First Year College Mysteries: Presenting First Year College Preparation Workshops with UNCA Connections Mentors to Asheville High School AVID Seniors

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to explore non-traditional methods of successfully transitioning students from high school to college. The AVID program strives to mitigate transitional challenges by increasing school-wide learning and performance, starting from elementary school through college. Connections Peer Mentoring program housed under the department of Multicultural Student Programs at UNC Asheville is designed to promote campus involvement to freshman and transfer students who are, but not limited to, minorities and/ or first generation college students. College readiness is not only focused around academics. The AVID program provides academic readiness for students, but some necessary information is left out that can be revealed through learning from others' experiences. To captures students' experiences, I designed three engaging workshops for in-depth dialogue to be shared among participants. The AVID students asked a series of questions to Connections mentors about their first-year college experiences. These three group-engaging workshops were designed for the AVID students to ask questions and mentors from Connections to share what they wish they knew the first year of their college experiences. Presenting Connections mentors included former athletes, transfer students, different year classifications, and various cultural backgrounds. Through extensive and interactive participation, this project provided the AVID students with the opportunity to understand the importance of college preparedness. As a result, my goal was to increase awareness of the many opportunities while matriculating through college.

Acknowledgements

Origins of the Project

My interest in creating the project stemmed from my experience as a first-generation college student, an active member in the Connections Peer Mentoring program and former tutor in the AVID program. Those experiences eventually led to my interest in community involvement and mentorship. Throughout this project, I learned that the AVID students have a great understanding of what to expect entering college, academically, but on various occasions, I was asked several questions about "what college is really like". The American School Counselor Association states that, "Academic success alone isn't enough to ensure today's students are prepared to be tomorrow's adults. They also need to focus on social/personal and emotional development" (The American School Counselor Association).

The purpose in creating these engaging workshops for this project was to lessen the anxiety that many AVID students have prior to graduating high school and entering into their first year of college. The project was designed and intended to give students more information about their first year in a college or university. My chosen group to present the workshops to included Asheville High School AVID students. I chose this group due to my experience working in the AVID program and the knowledge gained from Sociology coursework on the stereotypical correlation between racial background and college acceptance. Connections Peer mentors accompanied me during these presentations by sharing their real-life college experiences to the AVID students.

The AVID program prepares its students to become academically successful in college. According to the AVID mission statement, "While others talk about what should be done to prepare students for college, AVID is doing it. For more than 30 years, the AVID College Readiness System has helped thousands of students, many of whom are overlooked and underserved, rise above the obstacles they face to achieve academic success."

There is a wide range of information that is overlooked in student orientation. AVID assists students with college applications, and most students have applied and committed to universities

at the time of the workshops. But there are many questions only actual college students can answer due to their recent experiences of transitioning from high school to college.

The Asheville High School AVID teachers and Director and Assistant Director of Multicultural Student Programming at UNC Asheville wanted me to join the two groups together. By attempting to find ways to collaborate with high school students in Asheville, North Carolina, and college students from UNC Asheville, these workshops became an opportunity to lead to a partnering program for the future. The purpose of combining these two groups was to promote mentorship from peer mentors on the topic of first-year college preparation.

Methods and Work Undertaken

Methods of this project were to quickly engage with the AVID students about their interests and concerns about their first year in college. I designed workshops based from majority of the group's concern to being able to provide AVID students with beneficial knowledge. I also incorporated previous research from the American School Counselor Association in designing effective workshops through peer mentorship.

 A group of presenters were invited that could relate to the AVID students, from a range of races, class statuses, campus activities, interests, and choices of major through UNC Asheville's Connections Peer Mentoring program. I aimed for a diverse group of presenters to provide AVID students various experiences and knowledge of college.

Creating beneficial workshops for the AVID class required researching former methods used towards high school students. I created three one-hour long extensive workshops, located in the AVID classroom at Asheville High School during their AVID class period. Three topics were covered: (1) Campus Involvement, (2) Managing Finances, and (3) Social Life. A necessity was to incorporate mentors close in age within a four year age-span and currently enrolled in college. This gave the AVID students the opportunity to ask questions about more recent experiences from the AVID class of Asheville High School. Reviewing drop-out rates in higher education and the effectiveness of relatable mentorship led to the topics the AVID class had questions about the most after their college campus tours and orientations. Jon B. Gould, author of *How to Succeed in College (While Really Trying): A Professor's Inside Advice,* states, "I also offer advice for students in balancing academic life with their co-curricular activities, work obligations, and free time" (3). Before creating the workshop topics, I conducted an informal oral group interview to determine how prepared for college the AVID students were. The information gathered from this discussion provided direction during the workshop presentations.

Connections mentors attended pre-workshop focus groups to discuss the approach that would be taken for the AVID students during the workshops. Topics were shared during this time and revealed that the class was not limited to questions that could be asked. Presenters were encouraged to treat all of the students as adults rather than children in hopes for better results during discussions. Each session included up to three mentor presenters. This would provide various experiences being shared to the entire class. This included a three phase process:

Phase 1: Designing an assessment to pinpoint interest of the AVID students based on what subjects they had more questions about towards college life.

Phase 2: Create workshop topics and prepare Connections mentors for presentations on subjects of:

Campus Involvement:

- Joining group organizations (benefits and advantages)
- Standing out in the right way
- How to find the right student organization for me to join
- Time management with campus involvement
- Benefits of getting to know your professor

Managing Finances:

- FAFSA
- How to look for scholarships and other ways to pay for school
- Locating the financial aid offices
- How can I plan work study in between my class schedule?
- What other ways can I find employment as a first year student?
- Where to find the right internships relatable to my major?
- How do I use the career center to my advantage?

Social Life:

- Making time to keep in touch with family
- "Hanging out" with friends versus studying
- Make your grades first priority
- How to live with a roommate
- What parts of social life can get you side tracked from the "Prize" (Graduating)

Phase 3: Connections mentors and AVID students attended separate informal focus groups to reflect upon the success of all three workshops.

Ties to Academia

My previous experience working as an AVID tutor and Connections peer mentor grounded my interest in pursuing a graduate degree in Higher Education. After realizing the AVID students enjoyed using time dedicated for academics, there was still an interest in gaining knowledge of the daily life of a college student. Gaining knowledge from a college student rather than a textbook or a teacher is more beneficial to their experience outside of the classroom.

Melvin L. Silberman, author of *Twenty Active Training Programs,* encourages taking a mentorship role with students rather than just presenting information. Silberman suggests that all students prefer learning from others' experiences.

Being raised in a small town where many students did not go away to college and in a single-parent home with a mother who earned two Associate degrees, I was not given the chance to have a mentor who could share their knowledge of college life with me. The transition for me was a frightening stage in my life. From this experience, I aim to assist other students who are beginning this transition. Some students do not know their options past high school and how to overcome the challenges that may not be revealed during college orientation.

Considering my own transition difficulty and the students' curiosities, I created the workshop topics based upon the students' interests. Stephen Lamb, author of *School Dropout and Completion: International Comparative Studies in Theory and Policy*, explains the connection between interest and achievement by stating that "students who lose interest in school (school engagement) and learning (academic engagement) are less likely to do well (academic achievement) and develop a stronger desire to obtain employment rather than remain at school (education and work aspirations)" (12).

Another way this project ties into my academics is learning the value of community involvement and promoting such towards the younger generation. Prior to the workshop, the AVID students expressed their desire to move out of Asheville because they saw it as a location without opportunity.

Further research revealed to me different avenues to enhance my presentation skills. Writing papers and researching has always been a requirement for my major, but presenting has been a struggle. Being in front of the AVID class presenting in a more comfortable manner rather than in front of large groups of people gave me more confidence towards presenting information.

Leadership Skills Developed

Creating and presenting these workshops to the high school students allowed the Connection mentors to demonstrate the success of being in college. The AVID students could more easily relate to the Connection mentors since they were closer in age. Demonstrating support and engagement towards their journey provided them a preview of success and leadership from the mentors. I used presenters who would be labeled "successful" in their college career due to campus and community involvement and success in the classroom.

The first step to put this workshop into action was taking a supportive role for the AVID class. A four-year degree program is not for everyone, and the idea was not to push them towards college or UNC Asheville but to lessen any anxiety about their future plans after graduating high school.

Presenters were asked to also share their anxieties after graduating high school and why they chose to go to college. AVID students related to many of the Connections mentors stories and experiences of how they came to add college to their career plan. Many of the AVID students expressed they had doubts about attending college for various reasons. From the workshops, the students realized college might be more attainable.

Importance of Collaboration with youth programs and College students

Learning from others' college preparedness experiences, I designed these workshops to link relatable mentors with students rather than me presenting information about college experiences. These three engaging workshops were designed for the AVID students to ask numerous questions and the Connections mentors to share what they wish they knew the first year of their college experience.

The Connections mentors that presented came from various backgrounds and included former athletes, transfer students, and freshman to seniors in class status. Thomas Landefeld, author of *Mentoring and Diversity: Tips for Students and Professionals for Developing and Maintaining a Diverse Scientific Community,* states: "A critical aspect of mentoring and, in particular, the planned mentoring program is matching the mentor and mentee (some prefer to use the word *protégé*). This match is truly the heart and soul of the mentoring process." (11). This collaboration shows the high school students that assisting with community progress can be a part of their academic experience.

Seeing the reaction of the AVID class after hearing about the Connections mentors' experiences showed the effective impact of projects like this one. The athletes who planned to attend colleges on scholarships had various questions, which focused on balancing schoolwork and practice. Additional questions focused on joining student organizations and whether it would be beneficial to getting acclimated to campus life.

The techniques introduced in Melvin L. Sherman's book, *Twenty Active Training Programs,* influenced and shaped the workshop design for the AVID students. Being an open listener to the students' concerns and understanding the anxiety of making future plans after high school enabled a more comfortable setting in the classroom for questioning and answering after presentations.

Importance of Service Learning

As a student aiming to work within the community after graduating from college, service learning is necessary for out-of-class experience and learning. Service learning is designed for students to not only learn outside of the classroom but also to share knowledge within the community and learn from community members. Robert F Kronick, Robert Cunningham, and Michele Gourley, authors of *Experiencing Service-learning*, emphasize the importance of service learning by stating, "Service-learning means 'serving while learning' or 'learning while serving'. The focus is on the act and the server in relation to another. The server provides knowledge or skills, and the other also has gifts to share, gifts that may be less obvious" (12). Service learning is more about serving and learning and promoting community involvement from college students.

By incorporating the concept of service learning into the workshops, I aimed to promote the importance of getting involved in the community and the importance of service learning for the positive progression of the community. During each workshop session, I let the students know that whether their college careers keep them local or not, community engagement leads to success in future career plans.

Benefits of Student-to-Mentor Shared Commonalities

Michael Karcher, author of the article "Increases In Academic Connectedness And Self-Esteem Among High School Students Who Serve As Cross-Age Peer Mentors," states, "Results revealed an association between serving as a cross-age peer mentor and improvements on academic self-esteem and connectedness" (1). Cross-age mentoring programs are able to foster student-to-mentor relationships. This was evident when the Connections mentors presented their experiences to the AVID class. Being completely honest and open about what they experienced during their first years of college gave the AVID students a clearer perspective of what to expect during their first year of college. This revealing portrait of college from the minds of actual college students about classes, finances, and social life became beneficial for their preparation after high school graduation.

Having the opportunity for the AVID students to ask questions to relatable Connections mentors was beneficial. This resulted in students gaining a better perspective of the success that they can achieve from the challenges college students have faced due to not being aware of what to expect during the transition after high school.

"Most point to features of family background (such as SES, family structure and parental education), demographic factors (such as gender, race, ethnicity and location), individual attributes (such as disability, health and self-esteem), and experiences in school (such as academic achievement, attitudes towards school and grade repetition or retention) as important" (Lamb, 370). The purpose of selecting mentors from a large group organization was to give students the option of finding a mentor with a similar background as them in order to help them overcome current concerns about college living.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

In the beginning, forming a team of presenters from the mentors of Connections Peer Mentoring group was a challenge. My first worry was that I would be presenting the workshops alone and would not be able to relate to all of the AVID students. This pushed back the presentation of the workshops by a few weeks due to trying to find ways to find other presenters for the AVID class. Presenting alone would not have given the AVID students a variety of experiences to learn from as it would from various mentors with diverse backgrounds and knowledge. I also worried about some mentors from the Connections program that are quieter than others and hoped there was never a chance of awkward silence during the workshop sessions.

Another challenge was finding just the right references to support my project. Finding information on college preparation was easy; however, finding effective ways of presenting the information became somewhat challenging.

I presented to two groups of AVID students. One class was larger and more conversational while the other had fewer students and was more introverted. It was necessary to mix the Connections mentors accordingly. Many times picking mentors for sessions was completely random or based on flexibility in schedule.

The workshop topics were to include information that reached the interests of all of the AVID students even those who may not be considering college right after high school. Being able to get to know all of these students well enough to relate to them resulted in being difficult due to time limitations.

Getting to know the students on a personal level was the first priority; students being comfortable enough to ask any questions on or off topic to the workshops in a limited time frame made the mentor relationship not as strong. To overcome this barrier, I began asking students about their interests related to their first year of college and incorporating information about their respected universities and colleges into the workshop topics. Keeping consistency with the mentors was a goal. AVID students being familiar with Connections mentors led to being more comfortable to ask questions on any topic related to college and life after high school.

Scheduling workshop presentations became a challenge due to the amount of people involved. Snow days and pep rallies for the AVID students delayed workshop presentations. Mentors from Connections had busy class schedules, which became a barrier to overcome. Setting up planned days and make up days for the workshop during the planning period may have been more beneficial to the presenting portion of the project.

Suggestions were brought to my attention that the larger groups (Group A) be divided and a mentor assigned to each group. This was related to not everyone being comfortable to ask questions or some questions not being answered. In the smaller group (Group B), it was not as easy to get the AVID students to ask questions until after trying a different approach. Group B was asked to write down their questions during the week, and on workshop day, the other Connections mentors and I randomly chose cards. This method stimulated the AVID class to ask more questions, and we could go through and answer each question in depth.

Sustainability

My public service project is expected to continue as a student-to-student mentor program after my departure from UNC Asheville. Hopefully, future mentors can learn from my previous challenges, and the "First Year College Mysteries" collaboration will continue between the Connections Peer Mentoring program and AVID. This year's workshops have already created interest in future workshop topics for the next senior class at Asheville High School in the AVID program. Topics of the workshops may change due to the interests of the AVID class.

Due to the networking I have done within the high school and at UNC Asheville, I plan to continue to be a resource to the project and its continuation even after graduation. Incorporating more teachers and students involved in the AVID program could benefit the workshops and increase the students' excitement towards applying to college.

It is important for future workshop facilitators to keep in mind that the goal of the workshops is not to teach the AVID class information about entering college but to share from the mentors' experiences ways the AVID students can avoid the same obstacles I and the other mentors may have endured during our college careers. Avoiding taking on a teacher role while presenting to the students can be challenging that's why I chose to use the methods of Gary D. Borich, author

of *Effective Teaching Methods*, to incorporate teaching techniques that accounted for individual differences. This tended to show up during the sharing of information on the three topics. Knowing that students receive information differently led me towards planning a more question-and-answer type of workshop.

When presenting these workshops, it must be taken into account that this is not a teacher-to-student interaction with learning material about college. Being supportive role models, the mentors aim is to encourage continuing their education despite any obstacles that may appear in the students' first year of college.

Results

After the workshop, the twenty AVID students and twelve Connections mentors were asked for feedback on how helpful the workshops were. The students in the AVID class revealed that they became even more excited to attend college or to discover the next steps after graduating high school. Gradually, these students opened up more throughout the sessions. Sessions may have strayed from the designated topics due to more interest in other topics about college experiences, but the workshops resulted in positive feedback including:

"Now I know different ways to find an on-campus job as a first year student."

"There are more ways to assist with helping me pay for college than student loans."

"Not all roommates may end up being your best friend, and there is a roommate contract if I need to use it."

"An agenda book is something that will stick with me and be helpful throughout college, glad some of the skills I learned in AVID will assist me in college."

Expressing thoughts to mentors of how their experiences were helpful led to a post-assessment for Connections mentors and mentees about the workshops. Other feedback included consisted of: "Sessions should be for an entire semester rather than three weeks" and "More time should be allotted to questioning and answering rather than the presenting information portion of the session".

Mentors from Connections expressed the excitement of being able to be more involved in the community and share their experiences—good or bad to be helpful for others. For some of the quieter mentors, it was expressed that the workshops helped them be more open and talkative. Incorporating cross-age mentoring was purposeful to make everyone more comfortable to open up and ask and answer questions.

Conclusion

When choosing the workshop topics, I considered the needs of the students and the areas of interest they had about their first year of college transition. I encourage incorporating their interests with previous college preparation research and information that connects to universities of their interests. Primarily, all students should have a comfortable setting to be able to freely ask questions about going into their first year of college. Questions deemed as uncomfortable and

embarrassing are encouraged towards the Connections mentors. My hope is this project will continue and lessen any anxiety the students might have about going into college after graduating high school.

Working with the AVID program has led to a greater appreciation of the amount of time and work teachers put in for the care of their students. This opportunity has given me the experience of mentorship that I plan to use in furthering my education in the field of Higher Education. After the workshop presentations, students voiced their opinions of the effectiveness of the workshop topics and presentation methods—positive or negative. From the two groups of AVID Asheville High School students, a majority have been accepted to a college or university and voiced that the workshops assisted with their final choices of committing to a college or university. Being a Sociology major and an AVID tutor for two years in the Asheville City Schools has given me more experience and knowledge to apply to my skills toward my academic career plans.

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