



Why Walla Walla University Implemented a Mentor Program

Like many freshmen entering the new world of college, Joe¹ started the year with challenges that were too big to manage on his own. His academic work began to deteriorate, and the person who had been assigned to mentor him noticed that at times, Joe had a swollen jaw.

As the school year progressed, Joe's grades continued to deteriorate. He finally confided to his mentor that several of his wisdom teeth were long overdue to be removed. His father had lost his job, and no one in Joe's family had the resources to pay for the surgery.

Seeing Joe's suffering and the challenges it posed to his academic experience, a group of Walla Walla University's mentors decided to raise money to have Joe's wisdom teeth removed. To verify the

seriousness of the case, they arranged for a local dentist to take X-rays at no charge. Sure enough, the teeth needed to come out. Within a few months, during a school break, the surgery was successfully completed, giving Joe a new lease on life.

What would have happened to Joe if he had not had this support? The chances are high that he would have withdrawn from the university. His case is a reminder that many students starting their educational program at a university are overcome by problems they are unable to solve on their own.

Stories like this are what led the officials of Walla Walla University in College Place, Washington, to see if more could be done to help students making the difficult transition to their first year of college. Despite the strong support of caring

BY MEL LANG



Page 25: A Walla Walla University mentor (left) prays with her mentee. Above: Walla Walla University's Freshman Success Program administrators conduct a planning session with a mentor. Left to right: Carolyn Denney (program administrator); Mel Lang (program director); and Tricia McCoy (mentor).

faculty, staff, and advisors, some students were leaving school because of problems they couldn't resolve on their own.

Closer analysis revealed that it was not only students with low GPAs who were leaving the university before completing their degrees; some with high GPAs did so as well. The reasons for withdrawing from school vary: Some students have financial problems, others struggle academically. Some leave for reasons that are beyond the university's control, while others simply fall through the cracks. It is not uncommon for Seventh-day Adventist institutions to lose 30 percent or more of their freshman class before their second year of college.²

For many young adults, the first year of college can be compared to having to drive a car alone on a busy freeway the same day one receives a driving permit. Students need a sympathetic, experienced person to help them navigate their collegiate journey. A good start in higher education affects not only their first year, but also their entire college experience.

Universities and colleges are increasingly recognizing

that offering various types of assistance during this transitional year will enhance students' satisfaction and academic success, and in turn, improve the institutions' retention rates. Retention is not only a problem for American institutions of higher education, but for the United States Government as well, which invests millions in student grants and loans, with institutions serving as guardians of these funds.

In the professional academic literature, much has been written about the necessity of improving retention, which, in turn, also has a positive impact on graduation rates. For example, Mangold, Bean, Schwab, and Lynch wrote: "One of the most pressing issues facing American universities is the number of students who fail to graduate. Low graduation rates cost universities scarce resources, weaken the ability to meet educational objectives, and are perceived to reflect the university's inability to meet the educational, social, and emotional needs of students."³

Researcher Tinto suggests that the transition to university causes extreme stress, making it probably the most

Universities and colleges are increasingly recognizing that offering various types of assistance during this transitional year will enhance students' satisfaction and academic success, and in turn, improve the institutions' retention rates.

challenging time during adolescence. He admonishes institutions to reach out to students outside the formal academic setting to ensure that they achieve positive social and intellectual integration into the campus.⁴

Although institutions are trying various ways to improve their freshman retention rates, mentor programs are one proven response to this problem. These programs are increasing across the U.S., including among Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher learning.

In addition to enhancing retention rates, a more important outcome of a mentoring program is ensuring that students receive adequate institutional support to succeed academically, socially, and spiritually. The institution has a moral responsibility to do all it can to help every student it admits to succeed. A variety of programs can contribute to this goal, including student advisors, testing/counseling centers, tutoring services, and student health offices.

Walla Walla University Launches Mentoring Pilot Program

After looking at the data on mentor programs, Walla Walla University decided to conduct a pilot program during the 2007-2008 academic year.

The new initiative, whose formal name was the Student Success Program, included:

- *150 randomly selected students*, divided into two equal-sized groups: an experimental group and a control group.

- *Provisions for the university to cover the cost of the program.*

- *A part-time director and six mentors.* The mentors were chosen based on predefined qualifications that included having a heart for students. In fact, several alumni applied because they wanted to give back to the university. Each mentor candidate went through a screening process, which included a review of his or her résumé and recommendations, and an interview.

- *An extensive mentor orientation program.*

The mentors were required to meet weekly with their mentees either in person or by phone. Personal visits were expected at least biweekly, although some students requested weekly face-to-face meetings.

The director of the program also met weekly with the mentors to discuss successes, areas of concern, and scheduled seminars to improve participants' mentoring skills.

In addition to providing academic assistance, mentors were also expected to provide spiritual and social support, since the university administrators believed that progress in all three areas was necessary for a successful college experience. Mentors referred students to institutional support centers as needed.

Retention of the experimental group and the control group was carefully monitored at the end of each quarter and each school year. We retained a larger percentage of the 2007 mentored freshmen students each quarter during the 2007-2008 school year and in the winter quarter of the 2008-2009 school year, than freshmen who had



Mentor Janet Wilkinson (center) shares a laugh with two freshmen at a mentor/student event.

been in the unmentored control group.⁵

At the end of the 2007-2008 academic year, we surveyed our freshmen in the experimental group regarding their perceptions of the experience. They rated their experience very high. Nearly all the responses were a four or a five on a five-point scale. Mentors' ratings virtually matched the student ratings.

The University Expands the Mentor Program

These results were sufficiently encouraging that Walla Walla University expanded the mentor program during the 2008-2009 academic year. By sharing the cost with the students, the university was able to assign a mentor for each student in the freshman class. The

program design was similar to that of the previous year but much expanded, as the university arranged for the mentoring of 309 students. During the previous year, the institution had learned the importance of quality in mentoring, so administrators again looked for mentors who had a heart for students and would connect well with them. This required a more extensive advertising, interviewing, and training process.

Of the 28 mentors in the initial study, half had Master's degrees. Most of the mentors were graduates of the university, and therefore well-versed in its resources. Some mentors were recruited by invitation or through the university's employment services. We also selected five outstanding seniors to serve as mentors. In addition to completing several days of preparation before the school year began, mentors were required to attend several seminars during the year.

The mentors' responsibilities included providing encouragement, helping students surmount hurdles, directing them to support services, assisting and communicating with professors and advisors, and assisting students with problem-solving. While the program director and university administrators emphasized the importance of providing academic support, they also stressed the importance of the mentors providing social and spiritual support—in keeping with the school's mission.

During Jump Start, the week when freshmen are oriented to campus life, the first-year students were given an opportunity to select five mentors from a list that included biographies for each of the mentors. The school then assigned a mentor from their selections. If a mentor felt that he or she did not connect well with the student, the student was reassigned.

The director met with the mentors weekly, in small groups or individually. Each mentor was required to keep a log, which he or she submitted weekly to the director. Reading the log provided the director with a report on each of the students being mentored, and allowed him to monitor the program's effectiveness.

The Mentor Program Overcomes Challenges

Every program faces challenges, and Walla Walla University's mentor program is no exception. As challenges arose, however, the mentoring team worked to-



Karrlayn Beck (left), mentor, enjoys a mentor/student event with her mentee, music education major Brenna Nakamura.

gether to resolve them. This included:

- Identifying and hiring high-quality mentors.
- Getting the student and the mentor connected early during the year so mentors could build the necessary rapport with their mentees and achieve open communication.
- Keeping students (especially those having difficulties) from withdrawing from their mentors.
- Ensuring that students believe they are getting an acceptable return on their investment of time and money.
- Complying with federal privacy rules.
- Defining the different roles of faculty and mentors.
- Dealing with students who have difficulty staying on schedule, despite their mentor appointments.
- Ensuring that mentors understand students' needs and engage with them in a positive way.

Data Indicates Increase in Retention and Overall Student Satisfaction

Seventy-six percent of the freshmen returned to the university in the fall of 2009 for their sophomore year, a six percent higher rate than the average for several preceding years. In addition to this increase in retention, surveys conducted at the end of the academic year suggested that both students and mentors were satisfied with the program.

Student Survey Spring 2009

Frequency of meetings with your mentor. Eighty-nine percent said they met weekly or biweekly.

On a five-point scale, rate your overall satisfaction. Eighty-four percent rated it a four or a five.

The comments were very positive, with many students complimenting their mentors. A few expressed concern that the program was mandatory.

Mentor Survey Spring 2009

On a five-point scale, rate your overall experience as a mentor. Ninety-six percent gave it a four or a five. Again, the comments were very positive. A common response was “thanks for the opportunity to be in the mentor program.”

Mentors Go Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Many heart-warming stories emerged from the 2008-2009 school year. In fact, the mentors’ enthusiasm for the program grew due to interacting with their students and learning about the experiences of other mentors. Throughout the year, mentors and mentees discussed personal matters, relationships, deadlines, and academic issues. Many forged relationships of a deeper nature, which provided students with a sense of belonging. In addition to offering academic coaching, mentors went the extra mile to show a personal interest in their students:

Some mentors were asked by their mentees for transportation to various places—shopping, airports, and appointments. One mentor recalls a late-night call from her mentee asking the mentor to take her to the emergency room. The student asked the mentor to stay with her during the four-hour examination, which the mentor did.

Some mentors brought gifts to the dorms for their mentees every Friday. One couple regularly brought fresh homemade bread to every one of their mentees.

Some mentors directed or even walked a student to support services offices, or to job shadowing.

Many mentors invited their mentees to their homes—especially on Sabbath.

Praying for and with students was expected. For example, one student could not make an appointment because she needed to study for her chemistry examination. That night, the mentor prayed for that student, then felt impressed to meet the student at the door of the chemistry class the next morning for a special prayer. The student was overwhelmed, describing the experience as a lifetime memory.

Some students who were mentored in the previous year’s pilot group chose to stay in touch with their mentors even after the program was completed.

A mentor recalls a visit with a student who desperately wanted to take piano lessons but lacked the financial resources; the mentor was able to provide funding for lessons for the rest of the year.

It was discovered that one student who was not doing well academically suffered from a severe case of ADD

and did not have the resources to purchase the appropriate medication. The mentor found a donor to cover the cost of the medicine for the year.

Conclusion

The mentor program has been a blessing to the Walla Walla University students, faculty, and staff. It has enhanced students’ sense of their value to the university and made life-changing differences for many students. Yet, we still wonder: “Are we doing enough for our freshmen at the university?” The answer is “No.” There will always be more that we can do, but at least we are doing more than in the past.

With the Lord’s help, we will continue to improve the mentor program to ensure that our freshmen experience even greater success. We hope that sharing our experience will be helpful to other Adventist colleges and universities. ☞

This article has been peer reviewed.



Mel Lang, Ph.D., *Director of the Freshman Success Program at Walla Walla University in College Place, Washington, has devoted his life to Christian education in a variety of capacities. He has served as Associate Vice President for Academic Administration and chair of and professor in the mathematics department at WWU; and as fund raiser and project manager for the new \$6 million Rogers Elementary School in College Place, Washington.*

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Not his real name.
2. The U.S. Government’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPED) program gathers and distributes data on schools in the U.S. that receive government aid, including Adventist institutions. See <http://NCEF.Ed.Gov/IPED/>.
3. William D. Mangold, Luann G. Bean, Douglas J. Adams, William A. Schwab, and Scott M. Lynch, “Who Goes, Who Stays: An Assessment of the Effects of a Freshman Mentoring and Unit Registration Program on College Persistence,” *Journal of College Student Retention* 4:2 (2002/2003), pp. 95-122.
4. Vincent Tinto, “Student Success and the Building of Involving Educational Communities” (2006): <http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/fsd/c2006/docs/promotingstudentsuccess.pdf>.
5. Here is precise information on the enhanced retention of the experimental (mentored) group in contrast with the control (non-mentored) group (entering freshmen, Fall Quarter 2007): Retained 7% more of the mentored group returning for the Winter Quarter 2008; 14% more of the mentored group returning for the Spring Quarter 2008; and 12% more of the mentored group returning for the Fall Quarter 2008, compared to the control group. (*Retention* is defined as students who remained at Walla Walla University; the school did not obtain information on whether the students in the two groups who withdrew from the school dropped out of college entirely or transferred to another institution. Through requests for transcripts, the school is able to determine that quite a number of students who withdraw from WWU do enroll in Adventist colleges or other higher education institutions.)