

Honors Peer Mentor Program

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Retention is one of the most important issues facing colleges and universities across the United States today. It is no longer sufficient just to admit students to higher educational institutions. These students must be retained and assisted to reach their academic goals and ultimately to graduate. Mesa Community College (MCC) is striving to increase its retention and graduation rates. Numerous programs have been instituted at MCC in recent years with this goal in mind. MCC serves 25,000+ students at two campus locations in Mesa, Arizona.

When one considers retention programs, students that are on the low end of the academic spectrum are often the primary target. However, students at all academic levels are at risk of dropping out of school. The reasons for leaving school are numerous, from academic difficulty, to financial concerns, to family matters. Whatever the reason, colleges such as MCC are trying to increase their retention rates.

This paper reviews and describes a recent retention program at MCC. This program focused on the retention of honors students and was a collaboration between the Omicron Beta Chapter of Phi Theta Kappa and the MCC Honors Program. The focus of this project was the retention of students entering the Honors Program during the Fall 2010 semester. This project was the College Project (Honors Peer Mentor Program) for this academic Honor Society for 2010-2011 and provided a service-learning opportunity for many students.

The objectives of the Omicron Beta Chapter College Project were to increase college completion in the Honors Program, decrease the number of students on probation, teach students about Phi Theta Kappa, connect students with resources on campus,

create a network for Honors students and increase the bond between the Honors Program and Phi Theta Kappa. Additionally, we created an events calendar to help students get involved and stay connected with school activities. This helped give students many options to get involved and stay connected to peers.

To begin this project, Omicron Beta's executive board met with college president, Dr. Shouan Pan, and discussed what areas of concerns he had that the organization could help to improve as it relates to student life at MCC. Students also met with the directors of the Honors Program, Dr. Betsy Hertzler and Dr. Scott Russell. They indicated that not only are students dropping out of the Honors Program in alarming numbers, but many are dropping out of college all together. After learning this, the Phi Theta Kappa students decided that a peer mentor program would be an effective way to serve the college. Peer mentoring has been shown to be very effective in many studies.

In 2010-2011, the MCC Honors Program consisted of 800 students. The majority of these students were awarded a Presidential Scholarship (full tuition for two academic years) when they initially entered the institution immediately after high school. There are two routes to gain the Presidential Scholarship. The first route is to be in the top 15% of your high school class ranking in either your 6th, 7th, or 8th semester. The second route is achieved by the placement tests administered prior to a student starting their first semester at MCC and within a year of graduating high school. To be eligible, students must test into Honors English, Math 120, and be exempted from a Reading course. Additional students are admitted into the Honors Program after they have completed 12 credit hours with a 3.25 GPA. These students receive the Honors Achievement Award (HAA) which comes with a partial scholarship. HAA students enter the Honors Program when they have met the criteria for this program. To graduate from the MCC Honors Program, students are required to have completed an overall GPA of 3.5 as well as a one credit hour Service-Learning class (50 hours of volunteer time). Out of the ten colleges in the Maricopa Community College District, MCC is the only one with this Service-Learning requirement.

During the Fall 2010 semester, approximately 340 students started the Honors Program at MCC. Roughly 31% of these entered the program because they were in the top 15%

of their class ranking. The majority (69%) entered due to their placement test scores. All incoming Presidential Scholars were invited to a voluntary orientation to the Honors Program at the start of the Fall 2010 semester.

In order to prepare for the Fall Honors Program Orientation, Phi Theta Kappa's Vice President of Service led weekly meetings leading up to the Honors Orientation. The committee planned for the orientation, taking into consideration what message was to be conveyed to the incoming students, the importance of building a network and staying connected with others on campus and providing resources to help make the transition to college life much easier. Chapter representatives met with the directors of the Honors Program and proposed ideas for the orientation, emphasizing the importance of having a peer contact. An email was sent to all chapter members, inviting them to become a peer mentor. Each student at the orientation received a list of peer mentors with their email addresses and phone number and was encouraged to make a connection.

At the voluntary orientation, this group presented to the incoming Honors students. They developed a short presentation: "Tips on being successful at MCC and being an Honors student" that included general information on Phi Theta Kappa (participation in a campus group or organization is correlated with student retention) and the importance of being in the Honors Program. Student organizers believed that new students would relate best to students who are currently in the program and can explain the value from their own experiences. Following the presentation, incoming students were split into groups with peer mentors and provided helpful information and resources about Phi Theta Kappa, the Honors Program and life at MCC. Mentors then took the students on a campus tour, spotlighted important points of interest and encouraged them to contact a mentor should they need assistance with anything relating to MCC.

Throughout the semester, chapter officers proposed regular activities where mentors and mentees could meet. These activities were planned to give new students exposure to the many dimensions of a successful college experience: from choosing and registering for classes, to fellowship, and increased academic growth through participating in scholarly activities outside of class. Mentors consistently modeled appropriate student behavior and encouraged their mentees by providing one-on-one

attention and advice. Students also modeled behavior through their involvement in Service-Learning, AmeriCorps, work study, and various volunteer activities.

Mentoring during the semester included five sessions for students to meet with their mentors. The first session was an open house that took place during the second week of school. This was the students' chance to meet with their peer mentors to let them know how the semester was going and to ask questions or talk about concerns they might have. The second session occurred on the Early Spring Registration Day. At MCC, Honors students can register for classes two weeks prior the rest of the school. Mentors were available to students wanting assistance with class selection and online registration. The third session was MCC's Homecoming Game. The chapter participated in a tailgating event as a fellowship activity. The next session was to attend the Honors speaker forum the "Democratization of Information: Power, Peril, and Promise" lecture series. The student mentors also held a mingling party before the event as a way to connect with students prior to finals. During the week before finals, there was a Reflection Day to gather feedback about the peer mentor program, as well as the Honors Program.

At the beginning of the Spring 2011 semester, an evaluation process occurred to assess the success of the program. This included a quantitative review of how the mentored group did in comparison to those that were not mentored as well as a qualitative review.

The quantitative outcomes of this project showed that a slightly higher percentage of mentored students (56%) were on probation or dismissed from the Honors Program at the end of the Fall 2010 semester than the non-mentored group (59%). Although the quantitative outcomes did not show that the mentored group did better than the group that was not mentored, there are some possible explanations. The students that came to the voluntary orientation could have been students that self-selected as needing help navigating college. The groups of students being mentored were also a small group of students that may not have fully represented the Honors Program population. Also, students that were not mentored included second year students that had more

experience at being a successful college student. Our hope is to continue the program with feedback from students and administration to meet higher outcomes in terms of retention and grade point averages.

Qualitative outcomes for the project were derived from the responses received from mentees. Overall, students were very appreciative to have this program and shared many stories of how helpful it was to have a mentor. One student shared his story about how the mentor program worked for him. This mentee had been dropped from his classes a couple weeks into the semester due to a delay with his financial aid. He went to his peer mentor and she guided him to the right people to fix the problem. The mentee said he felt more comfortable going to his mentor than college officials for assistance. Mentors received responses from their mentees such as, "Thank you so much for all your help! I don't know what I would do without you!" and, "This program is so great, how can I sign up and start to help students, too?"

The program described in this paper affected both the mentees and the mentors. It also addressed a need at MCC and it allowed a student voice to be heard at the institution. In the future, more intense interactions between the mentees and the mentors might lead to a stronger result. Either one-on-one mentoring or smaller groups might well prove to be more effective. A project such as this fulfills the ideals of service-learning: the mentees learn about service, the mentors serve and learn from their experiences, and, hopefully, a sustainable program was created. Omicron Beta would like to see, and will encourage, current mentees to become mentors themselves – it's all about giving back!