Cornell University
Council on Mental Health and Welfare

MINUTES
February 24, 2010

Attending: Amit Anshumali, Casey Carr, Kathy Edmonson, Greg Eells, Kappy Fahey, Kathryn Gleason, Mary Beth Grant, Tanni Hall, Kent Hubbell, Michel Louge, Scott MacDonald, Tim Marchell, Susan Murphy, Andy Noel, Janis Talbot, Catherine Thrasher-Carroll, Kristen Welch, Lisa Shaffer, Lisa Ryan, Betsy East, David DeVries, Lauren Wetterhahn, Joe Burke, Bendan O’Brien, Andy Noel, Tow Yee Yau, Anne Lukingbeal, Trey Waller, Lynette Chappell-Williams, Greg Eells, Amanda Carreiro

Panelists: Veterinary College Peer Support Network: Dr. Clare Fewtrell, Associate Professor, Ashley Woods, Graduate Student in Pharmacology
Engineering 1050 Peer Advising: Beth Howland, Advisor
Undergraduate Biology Peer Advising: Wendy Aquadro, CALS Advisor, Matt Valente ’10

Upcoming meetings:
March 31, 3-4:30pm, Hall of Fame Room in Friends Hall (Schoellkopf Annex)

I. Welcome and Introductions – Susan Murphy
A. During today’s meeting, we will learn more about the structures of the peer advising and mentoring programs offered to students, and discuss what role these groups can play in the overall network of support provided for students. In addition to the three programs represented on the panel today, two other programs also sent information: Human Ecology Peer Partnership Program, ILR Student Advisor Program. Their information is included at the end of the minutes.

II. Panel Presentation: questions were provided in advance asking panelists to offer an overview of their group’s history, size, goals, role expectations of the peers, preparatory training, overview of advising sessions, common questions/concerns brought by advisees, and program evaluation.
A. Veterinary School Peer Support Network
1. Dr. Clare Fewtrell reported the network was first formed in 2001 to provide support to anyone in the college, including faculty, staff members or students. The network was comprised of faculty and staff members from each department, along with students.
2. When recruiting peers, they look for people who are good listeners and who feel approachable by their friendly and sympathetic demeanor. It is important to have a cross section of faculty, staff and students in the college so that no matter who is in need, there is a peer who they may feel comfortable talking to about their concern.
3. Currently the network has a good balance (in terms of gender, religion, ethnicity, family relationships, and disabilities) of peers with three Vet students, six technical staff members, and seven faculty members. Each department in the college is represented.
4. Peers are initially given two, half-day training sessions as preparation for their volunteer role. Each is given a handbook and information on departmental and campus referral resources. During the year, a shorter in-service session is provided by invited guests from outside the college, such as the Suicide Prevention Crisis line and the Notice and Respond program offered by Gannett. Informational lunches also are held periodically to give members of the network a chance to confer with each other and discuss how things are going. The college maintains a web page that peers can access when further information is needed.
5. Publicity within the college is essential to ensure that everyone knows about the support network and knows who the peers are. One of the most effective mechanisms used to communicate this
information has been a poster board with photos and biographies of the volunteers. Brochures, posters and book marks are widely distributed throughout the college.

6. Ashley Woods felt that one of the greatest strengths of the network is the diversity of its volunteers. Some examples of the issues people discuss include: problems adjusting to cultural differences, academic issues ranging from what classes to take to which lab dynamics are important, and other personal concerns.

B. Engineering’s 1050 Peer Advising Program

1. Beth Howland explained that the peer advising program began around 1994, but now works in conjunction with the 1050 First Year Student Colloquium. The current model/training for Peer Advising has been used for the past four years. Two to three Peer Advisors and one faculty member are assigned to support each 1050 course section of 18-20 students. There are about 100 peer advisors. The faculty member leading each section becomes the faculty advisor for the students taking their 1050 section. All first year students are required to enroll in the course and earn one credit hour (S/U).

2. The goal of Engrg. 1050 is to:
   a) help new students transition and integrate into the college
   b) gain a better understanding of the curriculum, resources and support services
   c) develop a positive relationship with a faculty member
   d) increase retention and overall satisfaction with the college

3. Each 1050 group meets for 50 minutes, once a week for 8-12 weeks. Groups meet through the spring semester pre-enrollment period.

   a. Peer advisors serve in a variety of roles:
      • assistance with orientation
      • help in creating a fun, inclusive environment (with icebreakers, announcements, etc.) during weekly sessions
      • participate in class and/or arrange outings
      • serve as role models
      • offer a student perspective, tips and suggestions for involvement in the college and at CU (i.e. where to eat, best place to take a nap or to study, etc.)
      • help connect students with one another and to others in the college
      • refer students to academic support, leadership opportunities, research opportunities, Co-Op and Career Services, extra-curricular activities, etc.

   b. Peer advisors return to campus before orientation to attend a 6-hours of training. After receiving an overview of the program on Friday night, the Sunday session includes:
      • information on the academic curriculum, support services and resources within the college
      • overview of campus resources (CAPS, Let’s Talk, EARS, LSC, SDS, CURW, ELI, ISSO etc)
      • review of how to work with the faculty advisor overseeing ENGRG 1050
      • planning interactions and presentations for class activities and out of class contact (i.e. workshops on such topics as “A C is not an F,” “How to build relationships with faculty,” “Pre-med as an Engineering major,” “An Insider’s Guide,” or “Tip of the week”)

   c. Peer Advisors are asked to refer students to the professor leading the 1050 section or to the Engineering Advising Office when additional assistance is needed. Melissa Hutson, who directly supports the student mentors, also maintains contact through twitter and Facebook.

C. Undergraduate Biology Peer Advising

1. Wendy Aquadro explained that this initiative began as a way to help biology majors feel more like part of a community. Each First-year / transfer student majoring in biology in either Arts and Sciences or CALS has one assigned faculty advisor and one peer mentor, so they can get the most thorough academic advising as possible. Currently there are 36 faculty/staff advisors and 58 student advisors supporting 450 freshman and transfer students. Faculty members agree to partner with one or two student advisors who each support 6-8 students.

2. Students are carefully selected (based on their friendliness, etc.) to be mentors in the spring semester through a series of informational sessions. They also assist with programs for perspective students during the spring semester. Once they are selected to be advisors, they receive a 3-hour initial training followed by a monthly 1-hour in-service program.
a. Student advisors (SAs) meet at least three times during the semester, and faculty meet at least two times with the students:
   • First over the summer, mentors contact mentees through a letter of introduction.
   • Next during orientation, the faculty and student advisors meet with students to offer information and respond to questions regarding the major.
   • Then, student advisors schedule individual meetings with their advisees to provide assistance in selecting appropriate first semester classes, planning a balanced schedule, and meeting college requirements.
   • Faculty and student advisors hold an outing with their advisees within the first 2 weeks of the semester where they gather for a picnic, snack, or meal. This direct contact helps first-year students begin to recognize the valuable perspective provided by both a peer and faculty advisor.

b. SAs serve as a primary advisor and contact their advisees every 2 or 3 weeks, set up meetings when a student experiences academic difficulty, and plan a mandatory progress report meeting prior to spring pre-enrollment.

c. SAs keep their faculty partner aware of the advisees' concerns and refer students to them when questions or concerns arise that are not within their area of expertise.

d. SAs maintain connection with their advisees for at least two semesters or longer, offering ideas on how to survive things like Greek Rush. Some serve on committees that plan events for biology majors on topics such as study habits, time management, and different paths one can take to medical school.

3. In providing academic and social support, SAs know their advisees and have helped identify students who were feeling disconnected because of injuries, eating disorders, roommate problems, lack of housing, homesickness, financial problems, psychological problems, depression, illness and more.

   a. One of the main advantages of this first-year advising model is that it allows faculty to support more students in less time, because most of the routine advising questions are being answered by the SAs. The faculty advisors are then able to have meaningful conversations with advisees about their experiences and interests in research, academic or career options.

   b. Feedback from first-year students suggests that this advising system has been effective. In 2009, 90.9% of the freshmen reported receiving adequate advising during Orientation. Over 50% of the freshmen rated their SAs as being outstanding, while 40% rated them as being between average and outstanding.

   c. There is a cost to run a student advising program. Wendy spends about 20 hours each week answering e-mails, providing training, developing/leading programs, and talking with SAs and their advisees during office hours.

III. Other Peer Advising programs at Cornell

A. The Human Ecology Peer Partnership Program is the most substantial and enduring orientation program in the college. It helps new students of color and incoming EOP students in transition to Cornell. Counselor Verdene Lee is the key contact person; faculty members Lorraine Maxwell and Gary William Evans lead the class that is required for upper class students who serve as mentors. Mentors receive academic credit for the course. Typically, one mentor and one faculty volunteer are assigned to a group of 5-7 mentees. Usually there are 7-9 mentors. Each group meets weekly during the fall semester.

1. The PPP supports new students’ personal growth, social adjustment and academic success by facilitating relationships and providing opportunities to share information between new students, upper-class students, and faculty.

2. Mentors are required to take a course called Mentoring in Higher Education which functions as a workshop. The college feels this workshop is critical to the success of their student mentor program. The course covers: mentoring, adult development, peer counseling, cross cultural counseling, heterosexism, racism, minorities in higher education and the professions. Each class begins with a check in with shared experiences, successes and at times things that are not working. The course is also an upper division writing seminar-- providing iterative writing assignments and training for mentors to become editors. Mentors in turn provide feedback to mentees on one major paper assignment.

3. New students in the program meet weekly in small groups for planned academic and social activities. In the process, they make informal contacts, discuss questions and concerns, receive tips on resources available at Cornell and in the Ithaca community, and get to know their peers. Mentors also watch for
students in distress and consult with the Office of Student Development or the faculty member when concerns arise.

4. Challenges of the program include: scheduling mentors for their weekly mentee meeting is difficult, and at times it has been hard to find faculty to volunteer as faculty partners.

5. Evaluating the program has been hard, since there is no control group. Anecdotally, every one of our mentees has graduated within 5 years; many of the mentors were former mentees and report very positive experiences.

B. **ILR Peer Advising Program** was established prior to 2003, and is coordinated by Kevin Harris. Peer Advisors are volunteers who serve as ambassadors for the ILR School and assume a leadership role with incoming students.

1. Sophomores, juniors and seniors in ILR are recruited during the spring semester and attend a half-day training program in early August. Each year 26-28 peer advisors are assigned to work with first-year students. Additionally, 10-12 student who transferred into ILR work are trained to work with incoming transfer students.

2. PAs send an email to students in their assigned group during the summer and communicate with them as often as needed prior to the start of the fall semester. During orientation, the PAs meet with their advisees and then plan a second group meeting which takes place about 3 weeks into the fall semester. Many PAs meet with their advisees more often during the semester.

3. If concerns arise about particular students during the various check-ins (i.e., pre-post first prelim), the student advisors are asked to contact the college advising office. Some of the PAs also participate in the first year colloquium sessions facilitated by faculty. The first year colloquium is required of all first year (freshmen) students. This approach completes what ILR calls their three-pronged advising approach. It ensures that all new students have contact with advisors in the student services office, student advisors and a faculty advisor. ILR also works with the PSP students over the summer.

IV. Questions and Discussion

A. One of the things the council will consider is possible ways of sharing information about these programs with other colleges and departments.

B. Panelists were asked “if there was a down-side of their programs?”

1. The students’ experiences are based on their relationship with the faculty member and having a comfortable environment to talk openly about issues of concern. Many feel they would like more time to get involved.

2. In Engineering, transfer students do not take the 1050 course, so they miss out on this form of advising.

C. Are there risk factors that others should be aware of when sponsoring a program like these? Are there liability issues or can students/faculty get in too deep when students are distressed?

1. Most felt that the peer advisor’s responsibility is to listen, not to attempt to solve problems. Their role and training underscores the importance of helping students find the best office/person to help them with their concern.

2. Students are asked to notice when students might need assistance and to respond by referring to advising offices or other campus resources.

3. In Biology, a weekly check-in is done with the peer advisors so if they feel they are getting in over their head with a student, they can talk about the situation then or can email Wendy whenever a question/concern arises. “We can only offer students assistance; their attitude determines if they will respond.”

4. One peer advisor commented that in her relationship with students, academic, career, and personal problems often get lumped together. It can sometimes be difficult to know what the student is coming to you with for assistance.

5. It’s not unusual for student advisors to know more about the CU system than faculty and can often provide insights to both new students and the staff.

6. Some might have concerns that students will talk more with PAs and not acquire skills in communicating with their faculty advisor.

D. Are there confidentiality issues to be concerned about? Do students see peer advisors as spies?

1. Students work to maintain confidentiality and sometimes anonymity. In some programs, peer mentors sign a confidentiality agreement.
2. Peer advisors are not privy to student’s actual grades, but might be told an advisee received a low grade in an exam.

3. Students (in the meeting) who had gone through the program as an advisee expressed feeling safe and comfortable to talk with the peer mentors about academic-related questions and concerns. They did not however share concerns of a personal nature, as they were not sure if this was an appropriate use of the peer mentor’s time.

E. What is the response of international students to peer advising?
   1. Sometimes international students are paired up with other international students. They are forthcoming in the discussion and communicate well with other students.

F. How are your programs evaluated?
   1. Students complete feedback forms on their peer advisors. The ratings are generally quite high.

G. How do students on the council feel about peer advising?
   1. One commented on the 1050 Engineering course (which she had taken as a first year student) and felt it was good for academic questions, but not necessarily personal issues.

H. How many students are reached with these programs?
   1. All first-year students in Engineering, and all new transfer students majoring in Biology are reached. In Human Ecology, undergraduate students of color are reached, and in ILR new undergraduate and transfer students are included. A modest number of professional students in the Vet College utilize the PSN. Generally, Arts and Science does not have student advisors, but individual disciplines may offer this for their majors.

I. Other comments:
   1. Sometimes we assume all faculty are good advisors, but not everyone is equally good. Some may feel ill equipped to handle career, academic and personal issues that arise for students.
   2. One suggestion was to redefine “service” in order to compensate those faculty members who do provide advising; and release other faculty from assuming this burden.
   3. There needs to be an inventory taken to see where there may be gaps in student advising and where peer advisors may be needed.
   4. It would be helpful for graduate students to have more information on how to choose an adviser. Some students may be looking for a person who can help them balance personal, academic and career goals. It can be very challenging.
   5. In the Hotel school, the first-year seminar is held in large group sessions. One session includes a peer panel discussion and another focuses on career planning with staff from the Career Service Office.

Closing comments: today's session gave us a good feel for what is happening on the ground across the undergraduate, graduate and professional colleges and schools in terms of peer advising and mentoring. It is encouraging to see so many advising options offered to students. Thankyou to all the panelists. Their work is much appreciated.