

To Be or Not to Be a Mentor: Assessment of the Efficacy of a Peer Mentoring Program in the University of Castilla-La Mancha

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Abstract

A first-year student either coming from high-school or the vocational training system find many difficulties in the degree of Pharmacy in the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) related to the high level of demand together with the multidisciplinary typology of the different subjects they have to take during the year. The teaching staff of this degree has designed a program called "FRATER" with the aim of helping first-year students to achieve their full potential. Particularly, the program is based on a mentoring relationship between freshmen and senior. The mentoring partnership formulated is a structured one-to-one relationship that focuses on the needs of the mentored participant.

While there is widespread acceptance of the value of mentorship, relatively few studies have evaluated mentoring program outcomes. In this short-communication we would like to assess the efficacy of the mentoring program FRATER and sum up the benefits that students can obtain from such academic experience. The mentors were also evaluated on the development of Key Skills Qualifications along the program. The results show very positive responses and immediate outcomes, postulating FRATER as an instrumental in helping guide to freshmen to achieve their greatest potential.

1. Introduction

Mentoring is a shared opportunity for learning and growth. Mentoring could be considered as a very powerful tool to help people to progress in their careers and is becoming increasingly popular as its potential is realized [1]. It is a partnership between two people (mentor and mentee) based upon mutual trust and respect.

Freshmen find many difficulties in the degree of Pharmacy of the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) [2,3]. A good part of their success depends on their ability to cope with the new challenges as soon as possible; students, therefore, must rapidly learn the rules and policies of the University, the Faculty and the new courses, as well as adapt their study methodology to the demands of the different contents and lecturers. A mentoring program called "FRATER" was designed with the aim of helping first-year students to achieve their potential [3]. The initiative was based on the experience of previous studies, which concluded that mentoring of novel students by experienced ones improves academic success and retention rates [4].

On the other hand, the degree in Pharmacy of the University of Castilla-La Mancha is included in the branch of Health Sciences and its main objective is to train specialists in all aspects of drugs and medicines, in accordance with European Directives [5]. But in order to educate pharmacists in their whole capabilities there are issues not specifically included in any subject of the degree, but in all of them. These are usually called Key Skills Qualifications (KSQ) and their final purpose is encouraging the students to develop their skills in a particular context. Among the different programs that each year the Pharmacy Faculty of Albacete develops to expand its educational opportunities for students throughout their degree [6], the FRATER program was also conceived to fulfil the requirement of implementation of the KSQ. Particularly, FRATER was designed to encourage in students the ability to manage and delegate to others and take on responsibility (KSQ 1: decision-making including human resources management), and to show potential to motivate teams and other colleagues that may work for them (KSQ 2: Teamwork and Leadership).

FRATER program started during the 2012-2013 academic year and is still in progress. Herein, we would like to take the opportunity to assess this program and reflect on ways of improvements.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Mentors: are students who have already successfully passed the first year of the Pharmacy Degree and, therefore, are in the position for transmitting their experience and knowledge to the freshmen [7].

Psychological Support Team: a group of psychologists are responsible for promoting the development of social and personal skills in the mentors, as well as to reinforce their commitment and responsibility values.

Coordinators: lectures involved in the program responsible for a mentor. They arrange periodical meetings with the mentors in order to review the outcomes of their meetings with the mentees.

2.2 Stages of the project

Selection Stage: specialized psychologists look for students who show the ability to relate to mentees. The selection is carried out with the help of test-taking strategies (Trait Meta-Mood Scale number 24 [8] in order to assess the skills on emotional information processing, and a SCLR Symptom Inventory-90-R [9] focused on the necessary skills for emotion awareness and control), and a personal interview with each of the candidates. Forty-six undergraduate students expressed interest in the mentoring program. Of the 46 interested individuals, 26 students (56.5%) have completed the program as a mentor.

Training Stage: Specialized psychologists and the lecturers participating in the program are in charge of training through workshops. The mentors are trained (1) in regulations and teaching resources; (2) to promote factors which facilitate motivation and cooperation within a working group; (3) to develop strategies aimed to face anxiety situations; (4) to promote the acquisition of the necessary skills to achieve effective communication; and (5) to provide social tools for increasing the ability to cope with everyday challenges.

Execution Stage: the mentors develop their mentoring job by means of several meetings along the year. An average of 4.28 meetings per course with average attendance at each by 82% of the mentees configures the work done by mentors.

Evaluation Stage: a survey consisting on twenty items was completed by freshmen and mentors in order to evaluate the program two years after its initiation. Seven questions were designed to evaluate the grade of satisfaction with the program and thirteen to evaluate the development of KSQ1 and KSQ2 along the program. Questions were scored 1-5, being 5 the score for the maximum satisfaction. Furthermore, two open-questions let respondents to qualitatively analyse the program. Demographic information is presented for 41 mentees (44% of the total number of freshmen) and 22 mentors (88% of the total number of mentors) who completed assessment.

3. Discussion and results

The mentoring program implemented in the University of Castilla-La Mancha allowed students the opportunity to gain skills and confidence in mentoring tasks. Qualitative results in the current study indicating positive mentee and mentors perceptions of the program. By implementing a graduate student mentoring program, mentees felt that the program positively help them successfully to face degree demands, presented the opportunity to network and develop new relationships, and provided useful information regarding university policies and rules. The mentors also had positive comments regarding the program. A majority of mentors perceived that the program resulted in an improvement in their mentoring skills. These positive perceptions corroborate the high scores shown in sections of the assessment in the quantitative analyses related to degree of satisfaction with the program (Fig. 1). There were no significant differences in perceptions from mentees and mentors.

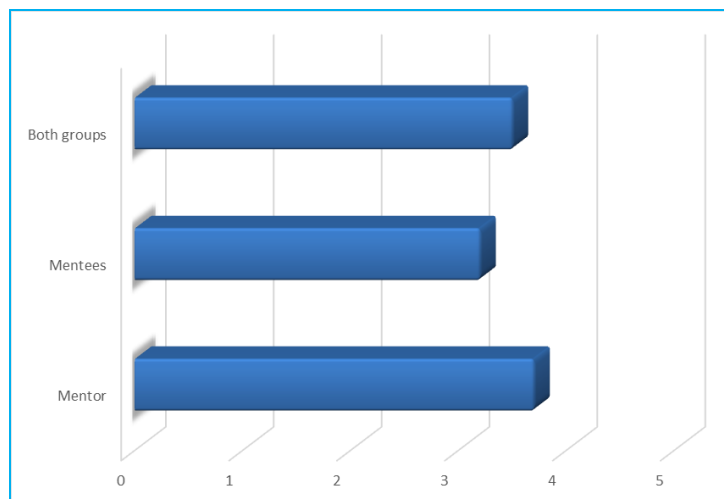


Fig 1. Degree of satisfaction of mentors and mentees with the program.

Mentors and mentees were asked to indicate their perceptions of specific mentoring skills to evaluate the impact of the mentoring program. Mentors considered the KSQ1 and KSQ2 as important for a mentor to possess, with most items being scored close to 4 on a 5-point scale (Table 1). There were no significant differences in mentors and mentees perceptions concerning to KSQ2 (items 6-13 in Table 1). Both groups positively evaluated FRATER program in improving the teamwork ability and leadership. This result seems to fit perfectly with the learning process that offered this project based on training through workshops. However, the results in the score were mostly different in items 6, 7 and 13. Most mentees felt that insufficient time was allocated for the program, resulting in difficulty scheduling mentor-mentee meetings. A lack of defined structure limited the productivity of these meetings, which may have had a negative impact on the quantitative assessment of item 6. An improvement in the satisfaction score of item 7 and 13 would need a strong interaction between the Psychological Support Team and mentors. Monthly meetings and social networking tools will be propose to help for the next academic course.

On the other hand, there were significant differences in the perceptions of both groups related to KSQ1 (items 1-5 in Table 1). Nevertheless mentors felt they execute an adequate human resources management at the meetings, mentees evaluated with minor scores (less than 4 points) all items that are involved in the assessment of KSQ1. Mentors need to be confident, competent, and committed to the mentor-mentee relationship. The better prepared and comfortable mentors are with their own strengths and weaknesses, the more likely they are to be effective mentors. Unfortunately, there is not an accurate workshop in the FRATER program regarding decision-making and human resources management during the training stage. In future programs an appropriate workshop would be designed to improve this important skill in mentors. Potential matching of a mentor/mentee pair who are in the same track could be another solution, as the mentor would be more likely to understand the demands the mentee will face. This fact should be provided by the individual institution's leadership team. Another concern to take into account is the lack of mentee interest/motivation to fully engage in the program, a barrier that has been experienced by other programs as well [10]. There should be more training for mentees regarding mentoring as well as more defined timelines for meeting with mentees. In future iterations, pre-program interviews will be used to improve the involvement level of the mentees.

Table 1. Perceptions of Mentors and Mentees regarding implementation of the KSQ1 and KSQ2 in Mentors upon Completion of FRATER program^a

Assessment of KSQ1			
Item	Theme	Mentor (SD) ^a	Mentee (SD) ^a
1	The mentor assumed his role as a mentor	4.2	3.3
2	The mentor took the initiative in transmitting ideas	3.8	3.5
3	The mentor identified my unique strengths and needs	4.2	2.5
4	The mentor was able to propose improvements to the problems identified	3.7	3.0

5	The mentor planned the meetings properly	4.1	3.4
Assessment of KSQ1			
Item	Theme	Mentor (SD) ^a	Mentee (SD) ^a
6	Friendly relations and co-operation to overcome difficulties were established during the meetings	3.6	2.9
7	The mentor was able to guide us to achieve the proposed aims	4.1	2.8
8	The mentor showed the wish to get involved in specific demands	3.4	3.4
9	The mentor proposed teamwork alternatives and ideas to find solutions to problem	3.6	3.4
10	The mentor was able to motivate the students to achieve their goals	3.8	3.5
11	The mentor used his influence to commit students with the degree of Pharmacy	3.8	3.5
12	The mentor communicated efficiently	3.6	3.4
13	The mentor brought original and creative solutions to the problems identified	4.0	2.8

^aBased on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5-strongly agree to 1-strongly disagree.

Finally, the participants felt that the program was beneficial overall and indicated that they would recommend it to other students. FRATER is postulated as a very useful tool to help freshmen to achieve their full potential (Fig. 2.).

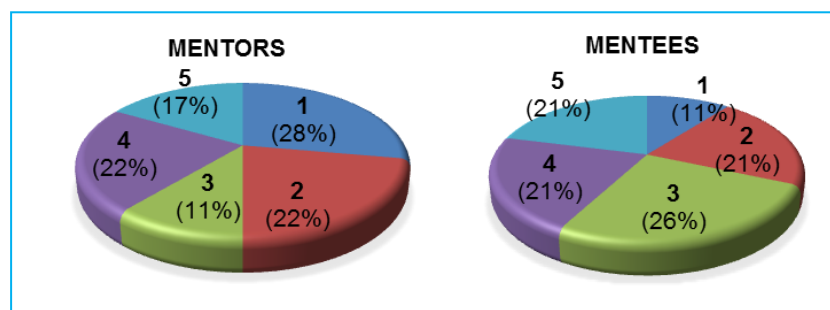


Fig. 3. Perception of the usefulness of the FRATER program based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5-strongly agree to 1-strongly disagree.

4. Conclusions

After participating in the mentoring program FRATER, mentors may gain valuable experience in conducting and leader team works, which are skills often used in postgraduate training. To improve programme results, future programs should include a more accurate training in making-decision and human resources management, more training for mentees regarding mentoring as well as more defined timelines for meeting with mentees, and also monthly meetings and social networking tools which help to strengthen the relationship between mentors and the Psychological Support Team. Overall, FRATER program can help prepare student for what will be expected of them in their future careers.

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