

Article

Small Group Mentoring of International Undergraduate Students: A Pilot Program

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ABSTRACT

International students often face non-academic barriers to success in their classes and programs of study. Some of these non-academic barriers include gaps in their cultural understanding, differences in expectations of themselves and of others, and a lack of strategies regarding how to tackle these challenges. Motivated by the continually increasing number of international students enrolling in the Faculty of Business at the University of Prince Edward Island (located on the east coast of Canada), the Coffee Coaching program was developed to help address some of the non-academic barriers many international students are facing in their classes. Based on the premise of a mentoring relationship whereby the mentor and mentee meet to discuss various topics over a "cup of coffee", the Coffee Coaching program brought together a faculty mentor and small groups of international students who were identified as experiencing non-academic barriers to success in their classes. This paper examines the first-hand account of the founder of the Coffee Coaching program with respect to how and why the program was developed and implemented and how participants perceived the program. The paper will conclude with key lessons learned for moving forward.

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Introduction

Universities across North America, and Atlantic Canada in particular, are increasingly investing in recruiting international students to help grow their academic programs. For example, the rate of international students enrolled in the University of Prince Edward Island's Faculty of Business undergraduate degree grew from under 10% in 2000 to approximately 30% - 40% in 2016 (UPEI, 2016). While international students, like all other students, experience a range of successes in their studies, these students can be particularly affected by challenges tied to being international students. Challenges include English language deficiencies, inadequate academic preparedness for the rigour of a North American business education, and barriers tied to differences in cultural expectations and norms. This paper will describe the purpose of the Coffee Coaching program, the program's development and design, implementation, participant feedback, and lessons learned.

Literature Review

The literature confirms the growth of international students attending post-secondary education institutions at many western universities (Guo & Chase, 2011) and that these same international students often face barriers that impact their abilities to succeed in their programs of study (Polrazli & Graham, 2007; Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Nienmantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). Some of the barriers faced by international students include English language skills

(Yanyin & Yinan, 2010), academic readiness (Lee, Farruggia, & Brown, 2013; Wang, Li, O’Kane, Mao, & Zhang, 2015), familiarity of educational expectations and norms (Grey, 2002; Sharfaei, Nejati, Quazi, & Heidt, 2016), micro-aggressions (Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014), social integration (Yun & Le, 2012), and cultural adaptation or assimilation (Munro, 2011; Sherry, Thomas, & Wing, 2010; Tung, 2011). Research also supports the claim that if international students receive support directly tied to addressing specific barriers, these students experience improved levels of success and satisfaction (Arambewela & Hall, 2013; Bordia, Bordia, & Restubog, 2015) and an increased sense of self-responsibility for learning (Warring, 2010).

One of the challenges is that international students are less likely than their domestic peers to access support services offered to help address barriers to success. Specifically, international students are less likely to utilize peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities (Dancer, Morrison, & Tarr, 2015; Outhred, & Chester, 2013), counselling services (Bong, Bennett, & Beauchemin, 2014), mental health services (Tung, 2011), and librarian services (Curry & Copeman, 2005; Song, 2004). Yet when international students access these services, the students clearly benefit (Ragavan, 2014).

Rose (2005), noted that international students identified relationships as being important attributes for successful mentoring. Group-based mentoring incorporating faculty as a mentor were considered by Heng-Yu, Lahman, Hsin-Te, and Yi-Chia (2008) within the context of supporting international students pursuing doctoral dissertation and careers in academia. When considering small groups, Ding, Bosker, Xu, Rutgers, and Heugten (2015) noted that heterogeneity of group members was negatively correlated to group performance. Working in multicultural groups has also been demonstrated to increase students’ self-awareness and to develop core leadership and team related skills (Robson, Forster, & Powell, 2016). A specific challenge in mentoring international students, identified by Wedding, McCartney, & Currey (2009) is confronting these students about their needs and the challenges that may be inhibiting success in the classroom. Mentoring provided social support for international students transitioning into a post-secondary education program.

Program Development

When reflecting on ways to support international students in understanding and adopting the cultural expectations and norms of North American business classes, professors in the Faculty of Business spoke about mentoring as a means of supporting students. The challenge for the Faculty of Business was the imbalance of faculty members to international students, which meant that forging meaningful mentoring relationships would be impractical. Thus, one-on-one mentoring was not a viable or sustainable option. So the option of mentoring via small groups was examined as a means to support more students while utilizing fewer resources.

The *Coffee Coaching* program was modeled after “coffee dates” whereby people get together over a cup of coffee to discuss various topics. Unlike a formal classroom setting or even an office environment, the “coffee date” model emphasized listening and learning, and supported shared experiences and understanding. No preparatory work was expected of the participants. The atmosphere was warm, welcoming, and relaxed. Students and the facilitator grabbed a cup of coffee, sat around a small round table, and talked about their experiences.

The target audience for the *Coffee Coaching* program was international students who may not be reaching their potential in their courses due to non-academic related challenges. Students who enrolled in *Introduction to Marketing* in 2015 and 2016, were international students, and who received a final grade between 40% – 70%, were identified and contacted.

Of the approximately 80 students who received invitations, approximately 30 responded by inquiring about further details regarding the program or to express interest in the program. Twenty-five of those students committed to participating in the program, and 15 showed up at least once during the eight-week program.

Of the 15 students who began the program, 13 students completed the program by attending at least 50% of the *Coffee Coaching* sessions. Seven students attended all six sessions, three students attended five of the content sessions, and three attended four of the six content sessions. Two students attended only two of the six content sessions and thus did not receive a certificate of participation. The profile of the students who attended the program are as follows (15): six female, nine male; eight Chinese, two Indian, one Nigerian, one Middle Eastern, one South American, one Caribbean, and one European; most students were in first or second year, and two of the students were in third year.

The Program

The program consisted of eight sessions held over a 12-week semester. Each of the sessions centered on a predetermined theme that served as the foundation for the weekly discussion.

The first theme was titled, *Success: What is Success and who is Responsible for your Success?* This topic was identified out of a desire to have students take ownership of their academic performance. Two main concepts were discussed. First, that success can mean different things to different people. Some of the students in the group said that success to them was high grades, while others said success was passing their courses. A few students stated that success to them meant securing a good job after graduation or gaining admission to a graduate program. All students agreed that success, in whatever form, was important to them and that they were aware that they were not well positioned to achieve that success without undergoing some changes in their academic performance. The conversation then moved on to who was responsible for a student's success. The discussion included the role of the faculty member, whom all students agreed played a role in a student's success. However, the central conclusion was that students themselves were primarily responsible for their own success in terms of doing the work required of them, being engaged in their studies, seeking help when needed, and trying their best.

Building from the conversation the previous week, the theme for session two was *Help! How to Find Help and How to Help Yourself!* During this session the group developed a list of where to go on campus, and in the broader community, if a student needs help of any kind. The group then shifted its focus to developing a list of ways that students can help themselves. All students agreed that one of the keys to success is recognizing when help is needed and getting that help early, rather than waiting until it is too late. Students all left with a copy of the lists that the groups created.

One of the ways students identified that they could help themselves was to develop a plan for their program of study, which was the third theme: *Pathways through their Program.* During this session, the discussion focused on the various pathways through the business program, options for supplementary learning such as co-op placements and exchanges, sequencing courses and choosing electives, and selecting subject-area specializations. The key lesson from this session was the importance of planning to ensure students were able to access the courses that they needed or wanted, and to make sure students derived the greatest value from their educational experience.

The theme for the fourth session was *In Class Strategies & Group Work*. Perhaps the most common comment from faculty members when discussing challenges faced by international students centered on group work behaviours that negatively impacted student performance. Session topics included the importance of class punctuality, class participation, note taking, assignment and exam preparation, textbook reading, course engagement, and group work norms. Every student agreed that there were concrete steps they could take on a day-to-day basis that would help them succeed in their courses. However, students diverged when discussing group work and their experiences with working in groups for class assignments. Some students seemed genuinely confused about what the expected norms were in a group setting, and reported difficulty “fitting in.” Of primary concern was the gap in language skills, real or perceived. Several students also expressed disappointment, frustration, and even sadness when their work was not well received by their group members. In comparison, one student spoke at length about the warm reception she received by her group members and how they made her feel valued by the group. Lastly, students spoke about the way in which groups are assigned in classes, with most preferring that the faculty member assign groups with some consideration for pairing students with at least one other student whom they knew.

Mentoring was the theme for the fifth session. Among the topics discussed were the importance of mentors, existing or past mentors, finding mentors, different kinds of mentors, and how to benefit from a mentoring relationship. Everyone shared their experiences with mentors and how those mentors shaped their lives. For most students, their previous or current mentors were their parents, other family members, or teachers. The students also recognized the importance of finding new mentors as their lives transitioned from being students into being professionals in the work world.

The last themed session was titled, *Putting your Plan into Action*. The focus of this session was to build a plan on how best to move forward to achieve the success that each student had identified at the beginning of the program. The group discussed the importance of putting the lessons learned into action and changing their behaviours to better align with what they need to do to be successful. Students reaffirmed that they had the responsibility and the power to shape their success.

The *Coffee Coaching* program ended with a celebratory ceremony. The Director of the International Relations Office and the *Coffee Coaching* founder/facilitator spoke to the students about their potential for success. Students received a certificate that they can include in their portfolio and add to their resume. The students appreciated the pomp and ceremony, with all of the students dressing up and taking photos to commemorate the event.

After the last themed session, students were invited to complete a short, online survey about their experiences with the *Coffee Coaching* program. All students who participated in the program received the survey invitation and six students responded by completing the questionnaire. Some highlights from the survey responses include: all respondents said they would recommend the *Coffee Coaching* program to their friends and five of the six respondents reported that they believe the *Coffee Coaching* Program had an impact on their success in classes. Students reported that the best part of the program was talking about and sharing their own experiences, small groups, and free coffee. Regarding the improvement of the *Coffee Coaching* program, students mentioned attendance and the inclusion of different topics. One student observantly noted that while all participants were seated around a circular table along with the facilitator, most of the comments by students were directed at the facilitator rather than the other participants. In summary, all respondents affirmed that the *Coffee Coaching* program was worthwhile.

Lessons Learned

The *Coffee Coaching* program was a pilot, intended to help address the ongoing and growing concern regarding the success of international students in the business program at the University of Prince Edward Island. As part of the program plan, a final report was prepared that outlined key lessons learned in the hopes that future iterations of the program can build on its successes and learn from its failures. These key lessons can be categorized into recruitment, attendance, participation, themes, and other.

The *Introduction to Marketing* course, as a proxy for identifying and recruiting international students in the early years of their program, was inefficient. Because of the reading and writing intensive nature of this course, many international students were opting to delay taking the course until well into their program and therefore were not first-year students. A gap existed between students who expressed an interest in the program and those who came to the sessions, and it is unclear why. In the future, working more closely with the International Relations Office, the Registrar's Office, and the English-as-a-Second Language program might be a more effective and efficient means of identifying potential participants.

Attendance was very good for the students who completed the program, with a notable exception with the group scheduled for 9:00 am. While the students from the 9:00 am session eventually arrived at the sessions, habitual tardiness was an issue. Lateness was not an issue for the 10:30 am and 1:00 pm groups. To encourage strong attendance, each student was emailed a reminder about the weekly session and students indicated that reminder was helpful in getting them to the sessions. When scheduling sessions in the future, avoidance of the 9:00 am time slot is recommended.

Student participation in the discussions was good and got better over the duration of the program. Most students were very active and engaged in the entire discussion, except for one student who did not utter a single word throughout the entire program despite numerous gentle attempts to draw the student into the conversation. As pointed out previously, the comments provided by the students were often directed at the facilitator with little student-to-student dialogue. Students also switched off their electronic devices during the discussions.

The themes were well received by the students and resulted in diverse conversations with notable interconnectedness between successive weeks. The themes addressed many of the challenges identified by faculty members. The only theme that was originally planned as part of the *Coffee Coaching* program and was not covered was *Academic Integrity: What Every Student Needs to Know*. This session was cancelled due to a snowstorm.

Lastly, students articulated their appreciation of the opportunity to get to know one of their professors through this program. Students reported that this connection with a faculty member made them feel more valued and understood, and in some cases less frightened, with respect to their class experience. The lasting legacy of this program may be that international students feel valued as individuals and part of the University community.

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Appendix One: Summary of Discussion Topics

Week One: Success: What is Success and who is Responsible for your Success?

All students agreed that they want to be successful in their studies. Each student had their own definition of success, some identify very high grades as being successful while others were less concerned with achieving high marks and instead viewed passing their courses as success.

Some students also mentioned “learning” as part of their goal to be successful. The students all affirmed that they were responsible for their own success, and recognized that the professor’s role in their success was to establish the foundation to be successful by teaching concepts, engaging students, providing material, and developing assessment tools.

The students reported that they liked to do well in their courses and that good grades made them feel better about themselves.

Students also made a clear link with having success in a course and being more motivated, identifying a circular logic (success led to motivation, motivation led to success).

All of the students also confessed that they sometimes (often times) procrastinate. Setting high expectations of themselves was common among the students.

Each student recognized that English skills were a real barrier to success in many of their classes. Some acknowledged that they could do more to regularly practice their English skills (and came up with strategies to work on this).

The students brainstormed strategies that would help them succeed in their classes, such as attending all classes, reading course material, taking notes, asking questions, etc., which they admitted that sometimes they often did not do.

Students declared that they were more motivated to succeed in classes that were interesting and relatable. Students particularly did not like when the professor read from the textbook during class.

After some discussion, students admitted that they play an important role in making classes interesting by being active participants and asking questions.

Week Two: Help! How to Find Help and How to Help Yourself!

A handout listing where students can turn to get help and how students can help themselves was shared with students. A copy is attached as an Appendix. Students added the “chaplaincy” as a place students could turn for help. Students talked about fear, shyness, etc. of approaching professors. We talked about the importance of knowing and taking advantage of professors’ office hours.

Students mentioned the importance of the writing center for help, but pointed out that the scope of the help often wasn't sufficient in resolving writing challenges. Specifically, students needed help with grammar and flow.

Students brought up "Grammarly" and reported it was an excellent resource and should be talked about more and used more.

We spoke extensively about the role of librarians and how invaluable they can be for students.

The importance of getting to know fellow classmates was also cited as being critical for success in both classes and the business program.

One of the most important themes of the day was the critical importance of getting help early, and not waiting until it was too late (when the semester was almost over or after they received a poor grade).

We also spoke of the importance of reviewing and reflecting on any feedback provided and incorporating that feedback into future assignments. Several students shared strategies for taking good notes and spoke of working with classmates to supplement notes.

Again, students talked about the importance of practicing their English skills. We talked about starting assignments early, but while students seemed to agree in principle they seemed a bit reluctant to commit to practicing this strategy. We also talked about the importance of taking care of themselves in terms of getting adequate sleep, exercise, and eating a healthy diet. All students recognized that they could play a big role in setting themselves up for success.

Week Three: Pathways through their Program

I shared that there was no longer one single way to complete their program of study. In fact, students take a variety of pathways through their programs including taking longer than 4 years, online courses, specializations, changing programs, etc.

We talked about the critical importance of registering for courses early to ensure students both get the course they want and the schedules that work best for them. We also identified why international students tended to register later and came up with some strategies to mitigate against this.

I shared the importance of getting on wait lists and checking on wait lists regularly to help increase the chances that students get into the courses that they want. Students talked about choosing electives and how to get the most value from electives.

Some chose electives to boost their grades, while others chose electives based on interest or connection to their field of study.

Students shared some electives that may be beneficial to business students, including languages, environmental studies, psychology, sociology, economics, math, etc. A general consensus emerged among students that online courses were substantially easier than in-person courses.

Students had an interesting discussion about whether it was better to take required courses or electives during the summer. Again, students felt that summer courses tended to be easier.

We discussed the Faculty of Business's specializations and how to take advantage of specializations if that was what students wanted.

Students were not all concerned with graduating on time, some wanted to graduate early while other were prepared to delay graduation if needed. We talked about the role that co-op could play in helping prepare them for the work world.

Students talked about knowing whom they should talk to about selecting courses and planning their pathway through their program, including the importance of multi-year planning.

Week Four: In Class Strategies & Group Work

Group work was the main theme of this session because this appears to be a problem for many international students.

I shared with students the myriad of reasons why we assign group work in the business program.

Students shared what their group experiences in the business program have been like thus far. The results were mixed. Most had at least some positive group experiences, but most also had at least one group experience that was less positive.

We discussed the various ways professors assign groups (students chose, professor chooses, or mixed).

Students preferred when the professor assigned the group, but appreciated it if they were allowed to request one friend to be in their group.

The students agreed that groups were more likely to procrastinate and that often led to problems within the group.

Students expressed feeling bad when they were told by members of a group that their work isn't good enough.

We talked about some strategies for dealing with this, including getting their work done well in advance so that feedback can be incorporated and utilizing the help available to them to ensure that they put their best work forward.

All of the students admitted that they tend to be more passive (quiet) within the group, often letting others take the lead. This was often interpreted by others as disinterest in the group or apathy.

When problems in a group arose, students were reluctant to take steps to address the problem, preferring to ignore the problem and hope it will go away or that the project will come to a natural conclusion and therefore the issue resolved.

We talked about strategies for dealing with problems and discussed in detail how important it is to practice dealing with conflict because conflict is impossible to avoid forever.

Several students spoke about group members who were especially kind.

We talked about strategies for dividing up group work and what tasks should be completed together as a group and what tasks should be assigned to individuals. We also talked about how important the peer evaluation process is to ensuring that students receive the grades that they, as individuals, earned. At this point, we discussed academic honesty and the importance of providing fair and accurate feedback about peers. Many students expressed discomfort in providing negative or constructive feedback that might be used to negatively impact another student's grade. Some of the students said they wished they could see the feedback other students provided about them.

Week Five: Mentoring

We talked about what mentors were and how mentors can have a powerful impact on a person's life.

Students shared their own personal experiences with mentors, and most identified past teachers or parents/relatives as mentors who shaped their lives.

We talked about different types of mentors and the different roles mentors could play. Students developed strategies for how they might identify and approach a potential mentor.

We talked about the various ways mentoring relationships work, including one-time mentors, long-term mentors, career mentors, personal mentors, etc.

Students listed several topics they could talk about with mentors.

The students also commented about the importance of showing respect to mentors. (This may have been the most engaged conversation of the entire *Coffee Coaching* program.)

Week Six: Putting your Plan into Action

We revisited a lot of the main themes from our previous conversations. I stressed that everything we talked about was useless unless students put what they learned into action.

We pointed out the difference between knowing and doing.

Students identified small and regular steps they could take to make these lessons a part of their routine.

I asked if anyone had already incorporated some of our themes into their daily lives and if they saw a difference.

One student took concrete steps to find a mentor in her future professional field. Another student said he now makes a point of connecting with his professors and asking questions. One student said that the way he views his in-class behaviour has changed (for the better).

Students all acknowledged the self-determination of what they can achieve. They set their own limits on their accomplishments by the choices they make.

Appendix Two: Student Feedback

When the program concluded, students were asked to complete a survey designed to capture their thoughts and views on their experience with the *Coffee Coaching* program. Here are the results (verbatim) from students:

<p>What was the best part of the <i>Coffee Coaching</i> program?</p>	<p>Talking about own experience with others. The path of successful. Small group. That we get free coffee, also the way professor Susan designed the program to let us speak and say what could be the major issue for us the international student. The best part for me when everyone is sharing their experience. Sharing ideas with participants that had similar experiences.</p>
<p>What part(s) of the <i>Coffee Coaching</i> program could be improved?</p>	<p>Attendance. Widely topics. The communication between students are very little. I liked it the way it is. I really liked the way it is. It’s more like a conversation and that makes it easy for people to open-up and share whatever they want.</p>
<p>Would you recommend the <i>Coffee Coaching</i> program to your friends?</p>	<p>Yes (6) No (0) Not Sure (0)</p>
<p>Do you think the <i>Coffee Coaching</i> program had an impact on the way you think about success in your classes?</p>	<p>Yes. Yes. Absolutely! No but it provided me with more ways to become successful. Yes, I started to rethink about courses I am taking. Yes.</p>
<p>Do you think the <i>Coffee Coaching</i> program will motivate or inspire you to change your behaviour so that you are more successful in your classes?</p>	<p>Yes. Yes. Yes, it helps me a lot of how to get some help from others. Yes. Yes, I started to contact with my professors more than before. Yes.</p>
<p>Do you think the <i>Coffee Coaching</i> program is worthwhile?</p>	<p>Yes. Of course. Yes, I learn a lot from it. Yes. Yes, it is. Yes.</p>