

Peer mentors help new students

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THE BRUNSWICKAN

Are you lost and forlorn? Do you have no idea what you're doing? Would you like some help?

Providing this help is the role of peer mentors, senior students assigned to first year students in their faculty. Peer mentors are familiar with the university and its services, and can provide new students with information and advice to make the transition to university life easier.

"They share experiences, and answer important questions that a new student might not know," said Lois Clowater, Assistant Dean of Students. "[The program] gives you a person to talk to. For example, if you have questions about midterms that you can't ask the faculty, and your classmates wouldn't know the answer, you can ask your peer mentor."

Melanie Boulé is a third year honours student in classics, and a peer mentor for the second time. "I was interested in it after my first year. I'd had a really good mentor, and I loved Arts 1000, so I went and applied."

Boulé finds being a peer mentor is rewarding to everyone involved. "It's

fun, and you get to meet a lot of really interesting people." She added that she met her best friend, a peer mentor, too, through the program.

"I feel like I've accomplished something when someone calls me because they don't understand something, or with personal problems," she said.

This is particularly true when the student is shy about approaching university staff and faculty. "They might be a little more comfortable coming to us, since we're closer to their age."

"We're there for them, and to help them. First year is hard and we don't want to lose any students," she said.

Boulé advises senior students to look into peer mentoring. "It's a good time, and there's a lot of support from other peer mentors. It's really rewarding when students say thank you. One girl said 'I'm going to miss you.'"

The peer mentor system, which is sometimes organized by students, is not available in all faculties. "But we're gaining," Clowater noted. "Nursing is starting the program for the first time this year."

Mentors can contact their students

by e-mail, by phone, or in person (such as at events), but sometimes they just don't meet up. "It might happen that you couldn't get in touch," Clowater admitted. "[Maybe] because of schedules, or if your name fell through the cracks."

If this happens, Clowater recommends contacting the Dean of your faculty. Peer mentors are chosen for different qualities, she said. "Some faculties choose students who are on the Dean's list, or students who have a good reputation, or are known to be leaders, or ones who have a variety of roles and responsibilities."

Students interested in becoming a peer mentor should contact their Dean. "They have to be approved by the faculty, and trained. Peer mentors are usually outgoing people anyway, but we work with them on communication skills," she said.

"The University really values the services that peer mentors provide, and it shows that the university really does care," Clowater concluded. "That transition from high school to university is significant, and this is one more bridge we're building to help them succeed."

Arts 1000 gets student-friendly

Small classes are great for students, offering opportunities for discussion and one-on-one instruction. But what happens when the class is huge?

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For hundreds of first-year students, Arts 1000 can be an overwhelming experience. Arts 1000, Development of Western Thought, has seats for 560 students and is a required course for anyone enrolled in the UNB Bachelor of Arts program.

"Frosh might find the course intimidating," says Kathleen Scherf, Associate Dean of Arts. "It has big ideas, pervasive thought. The course is relevant to showing students where they've come from, to situate themselves in the history of Western thought."

Not only are the ideas big, the class is also physically huge. So large, it takes place simultaneously in two of the largest auditoriums on campus. The lecturers address students in a classroom in Tilley Hall, and the lecture is fed via video link to a big screen in McLaughan Hall.

Because of the challenge that Arts 1000 represents for many students, the Faculty of Arts is taking steps to make the course more student-friendly.

"In terms of choosing the tutors, I wanted really student-friendly people," says Scherf. "All the people who are teaching understand the importance of mentoring."

Tutorials, making up one-third of class time, will each include no more than twenty students. Organisers will try to place students in tutorial groups according to their interests. Students interested in the fine arts, for example, may attend their tutorial in Memorial Hall, the building where drama productions are staged and home of the UNB Arts Centre. As well, some

tutorials will be held in residences. "We want to forge a stronger connection between residence and academics," says Scherf.

As well, the two year-old Peer Mentor program will play an important role in helping students survive what can be an intimidating class. The drop out rate for first year students can be high and studies have shown that upper level students play a huge role in keeping first year students at university. "We want to access the experience and expertise of the senior students," says Scherf.

Another innovation this year is tutorials set aside for at-risk students. For students who may need more help meeting the demands of university academics, extra time will be spent teaching critical thinking skills, writing skills, or whatever new students might need to strengthen their academic abilities. "We want to ensure that each and every student in Arts 1000 makes the transition from dependant to independent learning," says Scherf. "They are acquiring lifelong learning skills."

The Faculty of Arts is also developing a more inclusive curriculum for Arts 1000, including more readings by

minority and marginal voices. "We think it's important to do a bit more in terms of minority voices," says Scherf, adding that while the course has never ignored these issues, there is room for improvement.

"I'd like to have a look at popular culture, and issues of capitalism, racism, multiculturalism are all important," says Scherf, adding that it's important for students to see



Kathleen Scherf, Associate Dean of Arts, encourages students to drop by and give her feedback about their courses: "We love talking to students. That's what we're here for."

themselves reflected in the courses they take at university. "There needs to be a contextualizing of Western thought in the context of world history."

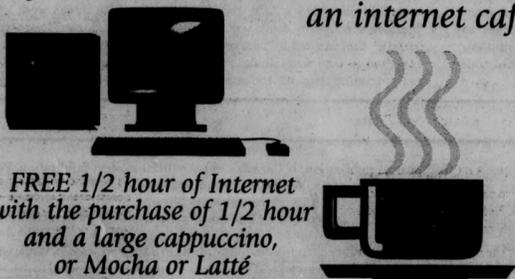
Because curriculum changes have to be approved by the university's Curriculum Committee, these changes might not take effect this year, but Scherf says that tutorial leaders are sensitive to the issues. "We ask them to work that into the tutorials."

Finally, Scherf emphasizes the importance of feedback from the students themselves. The Arts 1000 Committee has tried to make the development of the course a consultative one, and Scherf encourages students to call, e-mail, or visit her office any time.

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