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A peer-based mentor system as means of improving 1st years' "whole student" experience on campus


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Present context

In view of (a) the broadened access to higher education in South Africa, (b) the increasing focus on throughput rates at universities & (c) the recently developed First Years Academy at Stellenbosch University - the growing need to assist first year students to effectively adjust to the university context has become even more relevant.




Historical perspective

In 1954 a first year schema was introduced at Stellenbosch University. (a) First year students were placed in first year residences (a practice to be ceased a few years later) and (b) every 15 first year students were assigned to a senior student who advised them on career, academic and personal matters (a practice retained until today).
At the end of 1955 the average drop out rate of first years at Stellenbosch University was 16.4%, compared to the national average of 28.7%. In 1958 a Buro for Student Counselling was established in the Psychology Department (Du Toit, 1966).




Aim of SU mentor system

The current mentor system at Stellenbosch University aims to assist first year students in their academic as well as personal, social & emotional functioning on campus via the use of a well-developed peer-support programme running both in residences & in private accommodation sectors on campus.



Definition of mentoring

"In its most basic form mentoring is simply friendship with someone who is a little more experienced & who acts as a guide."
(Lewinson, 1978)



Concepts related to student mentoring

- Peer tutoring
- Peer support programs
- Peer learning: e.g. Supplemental Instruction Programs (University of Missouri)
- Service learning

Five key features of mentoring relationships

- Helping relationships usually focused on achievement
- Relative to mentees, mentors show greater experience, influence & achievement within the particular environment
- Provide any one or all three of:
 - Emotional & psychological support
 - Direct assistance with task-related development
 - Role modelling
- Personal & reciprocal relationships (Jacobi, 1991)

Differences between mentoring & tutoring (Goodlad, 2002)

Dimension	Mentoring	Tutoring
Focus	Life skills	Academic learning
Location	Often outside of classroom	Usually in a classroom
Mode	One to one	One to several
Duration	Several months / years	A few weeks

Rationale of mentoring system

- Better student retention & lower attrition rates
- Therefore a better throughput or student progress ratio
- Make use of an available resource
- Skills development of mentors

Student integration & academic success

Underscores the importance of integrating students into their academic institutions: both academically & socially

“The more students are involved in the social & academic life of an institution, the more likely they are to learn & to persist.” (Tinto, 2000)

Learning communities

Peer mentoring facilitates the development of learning communities.

The benefits of learning communities are:

- Shared knowledge
- Shared knowing
- Shared responsibility (Tinto, 2002)

Benefits of mentor relationships

- Benefits are well documented in organizational environments
- Anecdotal reports of positive student experiences of mentoring
- Reported effects on student satisfaction, retention & success
- Little substantive research into the benefits of mentoring relationships in higher education (Pendleton, 2005)



Question of varied outcomes

- Maybe different effects on different students (e.g. SI more effective with students that are academically better prepared - Zulu, 2003)
- Maybe all expectations not met (higher retention rates & satisfaction, not better academic performance)
- Short-term versus long-term benefits (positive results early on, no difference after two years)
- Not universally beneficial or magical cure all



Rewards for mentor

- Often mentors are paid
- Sometimes mentors receive academic credit (more often in case of tutors & service learning)
- Often only intrinsic rewards
 - Something to put on CV
 - Development of own skills
 - Positive effect on own learning



Management of SU mentor system

- Funded by Student Affairs & Office for Student Housing
- Mentors selected & appointed by residence heads
- Mentors trained by Student Counselling
- Day to day responsibility of residence heads & residence management
- In cooperation & with support of Academic Support staff & 1st year Academy



Mentor system supplementary to other services & programmes

- Centre for Prospective Students
- Welcoming Matie – special issue of student newspaper
- Welcoming programme in faculties
- Welcoming programme in residences & private wards
- Tutorial system in faculties facilitated by Centre for Teaching and Learning
- Language Centre
- Student Counselling & Development



Criteria for selection of mentors

- Good academic achievement & habits
- Interpersonal skills & accessibility to different 1st years
- Commitment & self-directedness
- Positive role model for 1st years
- Available for training & during welcoming period
- Representing different faculties



Functions during welcoming period

- Allocation of 1st years prior to their arrival
- Meet 1st years on arrival on campus
- Meet parents of 1st years
- Conduct goals interview with 1st years
- Daily contact sessions during welcoming period
- Identify any problems & possible risks
- Feedback to residence management & referral to appropriate services



Themes in goal interview



- I am accepted to study ... (degree)
- Ideally, I would like to study ...
- I chose this degree because ...
- I dream of one day ...
- In ten years' time I see myself as ...
- My most important values in life are ...
- I am at my happiest when ...
- The things I look forward to the most in coming to SU are ...
- I would like to achieve the following in my time at SU: academically, socially, personally, other



Themes during welcoming period



- Familiarity with campus layout
- Importance of attendance of faculty welcoming programs
- Process of registration & student fees
- Programme choice & combinations of modules
- Buying of textbooks
- Introduce 1st years to demands of studying at US
- Introduce 1st years to student & residence life



Continuous functions of mentors



- Meet with 1st years every 2nd week
- Feedback to residence head every 2nd week
- Attend cluster meeting every quarter
- Identify & address problems
- Referral to appropriate services
- Report sickness, injury, offence
- Communication with parents



Academic mentoring



- Inquiry about academic progress
- Identify problems & problem subjects
- Advice about study habits
- Preparation for tests & exams
- Information about HEMIS & readmission
- Answer questions & address problems
- Referral to other services when needed



Social mentoring



- Provide information regarding student activities
- Explain rules & culture in residence & private wards
- Provide advice about problems with roommates & other personal relationships
- Provide advice regarding personal safety
- Address possible adjustment difficulties
- Provide support during periods of crisis



Communication with parents



- Meet parents during welcoming period
- Provide own contact details & obtain theirs
- Send correspondence in March, May & August
- Give feedback to residence head about contact with parents
- Keep balance between keeping parents informed & maintaining confidentiality with 1st year



Mentors of 1st years in private wards



- Provide walk-in service point at Student Counselling, daily from 12h00 – 14h00
- Two mentors per day & five days a week
- Mentors participate in private ward orientation programme
- Establish mentors groups of 1st years living in private wards



General considerations



- Participation of 1st year students is voluntarily
- Importance of personal relationship
- Regular contact & meetings are essential
- Mentor should use own initiative
- Importance of maintaining confidentiality
- Always consult with residence head
- Referral to other services when needed



Training of mentors



- October: one hour orientation session
- January: before arrival of 1st years & start of welcoming programme: two full days (10 hours)
 - Academic mentoring
 - Personal mentoring
- Quarterly ResEd cluster meetings



Content of January training



- Academic mentoring
 - Registration process
 - Transition from school to university
 - Study skills guidelines
- Personal mentoring
 - Successful relationships
 - HIV / AIDS
 - Alcohol abuse
 - Drug abuse
 - Dealing with diversity
- Discussion of case studies



Content of mentor manual



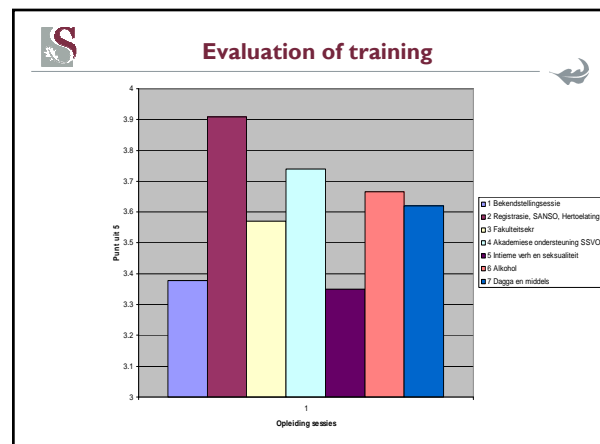
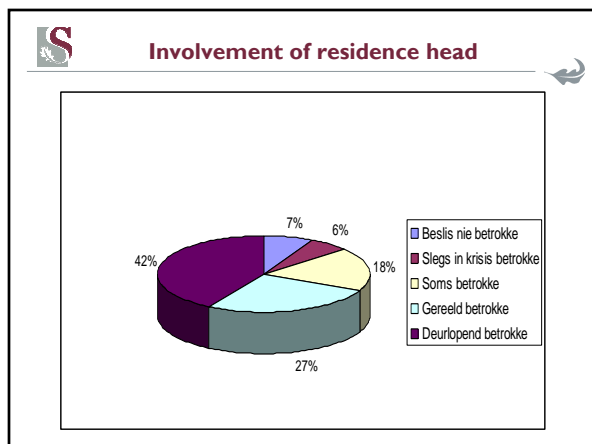
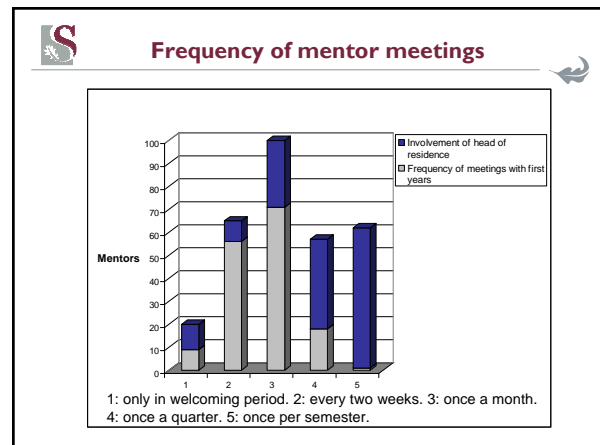
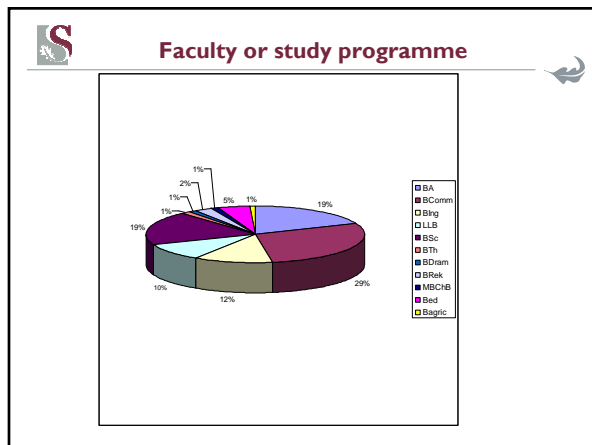
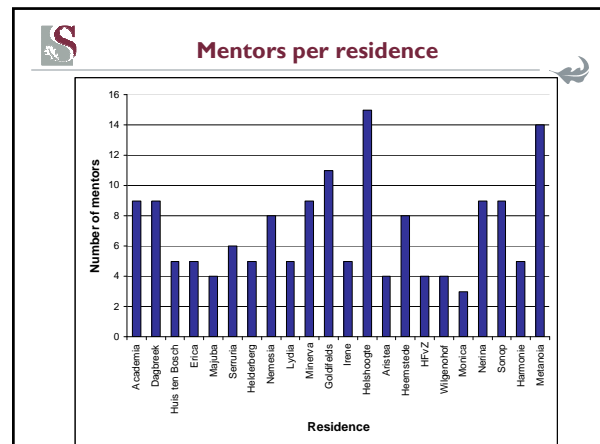
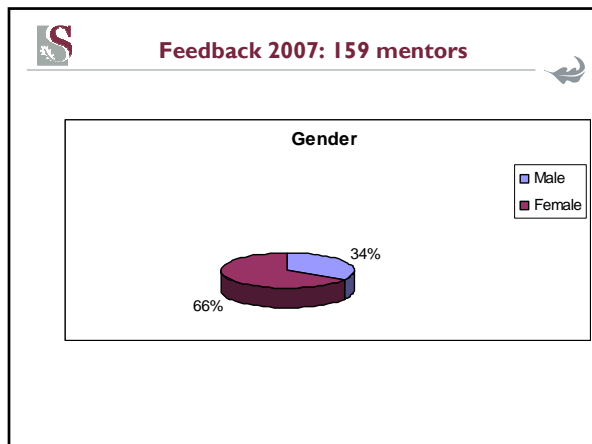
- Description of mentor duties
- Academic information: registration procedures, program & module details
- Contact details of faculty officers
- University calendar
- Guidelines for study skills, dealing with tests & examinations
- Contact details of available support services
- Details of development workshops
- Personal mentoring: various themes
- Guidelines for goal interviews
- Guidelines for letters to parents

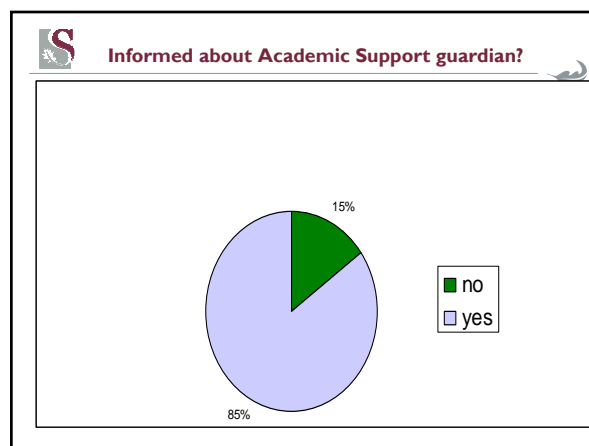
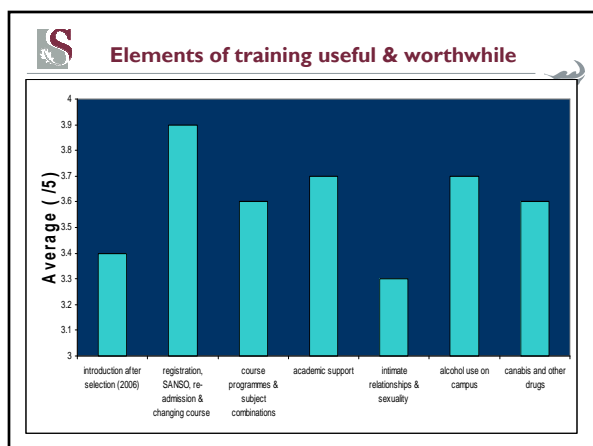
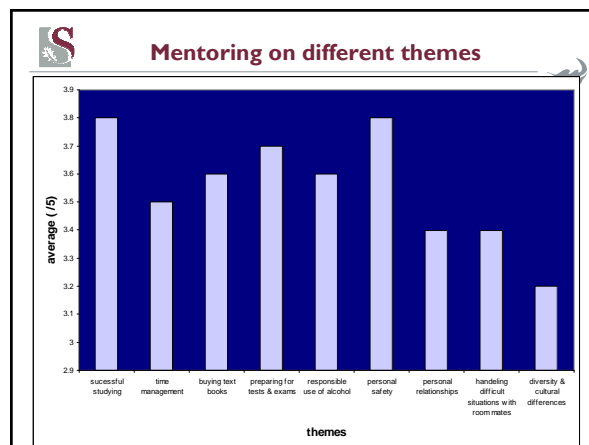
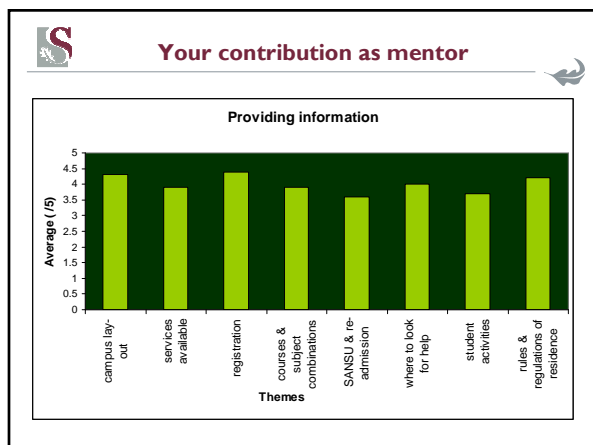
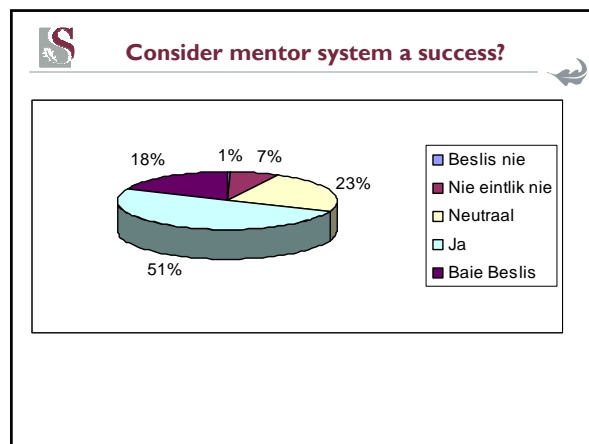
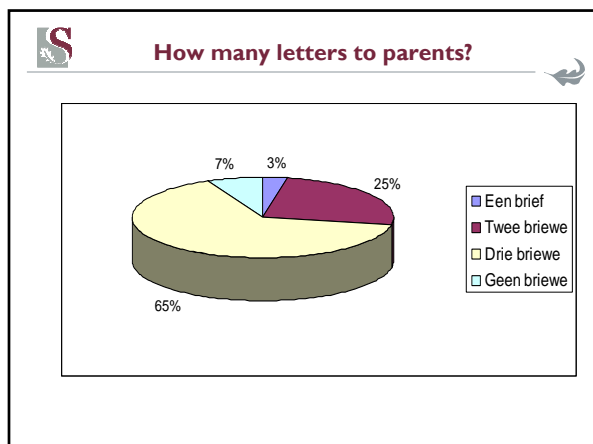


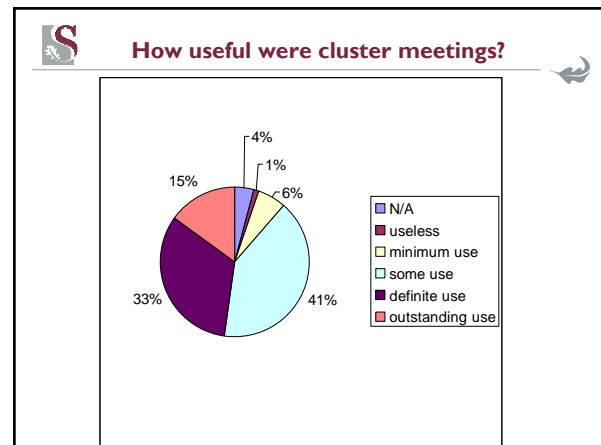
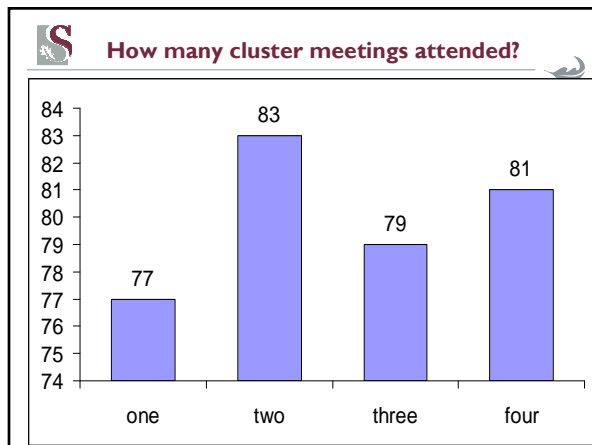
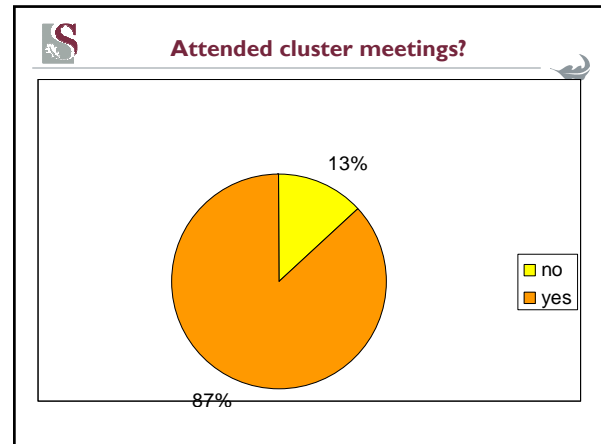
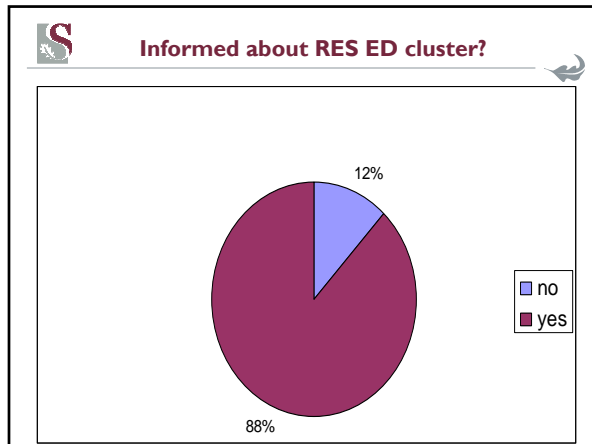
Evaluation of mentor system



- Mentors evaluate all training modules
- Questionnaires to sample of parents in fourth term
- Questionnaires to all 1st years in fourth term
- All mentors' end of term reports
- All residence heads' end of term reports
- Quarterly feedback by Academic Support guardians







- Difficulties experienced**
- Time constraints in program of mentors (own academic or personal problems)
 - Test & exam results of 1st years not available to mentors soon enough
 - Some mentors do not meet regularly with 1st years & some mentors only meet with 1st years in groups
 - Some 1st years only attend mentor meetings at beginning of year
 - Residence management not adequately involved with mentors in some residences

- Challenges ahead**
- Secure funding to lower mentor to mentee ratio from 1:15 to 1:7
 - Further establish mentoring of private students
 - Continue to improve monitoring & quality control of mentors
 - Conduct quality research on mentor system
 - Focus not only on integration of students to institution (Tinto) – but on institutional adaptation as key to transition & retention (McKenzie & Schweitzer)
 - Link mentors, curriculum & pedagogy



Research



- Good research ensures good practice
- More research on how & to what extent mentoring benefits mentees, mentors & academic environment
- More research on aspiration of mentees, & effect of mentoring on them
- More research on motivation of mentors
- Better understanding of the possible secondary & long-term benefits of mentoring



Thank you



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