DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSFERABLE SKILLS IN A LOW-SES POPULATION THROUGH PEER ASSISTED STUDY SESSIONS

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KEYWORDS: Peer mentoring programs, Study skills, low SES

Background
Student peer mentoring programs are generally implemented to improve student learning outcomes. Students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are typically under-represented in Australian higher education (Coates and Kraus, 2005). In general it is thought that these students may not be equipped with the skill-sets necessary to complete their academic studies (Kirk, 2008). At Victoria University in Melbourne, there is an increasing number of low SES students (`20%), with a significant proportion of mature aged (Bachelor of Health Sciences (Paramedicine)) and “first in family to University” from immigrant communities (Bachelor of Science (Biomedical Science)) students.

Aims
The aim of this study was to determine if these students undertaking Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) in an anatomy and physiology unit also developed study skills, time management skills and confidence in their abilities to complete their studies.

Description of intervention
We introduced a voluntary learning support or academic assistance program (PASS) for first year Bachelor of Health Sciences (Paramedicine) and Bachelor of Science (Biomedical Science) students. Student mentors were selected from the previous year’s cohort, with mentors obtaining a grade of >80% in the same unit. Mentors completed a 2-day training program before the first session and attended weekly workshops throughout the semester. Student mentee numbers were capped at 50 per semester.

Design and methods
This study was approved by the Human Ethics Research Committee of Victoria University (HRETH 10/20). PASS involves 2nd or 3rd year Student Mentors facilitating weekly review sessions for groups of 1st year students in a specific unit of study focused on anatomy and physiology. Student Mentors use collaborative learning methods to assist students to better understand difficult concepts. Students enrolled in both degree programs voluntarily participated in the PASS scheme in 2011 and 2012. Evaluation surveys were distributed at week 12 of semester. The survey contained 10 questions with a Likert scale of 5, as well as 3 open questions.

Results
Students in both cohorts improved their final grade for this unit and reduced their failure rate if they participated in PASS. In addition, in both cohorts, students who attended PASS improved their confidence and believed the sessions provided them with important skills. Specifically, students believed that the PASS program helped them to develop skills to approach their other units of study in the degree, time management skills and the development of social networks. All students who participated in the PASS program strongly agreed that it had been a positive experience.

Conclusions
The PASS program employed at Victoria University produced favorable outcomes for both the Bachelor of Health Sciences (Paramedic) (Hryciw et al., 2013) and Bachelor of Science (Biomedical

Science) students. Students in general believed that they had developed confidence in general, as well as necessary skills that could assist them in completing their degree. Future studies should focus on the students' transferability of the skills learned in the PASS program in other subjects within their degree and whether this cohort had an increased completion rate in their overall degree program.

References

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Proceedings of the Australian Conference on Science and Mathematics Education, The University of Queensland, Sept 28th to 30th, 2016, page 69-70, ISBN Number 978-0-9871834-5-3.