Peer Mentoring in Social Work Education: Strengths & Challenges
Walsh, J. S. & Kinney, M. K.
Indiana University

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Background

Social Work Students: High risk of cognitive, emotional, social, socio-economic, and socio-political stressors throughout coursework and field placements in a discipline that is susceptible to high levels of compassion fatigue and burnout

Peer Mentoring: A supportive one-to-one relationship with persons closely approximating one another's experiences (e.g. educational, professional, and vocational) with the goal of academic and social integration

Peer Mentoring with Social Work Students: Despite the presence of academic advising and career support services, peer mentoring programming is nonexistent in most social work education schools, including Indiana University

Study Purpose

To implement and evaluate how well the components of a peer mentoring program for BSW and MSW students contribute to academic and social integration and to attainment of students' academic, social, and personal goals

Participants

	Mentors 6 2nd year MSW	Mentees 3 2nd year BSW 7 2nd year MSW
Gender	6 Females	8 Females 1 Male 1 Androgyne
Race	6 White	6 White 1 Black 2 Hispanic
Age	25-50 (*Mdn*=30)	20-49 (*Mdn*=26)

Methods

Implementation of Peer Mentoring Program
- Participants matched based on ranked preferences for age, gender, race, socio-economic status, concentration/practice interest, and personal interests
- Mentor match day
- Twelve weeks of peer mentoring
- Three group networking events
- Biweekly log reporting

Peer Mentoring Program Mixed Methods Study
- Convenience sampling of IUSSW students participating in peer mentoring program (*N* = 55)
- Pre-test and post-test survey (*N* = 16)
  - Academic integration: 6-item scale
  - Social integration: 6-item scale
  - Goal attainment: Self-assessment
  - Leadership skills for mentors: Self-assessment
  - Evaluation of of peer mentoring program: Open-ended and closed-ended questions
- Focus group (*N* = 4)
  - Facilitated by a qualified social work colleague who had familiarity with the program
  - Structured interview guide used to explore participants' experience with the program

Results

Highest ranking match characteristics
- Professional interests (78%), Personal interests (73%), Age (22%)

Highest ranking program components
- Match day (89%), Networking event: concentrations (87.5%), Networking event: post-grad (79%)

Most frequently discussed topics between mentors and mentees
- Personal concerns; Social issues; Concentration choices; Practicum questions

Highest ranking program benefits among mentors
- Supporting mentees; Identifying personal strengths/challenges; Networking with professionals

Highest ranking program benefits among mentees
- Transparent discussion; Course insight and support; Networking with students and professionals

Most frequently cited barriers between mentors and mentees
- Scheduling limitations; Poor follow-through by mentor or mentee; Personality differences

Effects on academic integration and social integration
- Significant academic increase: $t(11)= -6.220$, $p<.001$; No social significance: $t(11)= 2.049$, $p<.065$

Optimization of meeting time between mentors and mentees
- Face-to-face (89.9%); Virtually (10.1%)

Discussion

Strengths
- Participants who are relatively close in age, share similar personal and professional interests, and hold well-coordinated schedules describe peer mentoring as meaningful
- Highest ranking program components favor community building activities

Challenges
- Coordinating schedules between two students' differing academic, professional, and personal obligations is extremely difficult, impacting relationship engagement and attrition
- Ongoing leadership support for mentors may have resulted in greater peer engagement
- While academic integration increased in this study, only social integration increased in the pilot study; therefore, conclusions cannot yet be drawn about its impact from peer mentoring

Conclusions
- One-on-one peer mentoring in social work education fosters transparent discussions that are informed by personal and professional experience; however, extensive mitigating factors including age, personal and professional interests, personality, scheduling limitations, student initiative and engagement, and availability of ongoing mentor support greatly influence the perceived level of success in peer mentoring relationships
- Additional research should explore how mitigating factors may be minimized and whether alternative options such as school supported peer counseling positions coupled with community building activities may increase desired outcomes