

The Animal and Dairy Science Learning Community Assists Students with Acclimation to Iowa State University

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Overview

Learning communities at Iowa State University (ISU) are designed to help new students become accustomed to campus, get to know their peers, and develop an immediate support group within their major. The Animal and Dairy Science Learning Community consists of small groups of students that share the same adviser, interests, and background. These students take one to three classes together and form study teams. Groups are led by a peer mentor who is familiar with the department, curriculum, and university resources. Peer mentors must have sophomore status and be in good academic standing. The peer groups meet in coordination with the Animal Science 110 course (ANS 110 - Orientation in Animal Science).

Learning Community Structure

All incoming students must enroll in the ANS 110 course. In doing so, they are automatically enrolled in the Animal and Dairy Science Learning Community. The benefits of the learning community include access to reserved sections of courses in English Composition and Principles of Biology. These sections are reserved for animal and dairy science majors, as well as those that have chosen the general pre-veterinary option. This allows our students to take these courses with students within their major so that they become familiar faces. An added benefit of the learning community is that incoming students are placed with a peer mentor to aid in their first-semester transition to ISU. A peer mentor is a selected current Animal Science undergraduate that is involved in organizing study groups, social events, and out-of-class activities for new students. Upperclassmen are able to speak to the group members from experience and are not as intimidating as a professor or adviser might be to the new student. Group members are required to meet with their peer mentor in small groups (8-12 students) once a week as part of the ANS 110 course.

Students are assigned to a peer mentor based on their adviser assignment. Therefore, all of the students that form a peer mentor group have the same academic adviser. Additional factors are considered when placing students into a peer group in an effort to unite students who may be experiencing similar challenges when adjusting to ISU. One way in which we do this is to separate transfer students from incoming freshmen. Transfer students experience different

challenges in their first semester so care is taken to place transfer students with other transfer students. When possible, the peer mentor of a transfer group will also be a transfer student. This allows them to work as a team rather than feel isolated at a large university.

A student's background and home town are also considered when assigning students to groups. For example, in the fall 2017 one academic adviser took on twenty incoming freshmen who were interested in companion animals and pursuing an advanced degree in Veterinary Medicine. Ten of these students were from small towns in Iowa while the remaining ten freshmen came from states outside of the Midwest (California, Florida, Virginia, and Maryland). Placing the out-of-state students in the same peer group allows them to get to know others who are also far away from home. This helps them build a sense of community at ISU and to be surrounded by people who understand what they may be going through in their first semester.

Peer Mentor Selection

Every year new peer mentors are selected through an application and interview process. The application requires current grade reports, an up-to-date resume, and completion of short essay questions. In December of 2016 a total of seventy-eight applications were received for thirty-eight available mentor positions. A total of thirty-eight peer mentors allows the group size to be between eight and twelve students per group. We believe that it is important to keep the groups small in order for the peer mentor to maintain the ability to form bonds with each student in the group. The mentality of keeping groups small and a hiring a large number of peer mentors has made the AN S/DY S peer mentor program the largest of its kind at ISU.

At the time of this publication seventy-two applications have been received for thirty-eight available peer mentor positions available in 2018. Eighteen peer mentors are returning from 2017 and forty-two interviews will be conducted for the remaining positions. Twelve of the applications were not selected due to sub-par essays or grade point averages.

Table 1. Reasons for submitting an application (N = 72)

Reason	Percentage
Opportunity to help new students	13.9%
Wants to improve own skills	16.6%
Enjoyed their role as a PM previously	25.0%
Their own PM made an impact on them	44.5%

Common themes of why a student chose to apply to the peer mentor program are outlined in Table 1. One-fourth of

the applications were from previous peer mentors who enjoyed working with incoming students. While all of the statements from previous peer mentors echoed the same theme, some of the statements stood out from the group. One student wrote: “Being a peer mentor in the fall of 2017 has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my college career. I gained confidence and knowledge through this program. It is such an amazing feeling to be able to give back to ISU and the Animal Science department by helping new students.” These thoughts were repeated by another former peer mentor: “I am grateful to see [the new students] grow into their collegiate career. My only regret is that the semester is coming to an end and I will no longer see them every week. Being an Animal Science peer mentor is without a doubt my favorite academic venture here at ISU.”

Previous peer mentors were not the only ones who enjoyed participating in the program. Roughly 44.5% of the applications came from students who were positively impacted by the efforts of their peer mentor and wanted to play the same role for a new crop of incoming students. The fact that almost 70% of the 2018 applicants stated that the program had a positive effect on them speaks volumes to the overall positive impact that the program is achieving.

Peer Mentor Training

Once a peer mentor is selected, they must complete approximately twelve to fifteen hours of training in the spring semester before being assigned to a group in the fall. The training sessions last two to three hours each and are designed to allow all of the peer mentors to interact with each other. These interactions help new mentors learn from previous mentors. The training sessions cover a broad range of topics including (but not limited to):

- Expectations of the peer mentor
- Review of the departmental curriculum
- Identification of student issues
- Mental health awareness
- Diversity and inclusion
- Availability of campus resources

Many of these topics are sensitive in nature but are considered essential for the peer mentors to be aware of and prepared for situations that may present themselves.

Effectiveness of the Peer Mentor Program

Every fall incoming students (freshmen and transfers) complete a student feedback survey. The survey provides several statements that refer to the effectiveness of the peer mentor and the impact of the learning community as a whole. Students must choose to agree or disagree with each statement according to a five-point Likert-type scale. In November of 2017 we received feedback from 178 first-semester students. Results related to the effectiveness of the peer mentor and the learning community as a whole can be found in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 show that the peer mentor selection and training process is effective at choosing the best

candidates and properly prepares them to lead their peer groups. Combining the ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ categories results in 93% of students indicating that their peer mentor provides them with useful information and 94% feel that their peer mentor is knowledgeable about resources on campus. Interestingly, only 29% of students said that they choose ISU because of the learning community while 81% of students would recommend the learning community to new students.

Table 2. Effectiveness of the peer mentor and the learning community as a whole (2017)

N = 178	Scale ¹				
	SA	A	N	D	SD
My ² PM facilitates interactions among the group	62%	30%	6%	1%	1%
My PM provides me with useful information	68%	25%	5%	1%	1%
My PM demonstrates concern about my academic success	48%	41%	6%	3%	2%
My PM is knowledgeable about university resources	60%	34%	4%	0%	2%
Overall, my PM has been helpful	65%	28%	6%	0%	1%
I am satisfied with my overall ³ LC experience	55%	60%	7%	2%	2%
The LC has helped in my adjustment to ISU	42%	30%	23%	3%	2%
The LC was an important reason why I chose ISU	13%	16%	42%	21%	8%
I would recommend the LC to new students	35%	46%	16%	1%	2%

¹Scale: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

²PM = peer mentor

³LC = learning community

In conclusion, the Animal and Dairy Science learning community is unique in the number of peer mentors that are hired and the small size of peer groups. Rigorous training has prepared the peer mentors to effectively lead their group of new students. In addition, matching students to group based on background and interests has proven to be an effective method at helping incoming students transition to the Animal Science department at ISU.