

The Success Team Program: A Model of Peer Mentorship

Suzanne Bilbeisi, AIA, Oklahoma State University

The first year at the university can be particularly trying for students entering the difficult major of Architecture. The unusual time commitment, as well as the high standards for performance, can confound entering students. To seek excellence, and to be able to absorb criticism and revise work with that input, is a difficult working mode for freshmen to adopt. Added to this new and demanding level of expectations is the unfortunate lack of a sense of belonging. The influence of upperclassmen can be a useful tool in resetting the academic expectations level, and can help build a sense of community for these beginning design students.

The common studio teaching model of fifteen students per faculty member is an accepted and effective model for achieving adequate interaction and personal attention in the studio learning environment. An underutilized yet also effective method involves employing undergraduate upperclassmen to mentor and assist freshmen students in the initial foundations course, thereby building in essence, a community. In their important theoretical treatise on learning, Lave and Wenger state that “A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage.”¹ In the all encompassing and overwhelming world of architecture school, this kind of apprenticeship into the community allows newcomers to participate at the edge while learning the lingo and developing an intuitive sense of the shared identity of the community.² For beginning design students, this transition into the school is a critical moment.

The Success Team Program

In 2004, our College instituted a formal mentoring program for all freshmen students, called the Success Team program, to be held in collaboration with the “Introduction to Architecture” first semester core course. This course is not a studio course, it is a large classroom, lecture based, introduction to the myriad of issues involved with beginning the study of architecture:

addressing drawing skills, introducing architectural concepts and vocabulary, and providing a review of the profession itself through precedent study, tours, interviews, and assigned research. (Figure 1) It is a two credit hour course intended to introduce the discipline of study, and prepare students for entering the spring semester Architecture Studio I.



Figure 1. Introduction to Architecture lecture, Fall 2015



Figure 2. A Success Team orientation meeting, Fall 2015

As part of this introduction course, groups of ten to twelve freshmen are assigned an upperclassman to help them navigate the difficulties of adjustment during the first seven weeks of their first Fall semester. Weekly meetings with this small group

Suzanne Bilbeisi, AIA

of freshmen peers, guided by the upperclassman mentor (or coach), immediately establishes a sense of community within the school of architecture for this newest group of design students. (Figure 2)

With a typical student enrollment in the class of 120+ freshmen (2/3 architecture and 1/3 architectural engineering majors), approximately ten to twelve coaches are employed each Fall. Coaches are selected via the process of an application; the questions on the application are related to why the upperclassmen desires to be a leader, and what they feel they can contribute to a freshman's initial experience at the school of architecture. One applicant reflected that "I had upperclassmen invest in me when I entered the School of Architecture and that impacted me tremendously; I realize how beneficial that was for my education in architecture as well as for my personal growth entering college. I wanted to be a success coach to have a specific avenue to give back to the school that has given me so much."

Coach candidates must be accomplished students within the school of architecture, and be willing to develop their leadership skills. Annually, more students apply than can be selected, which is evidence of the positive perception of the program throughout the school. One coach commented "I absolutely love what I do here, and I am proud to advocate our major to younger students." A second-time coach stated "Getting to mentor younger people is one of the coolest things you get to do as an upperclassman and I look forward to sharing what I've learned about architecture every year."

Weekly coach coordination meetings, led by the faculty and a designated coach coordinator (also a student), ensure that the upperclassmen have sufficient monitoring such that they know the expectations and can ask any questions of each other, or of the instructor. It is common at these meetings for strategies related to increasing positive group dynamics to be shared and discussed. A sort of 'coach community' thus results; one coach related that "the communication between everyone was fantastic, and I felt like I got to know the other coaches and the professor much better as well." The coach coordinator is also responsible for collecting time sheets, coordinating individual team meeting locations, and distributing other information to the coaches as warranted, thereby building the coordinator's leadership capabilities in human resource management.

The academic content of the team meetings is controlled, and is complementary to the lecture material presented in the Introduction to Architecture class – the coaches assist students

with aspects related to the weekly assignment. Freshmen are offered advice and can ask questions of the mentors that aids in their success in the course. One freshmen surveyed said "I really enjoyed having a student's viewpoint and helpful advice for each assignment. These tips made each assignment much less nerve-racking." (Figure 3) Topics for the assignments range from developing drawing skills – orthographic documentation and perspective sketching, to assignments focused upon understanding fundamental ordering systems and design principles such as axis, hierarchy, repetition, datum, etc.

The coaches lead their student team on a 'mock' assignment each week, which parallels their assignment without solving the actual homework. If we accept that knowledge is defined as the process by which a person or a group of people acquire a situated understanding within a social context³, here we find many 'Aha' moments, where interactions with peers and the coach lead to a more thorough understanding of each issue, as the areas of study build upon one another.



Figure 3. Sketching review as part of a team meeting, Fall 2015

Most importantly, however, is the social aspect of the peer mentoring which breaks down the fear level and makes achieving the degree seem possible. "The Success Team program has introduced me to alternative avenues of thought, new friendships, and a glimpse into the future of my architectural studies!", wrote one student. Another stated "This program allowed me to meet other like-minded students who are taking the same classes I am. This allowed me to find partners to work on assignments with, and to study within a group for our other classes too." Coaches are eager to share their own experiences, especially the difficulties they overcame. A freshman observed "It helped to know that she was once in the same position but improved, and now is in her fourth year of architecture school – it gives me hope!" These impressionable beginning design students see that they are not alone, and that it is alright to be less than perfect in this transition; instead they can perceive the bigger picture of where they could be in just a few short years.

Program Benefits

The program benefits are many; for the freshmen the advantage of the assistance of a personal coach is invaluable. Time management is an important topic the coaches are required to discuss with their team – it is the key to success in architecture school, as well as knowledge of how to access university resources. (Figure 4) Coaches also provide the academic and technical assistance of ‘this is how you can achieve that’ in terms of content and execution quality – not only what to observe and how to document it, but also how to cut, glue, draw, compose, etc. As a result of coach input, the overall homework scores have improved for the course, and the assignments have in fact been allowed to become more complex in their scope.



Figure 4. Students gather with their coach to discuss time management strategies, Fall 2012

Of equal importance, however, the coaches provide an introduction to the culture of architecture school, and encourage engagement while offering opportunities for interactions with peers and the student organizations. “My coach kept us updated on school-wide events”, one student reported. Freshmen are invited to attend AIAS evening meetings, for example, and when they arrive they actually know someone there. This freshman program has in fact increased participation in the school’s student organizations, leading to a more vibrant community from top to bottom.

One critical asset to the course is a section of studio real estate, designated as the ‘Intro to Architecture’ open studio space which is available for the freshmen to use as if it were an actual studio. (Figure 5) And many do use the space, at all times of the day and week, further increasing their integration into the studio culture. They have a ‘home base’ in the Architecture Building, should they choose to make use of it.

Not surprisingly, the program has proven to aid with first semester retention rates (August to December), which hovers at 85 - 90% annually. While for most freshmen the program is an affirmation along their initial path in architecture school, for others it helps them realize their passions may lie elsewhere. One student found that “Although the Success Team helped me a ton, I have decided to switch to a different engineering discipline. I enjoyed the assignments but I don’t think this is what I want to do.” This kind of realization is equally valid.



Figure 5. A coach discusses design principles with his team in the Intro studio, Fall 2010

At the end of semester survey, the freshmen responded at a rating of 8.45/10 that the program assisted with their transition into the school of architecture ‘community’. With a rating of 9.07/10, they reported that they now understood the expectations (workload, attitude, rewards, etc) of an architecture or architectural engineering student better. These results are consistent with previous annual program survey ratings, indicating that the Success Team concept continues to be making a difference in the freshman experience for students in the school of architecture.

The benefits for the coaches is obviously found in the opportunity to hone leadership skills, involving improved communication techniques, managing group dynamics, and leading activities. The coaches reported at a 9/10 rating that they found their leadership skills were improved as a result of participating in the program. At an overwhelming 9.9/10 rating, the upperclassmen felt that coaching in the Success Team program was a valuable enhancement to their own experience in the school of architecture. One coach earnestly stated that “In my studio it is easy to lose sight of why architecture spoke to me in the first place, and interacting with these new students is refreshing. It lets me escape from ADA, egress, fire suppression, etc for a while.” Every teacher in a school of architecture can relate to this sentiment!

Suzanne Bilbeisi, AIA

Program Challenges

With all of these known benefits, there are the inevitable challenges for the program – the major of which is financial. There is a departmental cost to this program as the mentors are indeed compensated a small payment of \$300 each for their work in the seven week program. Each year, special funds have to be petitioned from the Dean of the college to ensure the continuation of the program. This is especially problematic in difficult budget years.

Another challenge lies in the initial pairing of team members to coach; for many years a random draw method was utilized, with mixed results. More recently, teams have been formed according to the specific major within the discipline (Arch or AE), and that has seemed to improve satisfaction levels with the program. Students typically want a coach who is pursuing the same discipline - someone on the same career path as they now are. Diversity within teams is maintained based upon the random draw of in-state/ out-of-state/ international mixture of students in the course, as well as the racial and cultural diversity found in such a large class.

The most pressing challenge, however, comes from the potential sense of dependency on the coach. In some instances after the conclusion of the seven week program, the coach becomes a lifeline for the freshman student, and the borderline of appropriate involvement can be breached. It is important that the coach doesn't get unnecessarily involved with a student's issues beyond their capability to assist. According to university legal counsel, for student employees participating in the mentorship program, and acting within the scope of his/her employment, Oklahoma's Governmental Tort Claims Act provides some protection against potential liability.⁴ In the eleven year history of the program, there has never been a need to utilize university resources to address any such issue, but it requires an awareness of coach and student activities by the faculty.

Despite these challenges, over the years the program has proven itself useful and popular, with freshmen student evaluations ranking it as 'very valuable' – at a 9.2/10 rating. Beginning design students clearly see and appreciate the benefits of the program. A real sense of community is established, even without an actual design studio to facilitate that occurrence. Annually, upperclassmen rush to apply to become coaches in the hopes of making a difference for the freshmen students. The challenges involved with program

operations, though they exist, pale in comparison to the many program benefits afforded to the freshman student experience.

Moving forward:

Mentorship through Academia and into the Profession

The Success Team program is a mirror of mentorship suggested by the AIA Code of Ethics wherein members are encouraged to “nurture their fellow professionals as they progress through stages of their career, beginning with professional education in the academy, progressing through internship, and continuing throughout their career.”⁵ Indeed, this process of fostering personal and professional growth must begin during the formative years of academia.

This program is the beginnings of professional mentorship for students at our School of Architecture. One coach remembered that “Thinking back to when I first started, I had no idea why I chose this major. I felt lost, a little afraid, and anxious. My success coach helped alleviate these worries while also giving me access to a group of other students who were probably going through the same worries that I was. I want to be just like that person who helped me so long ago, my coach, who ultimately pushed me to become the designer I am today.” This is classic ‘pull mentoring’, where the coaches, just a few years older than the mentees, reach back to assist the next generation of potential architects in line. When asked if they felt that their own understanding of fundamental design issues had been ‘refreshed’ because of their role in the program, the coaches agreed at a rating of 9.4/10 that their current design thinking had indeed been influenced. Mentors ultimately find that by helping others develop knowledge and skills that enhance the overall organization, they themselves become more successful.⁶

In addition to the Success Team program, within our school of architecture there are two other mentoring programs: the ‘Big/Little’ program that is organized as a volunteer activity by AIAS for 2nd-5th year students and is a continuation of the student to student peer mentoring process, and the newly created Centennial Mentorship Program designed to connect students in professional school with alumni. The Big/Little program was initially conceived by the OSU AIAS chapter over 30 years ago, and has remained a part of the school culture for all these years. Annually, 40 to 50 upperclassmen volunteer to mentor second year students in a one-on-one relationship. (figure 6) Approximately 100 students participate in the program, reflecting a participation rate of nearly half of the eligible student population of the School of Architecture. The new Centennial Mentorship program is in the test phase, but

the initial response from both students and alumni has been very positive. In this program, one alumnus will be matched with two to four professional school students, with weekly contact (Facebook, Skype, Email, etc) required. The purpose of this program is to ease the transition from academia to the profession, by having a mentor available to assist with issues related to job search, development of career goals, and many other issues a soon-to-be graduate will face.

The inherent struggles involved with architecture school, and all that this new culture entails, is the glue that binds these mentoring relationships. Structured mentorship programs can be remarkably successful because they take the pressure off of the junior member from having to ask the more senior member to be their mentor.⁷ Social anxiety is lessened, and at the university level student performance can be enhanced.



Figure 6. AIAS Big/Little program helps to form bonds between upperclassmen and second year students, 2013.

The importance of mentorship is undeniable in the development of a future professional – whether in the position of mentor or mentee. As a person’s needs change throughout their career, so will the qualities they value in a mentor.⁸ While structured mentorship programs can be perceived as ‘forced’ in that those initially paired in a mentor/mentee relationship don’t know one another at all, in this situation the shared milieu of architecture school creates an often reciprocal relationship where not only does the mentee gain from the mentor, but the students benefit from knowing one another. The junior members remind the senior members of themselves, therefore it is a natural relationship to sustain.⁹

And so each Fall we welcome our next group of freshmen into architecture school to be mentored by newly promoted upperclassmen, followed in the spring by fifth year students/graduates entering the workforce to find their own mentors as they begin their careers. The chain of mentorship

must seamlessly continue through academia and into the profession. In the words of Sheryl Sandberg, “Being unsure about how to proceed is the most natural feeling in the world. Asking for input is not a sign of weakness, but most often the first step to finding a path forward.”¹⁰ Occurring in those first two critical months of the student’s university career, the Success Team program is a proven means of effectively assisting the beginning design students forge their path en route to becoming professionals.

Notes

¹ Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press, MA, 1991, p 98.

² Hara, Noriko. *Communities of Practice: Fostering Peer to Peer Learning and Informal Knowledge Sharing in the Workplace*. Springer Press, 2009, p 11.

⁵ *ibid*, p 17.

⁴ Governmental Tort Claims Act, OKLA. STAT. tit. 51, §§ 151-171.

⁵ 2012 AIA Code of Ethics, Canon V “Obligations to Colleagues”, section E.S. 5.2.

⁶ Goetsch, David. *Building a Winning Career in Architecture*. Pearson Prentice Hall, NJ, 2007, p 183.

⁷ Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In For Graduates*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014, p 86.

⁸ Kim, Grace. *The Survival Guide to Architectural Internship and Career Development*. John Wiley & Sons, NJ, 2006, p 167.

⁹ Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In For Graduates*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014, p 90.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p 90.

References for student quotes and program evaluations:

Blind survey of 12 Success Coaches for the ARCH 1112 course, administered Fall 2015.

Blind survey of 89 student participants in the Success Team Program within the ARCH 1112 course, administered Fall 2015.