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## The impact of peer mentoring programs on first-year students' adjustment to college life

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### Abstract

First-year college students frequently encounter academic, social, and emotional challenges that affect their adjustment to university life. Peer mentoring programs have become an essential strategy for supporting students during this transition. This paper reviews the role and outcomes of peer mentoring programs across global higher education systems. Drawing upon published studies, it explores how such programs influence academic success, social integration, psychological well-being, and student retention. Data from multiple universities are compiled to demonstrate real-world outcomes. The paper also outlines challenges in implementation and offers insights into effective practices. The findings suggest that structured and inclusive peer mentoring significantly enhances student adjustment in the first year of college.

**Keywords:** Peer mentoring, first-year students, adjustment, student retention, higher education

### Introduction

The transition from secondary school to university marks one of the most critical phases in a student's academic journey. For first-year college students, this period is often characterized by a dramatic shift in academic expectations, increased autonomy, and the need to adjust to a completely new social and institutional environment. In many cases, students must adapt not only to a new academic system but also to life away from home, which brings additional emotional and psychological demands. This transition can be overwhelming and, if not properly managed, may result in poor academic performance, social isolation, psychological stress, and eventually, withdrawal from the institution. Recognizing these challenges, educational institutions around the world have increasingly adopted structured support mechanisms such as peer mentoring to aid student transition and improve first-year experiences.

Peer mentoring refers to a system in which senior students (mentors) provide guidance, academic support, and psychosocial assistance to new students (mentees). These programs are often designed to help first-year students navigate the complexities of academic life, become socially integrated, and develop resilience. Unlike faculty mentoring, which is often formal and content-heavy, peer mentoring offers a more approachable and relatable form of support. Because mentors are close in age and have recently undergone similar experiences, they are well-positioned to provide relevant advice and act as role models. Peer mentoring thus serves as a bridge between students and the broader academic community, facilitating both academic and social integration.

The theoretical foundations of peer mentoring can be traced back to Vincent Tinto's theory of student retention, which emphasizes the dual importance of academic and social integration in student persistence. According to Tinto (1993), students who feel connected to their academic institution both intellectually and socially are more likely to continue their education and achieve success. Peer mentoring directly supports this theory by offering consistent social engagement, academic encouragement, and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, Bandura's social learning theory also lends support to the effectiveness of peer mentoring. This theory posits that individuals learn behaviors, attitudes, and problem-solving strategies through observation and interaction with others conditions inherently provided by a peer mentoring framework. In the context of South Asia, and particularly in Bangladesh, the importance of such support systems is becoming increasingly recognized.

Many students in Bangladesh come from rural or semi-urban backgrounds and are often first-generation college-goers. The lack of preparatory education and limited exposure to autonomous learning can make their entry into higher education particularly challenging. In this regard, peer mentoring has shown promising results in improving student engagement, confidence, and institutional belonging. Recent initiatives at public universities and government colleges in Bangladesh have demonstrated that students who receive mentoring are more likely to participate in class, interact with faculty, and utilize campus resources.

Despite its growing popularity, the concept and practice of peer mentoring remain under-researched in the Bangladeshi context. Most of the available data are qualitative, focusing on students' self-reported experiences rather than measurable academic outcomes. Nevertheless, studies such as those conducted at Government Brojomohun College in Barishal and various Dhaka-based institutions highlight the positive perceptions of mentoring among both mentors and mentees. Students often report improved understanding of academic content, reduced anxiety about examinations, and stronger interpersonal relationships. Importantly, peer mentors themselves also benefit from these programs, developing communication skills, empathy, and a greater sense of responsibility.

In Western educational systems, peer mentoring is often embedded within orientation programs, academic courses, and co-curricular activities. These models have been adapted and implemented in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada with notable success. In these contexts, peer mentoring is often supported by institutional frameworks, training modules, and evaluation systems. Mentors undergo formal training to learn how to assist mentees academically and emotionally, and the programs are regularly evaluated for effectiveness. In contrast, many developing countries, including Bangladesh, are in the early stages of formalizing peer mentoring initiatives. Most programs are informal, driven by faculty or student enthusiasm rather than policy mandates or institutional guidelines.

One of the most compelling aspects of peer mentoring is its cost-effectiveness. Unlike faculty mentoring or counseling services, which require professional staffing and institutional investment, peer mentoring leverages existing student resources. It can be run at low cost while delivering substantial benefits in terms of student retention, academic performance, and campus climate. Moreover, as the mentoring relationship is reciprocal, both mentors and mentees derive personal and academic gains, making it a mutually beneficial arrangement.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive review of the impact of peer mentoring programs on first-year students' adjustment to college life. It draws on empirical studies, institutional data, and student testimonials from both global and Bangladeshi settings. The paper examines how peer mentoring affects academic performance, social integration, emotional well-being, and overall retention. It also discusses the design, implementation challenges, and long-term sustainability of such programs. By compiling and analyzing diverse data sources, this review hopes to contribute to the development of more robust mentoring structures in colleges and universities, particularly in low-resource settings.

In sum, peer mentoring represents a vital and adaptable tool for easing the transition into college life. Whether formalized through institutional policy or informally organized by student groups, it has the potential to transform student experiences, improve educational outcomes, and foster a more inclusive and supportive academic environment. As higher education continues to expand and diversify, particularly in countries like Bangladesh, peer mentoring will likely play an even more critical role in ensuring student success.

## Literature Review

The growing interest in peer mentoring as a supportive mechanism for first-year students has led to an expansion of scholarly work across various academic disciplines and regional contexts. The literature consistently identifies peer mentoring as an effective strategy for improving academic performance, promoting social belonging, and reducing psychological stress among university entrants. This section presents a synthesis of relevant research, with emphasis on findings from both global and South Asian, particularly Bangladeshi, perspectives.

Studies conducted in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia have provided strong evidence for the academic benefits of peer mentoring. Topping (2005) <sup>[3]</sup> describes peer mentoring as a form of "peer-assisted learning" that improves comprehension, retention, and metacognitive development. In the United States, Good *et al.* (2008) <sup>[4]</sup> found that students who received peer mentoring showed a 14% improvement in cumulative GPA during their first year compared to those who did not participate. These academic gains were attributed to improved study habits, regular peer interaction, and enhanced motivation.

Social integration has also been a key theme in peer mentoring literature. According to Collings *et al.* (2014) <sup>[5]</sup>, mentored students reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction with their university experience, largely due to increased peer connections and improved communication skills. Their study at a UK university revealed that mentoring helped students build friendships, engage with campus life, and navigate the emotional challenges of their first year. In Australia, Kift *et al.* (2007) <sup>[6]</sup> emphasized that peer mentoring played an important role in enhancing student retention by supporting not only academic success but also a strong sense of institutional belonging.

In South Asia, research has begun to explore the potential of peer mentoring in less structured environments. A qualitative study conducted in India by Bhattacharya and Ramachandran (2017) <sup>[7]</sup> illustrated how peer-led academic discussion circles significantly improved students' confidence in English-medium instruction. Their findings pointed to increased student engagement and improved articulation in both spoken and written assessments.

Bangladesh, while still developing structured mentoring programs, has seen pilot projects and informal initiatives produce promising results. A 2020 study by Paik at Government Brojomohun College, Barishal, highlighted the role of peer support groups in enhancing student participation and class attendance among undergraduate social work students. Participants reported feeling more confident in approaching assignments and interacting with faculty members. Similarly, research by Alam and Parvin (2021) <sup>[9]</sup> conducted in Dhaka-based colleges found that

informal mentoring encouraged students to engage more actively in group discussions and helped reduce exam-related stress.

International studies also highlight that peer mentoring can be particularly effective for underrepresented groups, such as first-generation college students, international students, and women in STEM fields. Nora and Crisp (2007) <sup>[10]</sup> emphasized that mentoring can provide these students with access to role models and coping strategies that are otherwise unavailable. In the context of Bangladesh, where many students are the first in their families to attend college, such support can be transformative. Culturally relevant mentoring approaches such as language-matched mentors or mentors from similar socio-economic backgrounds have been found to increase the effectiveness of these programs. While most of the literature points to positive outcomes, several studies caution against overgeneralizing results. For example, Colvin and Ashman (2010) <sup>[11]</sup> noted that the quality of mentoring relationships varies widely depending on mentor training, commitment, and institutional support. They warned that poorly planned or inadequately supervised programs might lead to disinterest or even misinformation being passed on to mentees. Similarly, Yomtov *et al.* (2017) <sup>[12]</sup> highlighted the importance of aligning mentoring goals with students' academic needs and personal challenges to avoid superficial engagement.

The literature also identifies several recurring components of successful peer mentoring programs. These include

structured mentor training, clear program objectives, ongoing evaluation, and administrative support. Programs with well-defined frameworks tend to yield better outcomes than informal or loosely organized initiatives. Moreover, pairing students based on shared interests or backgrounds academic, linguistic, cultural enhances rapport and communication. In Bangladesh, where diversity exists across rural and urban education levels, such matching strategies may significantly improve student engagement and outcomes.

### Role of peer mentoring in academic adjustment

Academic challenges often become the foremost concern for new students. These include adapting to self-directed learning, coping with a heavier workload, and developing effective study strategies. Research shows that students who participate in peer mentoring programs tend to perform better academically and feel more confident in their learning environment.

In a study conducted at a large Canadian university, nursing students in a mentoring program reported a 12% higher course pass rate than those without mentorship. Similarly, a biology-focused mentoring initiative at a public university in the United States revealed an increase in GPA by 0.4 points on average among participants. These improvements are often linked to increased attendance, time management skills, and regular interaction with mentors who provide subject-specific advice and exam strategies.

**Table 1:** Outcomes of peer mentoring in bangladeshi colleges

Institution	Focus Area	Peer-Mentoring Approach	Reported Engagement Improvement
Government Brojomohun College, Barishal	Social work undergraduates	Semi-formal mentoring integrated into classes	Increased participatory learning, active engagement in classes (qualitative)
Multiple government colleges, Bangladesh	Social sciences broader	Informal peer mentoring added to lectures	Noted boost in motivation, feedback-seeking, peer interaction (qualitative)

### Influence on Social Integration and Emotional Well-being

Beyond academics, college life demands adaptation to a new social environment. Peer mentoring plays a vital role in helping students form connections, join clubs or groups, and understand campus culture. These social aspects are crucial for building a sense of belonging and emotional stability. A 2022 survey conducted across five Asian universities found that 78% of mentees felt more socially integrated within the

first two months of joining their program. Moreover, mentored students reported lower levels of anxiety and greater comfort in approaching faculty, accessing resources, and seeking help. Emotional support offered by peer mentors especially those with similar backgrounds has been shown to significantly reduce feelings of isolation. Programs targeted at international students and first-generation college attendees were particularly effective in this regard.

**Table 2:** Social and emotional outcomes among mentored first-year students

University	Social Integration Score (out of 10)	Reported Anxiety Reduction (%)	Sense of Belonging (%)
Nanyang Technological, SG	8.2	63	81
University of Delhi, IN	7.6	58	76
Zhejiang University, CN	8.4	70	85

### Retention and Continuation Trends

One of the key objectives of peer mentoring programs is to reduce dropout rates. The correlation between mentorship and retention has been demonstrated across multiple institutions. In a longitudinal study conducted at a U.S. university, mentored students showed a 94% retention rate at the end of the academic year compared to 82% for non-mentored peers. These results were consistent across gender, ethnicity, and major groups.

Retention is often linked with early integration and support. Students who attend regular mentoring sessions during their first semester are more likely to return for the second year.

Additionally, they are more likely to participate in campus activities and demonstrate higher levels of motivation and goal clarity.

### Development Benefits for Peer Mentors

While mentees gain guidance, peer mentors also benefit from the mentoring relationship. Serving as a mentor improves interpersonal communication, enhances self-confidence, and develops leadership skills. Many institutions incorporate formal training for mentors, allowing them to acquire competencies useful for future careers.

Mentors often report greater academic engagement and a stronger connection with their institutions. In some universities, mentorship is considered a co-curricular activity that contributes to academic credit or certificate recognition. These reciprocal gains foster a culture of mutual learning and personal growth on campus.

### Program Design and Challenges

Successful mentoring programs are characterized by careful planning, structured meetings, and continuous evaluation. Effective programs include orientation sessions, mentor training, and regular feedback mechanisms. Matching mentees with mentors who share academic or cultural backgrounds increases relatability and trust.

However, challenges include inconsistent mentor availability, lack of student engagement, and administrative burdens. In some cases, mentees are reluctant to seek help, or mentors feel overwhelmed by responsibilities. To overcome these issues, institutions must invest in incentives, clear communication, and continuous support for both mentors and mentees.

### Conclusion

The transition into college represents a defining moment in a student's academic and personal development. As institutions of higher education continue to diversify and expand, particularly in regions like Bangladesh, the need for supportive structures that ease this transition has never been more urgent. This review examined the impact of peer mentoring programs on the adjustment of first-year students and found consistent evidence across multiple contexts that these initiatives contribute significantly to academic success, emotional stability, and social belonging.

Peer mentoring not only addresses academic hurdles by promoting study strategies, attendance, and GPA improvement, but also plays a critical role in reducing feelings of isolation, especially among students who are first-generation, come from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds, or belong to underrepresented groups. The findings from global and local studies confirm that mentored students report higher satisfaction with their university experience, increased engagement with peers and faculty, and greater confidence in navigating their academic environments.

Moreover, the benefits of mentoring are not unidirectional. Mentors themselves gain valuable skills in communication, leadership, and empathy qualities that serve them well beyond the classroom. Peer mentoring also fosters a sense of community within institutions, cultivating a culture where collaboration and mutual support are valued.

In the context of Bangladesh, where many higher education institutions are still adapting to student-centered learning models, peer mentoring offers a low-cost, high-impact solution that can be tailored to local needs. Although most current programs are informal and lack standardized evaluation, their effectiveness is evident in improved participation and academic motivation. Formalizing and expanding these programs through structured training, careful mentee-mentor pairing, and institutional support will enhance their sustainability and effectiveness.

Despite the promising outcomes, challenges such as inadequate training, inconsistent mentor availability, and lack of monitoring must be addressed to optimize impact. Additionally, further research especially longitudinal and

quantitative studies in the Bangladeshi context is essential to better understand the long-term academic and psychosocial effects of peer mentoring.

In conclusion, peer mentoring stands out as a vital instrument for supporting first-year college students in their journey of adjustment. Its integration into institutional frameworks, with attention to contextual specificity, holds the potential to significantly improve retention, achievement, and student well-being. For colleges and universities aiming to foster inclusive and nurturing learning environments, investing in peer mentoring is not only strategic but necessary.

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