

# Peer Mentorship: The Best Way for New Teachers to Grow


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While mentoring is recognized as a proven approach to fostering student retention and success, it is also a very effective way to support professional development of teachers. The mentoring relationship can be beneficial in many ways for both the mentor and the mentee, each of whom see it as a sincere and profitable relationship to develop meeting after meeting.

In this article, we introduce the Peer Mentorship Program implemented at Marianopolis College, from its roots as a pilot project in 2018 to its current status as a fully integrated professional development program. We write from three distinct perspectives:

Andrew Burton, teacher of English, as the architect of the program; Hugo Hamel-Perron, teacher of history and humanities, as a mentor; and Alison Crump, as associate dean in charge of programs, who administers the Peer Mentorship Program. We also include the perspectives of mentees through aggregated data from end-of-term surveys. By sharing our approach to mentorship as a successful form of collaborative professional development in this way, we hope to inspire individuals in the college system to consider a similar program.



Teachers in higher education often possess little to no formal teacher training as they are hired on the basis of their content-area expertise (Jones, 2008), and they may experience professional and pedagogical isolation that limits their on-the-job learning. However, new faculty members are still expected to perform effectively in their teaching role (Brightman, 2006) while adjusting to the local culture of the school. It is no wonder then that some teachers experience professional and pedagogical isolation, especially at the beginning of their careers. One effective way to support these new teachers is through peer mentoring, which is an interpersonal relationship based on support, sharing and learning, in which an experienced person invests their acquired wisdom and expertise to foster the development of another person who has skills to acquire and professional goals to achieve (CTREQ, 2018). Not only does this practice enable collaboration among fellow teachers (Andersen & Watkins, 2018; Perry, 2000), but it also

promotes professional integration, as well as enhancing mentors' and mentees' sense of self-efficacy (Irby *et al.*, 2017).

Mentoring relationships can be "remarkable, profound, and enduring; ...[they] have the capacity to transform individuals, groups, organizations, and communities" (Ragins & Kram, 2007, p. 3). In the context of education, mentoring has been associated with improved teaching performance and student learning as well as teacher retention and job satisfaction (Brightman, 2006; Jones, 2008; Thomas, Lunsford, & Rodrigues, 2015; Wilson, Valentine, & Pereira, 2002), particularly when the mentoring is strictly formative.

### Origin of a story of encounters

The origins of the Marianopolis Peer Mentorship Program stem from Andrew Burton's own experience of

professional and pedagogical isolation as a new teacher in multiple institutions. This "sink or swim" induction led him to seek feedback from colleagues by asking them to observe him teach and provide constructive feedback. Andrew's interest in peer observation led him to research, design, and pilot peer observation practices and processes during the Winter and Fall of 2016; funding was provided by the ECQ (Entente Canada-Quebec). A second ECQ grant provided funding to design and pilot the Marianopolis Peer Mentorship Program during the Fall 2017 and Winter 2018 semesters.

Following a successful pilot in Winter 2018 with Marianopolis Psychology teacher Anne-Marie Linnen as a mentor, the program was formally launched in Fall 2019. Andrew Burton was selected as the peer mentor and was paired with 8 mentees, the maximum that was deemed reasonable given the one course release associated with the role. The initial intent was to run the program once per

academic year in the fall, when there are typically more new faculty hires. Thus, the program ran again in Fall 2020, with Hugo Hamel-Perron selected as peer mentor, and was again filled to its maximum in terms of the number of mentees (see **Table 1**). However, due to the novel challenge of online teaching brought about by the pandemic and the absence of the

usual opportunities for social and professional integration on campus, the College approved the program's extension to the Winter 2021 semester. Then, for the 2021-22 academic year, for the first time, the program was approved to run for the full year, a sign that it had become an established and integrated part of our college.

**Table 1** **Overview of peer mentorship program development and participants at Marianopolis**

<b>Semester &amp; Status of Program</b>	<b>Peer Mentor and Discipline</b>	<b># of Mentees and Departments<sup>1</sup></b>
Winter 2018: program pilot	Anne-Marie Linnen, psychology teacher	5 from 3 departments
Fall 2019: college-wide program launch	Andrew Burton, English teacher	8 from 4
Fall 2020	Hugo Hamel-Perron, history and humanities teacher	8 from 6
Winter 2021	Hugo Hamel-Perron	10 (7 returning from Fall 2020) from 5
Fall 2021	Hugo Hamel-Perron	9 from 5
Winter 2022	Hugo Hamel-Perron	9 from 6

<sup>1</sup> There are 7 academic departments at Marianopolis.

The Marianopolis Peer Mentorship Program is currently in its sixth semester of operation. Over the program's lifespan, it has supported the professional integration and development of over thirty teachers at Marianopolis, all new or recent hires. This is significant not only to the benefits that mentees experience (more on this below) during the time of the mentorship relationship, but also because it signals the growth of a culture of collaborative professional development among our faculty.

## Key features of the program

It is interesting to outline the key features that define the Marianopolis Peer Mentorship Program, which other colleges could adjust to suit their local realities. In order to encourage others to consider similar programs for their own colleges, relevant files related to the Marianopolis program are shared in a Google folder<sup>2</sup> that includes:

- Peer Mentor Job Posting
- Mentor Confidentiality Agreement
- Mentee Background and Needs Questionnaire
- Mentee End-of-Semester Survey
- Concise Peer Observation Process Guide

These documents may be downloaded and adapted.

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<sup>2</sup> Documents located in the Marianopolis College Peer Mentorship Program Google folder can be downloaded and adapted [bit.ly/3MPSAem].

The aim of the Marianopolis Peer Mentorship Program is to support teachers in their pedagogical success through confidential one-on-one mentoring from a trusted peer. In order to fulfill that aim, the program has a number of key features that define it. First and foremost, participation from teachers as mentees is strictly voluntary, and the mentorship relationship is solely formative. It offers teachers opportunities to engage in regular reflection on successes and challenges in their practice, which fosters pedagogical growth. The program also provides new teachers with a knowledgeable, experienced colleague who shows respect and empathy, possesses a positive and encouraging attitude, and listens actively, asks questions, offers suggestions, and, importantly, maintains confidentiality. The key features are described in more detail below.

## Qualities of the peer mentor

There are certain qualities that have been shown to be important for an effective mentor: they should be fully committed to their mentoring role, accessible to mentees, accepting of and responsive to the mentees' needs, able to establish trusting relationships with the mentees, provide guidance and support, and have strong collaborative skills (Berk, Berg, and Mortimer, 2005; Irby *et al* 2017; Rowley, 1999).

At Marianopolis, the qualities we look for in a peer mentor are outlined in the Peer Mentor Job Posting (see Google folder), which are consistent with the literature on effective mentorship. The emphasis in selecting a peer mentor is not on content-area expertise, but rather on knowledge of pedagogy

and strong interpersonal skills. One of the key features of the program is for the peer mentor to engage in peer observation; this requires them to display humility and vulnerability and emphasizes the qualities of strong interpersonal skills, passion for pedagogy, and a belief in the power of dialogue and collaboration as fundamental to pedagogical development.

To nurture confidence, peer mentors should listen more than speak, ask questions and help mentees navigate challenges in their own way, rather than try to provide ready-made solutions. The peer mentor should be comfortable discussing various themes and adjusting their approach to the needs and challenges of each mentee. Some of the most common themes reported by our peer mentors include:

- Fostering student engagement and participation
- Designing courses, lesson plans, learning activities and evaluations
- Classroom management strategies
- Using classroom technology
- Managing stress, anxiety, workload, work-life balance, departmental life, and a person's expectations of themselves
- Navigating the teacher evaluation process.

## Course release for the peer mentor

Research on mentorship shows that compensation for mentors through course release helps ensure the mentor's engagement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2004; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2002). At Marianopolis, the peer

mentor receives one course release per semester. In collaboration with the Associate Dean, Programs, the peer mentor determines the number of mentees they can work with each semester, as appropriate given the release's workload. While the program is open to all faculty, due to limited spaces for mentees, priority is given to teachers who have been hired in the past two years.

As an example, a typical week for Hugo involves between three and eight one-hour meetings, plus some preparation for each meeting. Over the course of the semester, this may result in about 80 one-hour meetings. The other major time commitment is the peer observations and post-observation feedback.

Given the benefits, both to the peer mentor and the mentees (more on this below), the value of this approach to professional development absolutely outweighs the cost of one course release to support it.

### **Voluntary participation**

A very important aspect of the program is that it is entirely voluntary. Prior to each semester, participation is solicited by an email to all teachers and by the peer mentor attending the New Faculty Orientation to introduce themselves and present the program. Mentees meet with the peer mentor for one hour every week or two, depending on mentees' preferences. They also have the option to engage in peer observation with the peer mentor, observing and/or being observed. These options provide some flexibility in terms of how many mentees the peer mentor can work with in a given semester.

For example, in Winter 2021, Hugo and Alison determined that he would collaborate with 10 mentees, 7 who were returning for a second semester in the program and meeting less frequently, and 3 new mentees, who met more frequently.

Given that at Marianopolis, the re-hiring of new teachers depends on evaluations of their performance during their first four semesters, new teachers could feel obliged to participate in the program in order to positively influence the perceptions of both administrators and departmental peers. This dynamic risks undermining the voluntary nature of the program. Fortunately, the peer mentor is well-positioned to emphasize that participation truly is optional, and in two contexts in particular: when presenting the program at the New Faculty Orientation and when conducting one-on-one meetings with mentees.

### **Interdisciplinary pairings**

The peer mentor and mentees most often come from different disciplinary backgrounds. These interdisciplinary pairings helpfully foster a focus on pedagogy rather than on content in the mentorship relationship. This emphasis on pedagogy is a unique feature of the program and distinguishes it from mentoring that may take place within academic departments between disciplinary colleagues, which tend to focus on delivery of content and to be part of new-faculty evaluation practices and thus linked to summative evaluations.

Rather than focusing on helping mentees with content, the peer mentor will primarily add value through their knowledge of Marianopolis students,

knowledge of general pedagogy, active listening skills, and questioning skills. The interdisciplinary pairings fruitfully discourage a directive approach; for instance, an English teacher is less likely to be prescriptive about the teaching of math than a mathematics teacher.

### **Weekly or biweekly meetings**

The peer mentor arranges a schedule of either weekly or biweekly meetings with each mentee, each meeting lasting one hour, based on the preference of the mentee. Prior to the first meeting, each mentee submits the Background and Needs Questionnaire (see Google folder), which helps set a mentee's objectives and begins to build the relationship. Given the uniqueness of each mentorship relationship, subsequent meetings work best if mentees set the agenda, and they may address anything that has come up since the last meeting; meetings may also serve to set up and/or debrief peer observations. The final meeting provides an opportunity to revisit the objectives that were set and to discuss the possibility of maintaining the relationship in the subsequent semester.

### **The diversity of mentor/mentee relationships**

A one-size-fits-all approach to peer mentorship should be avoided, since an effective mentorship relationship reflects the individual needs and inter-

ests of each mentee. Indeed, if a mentor shows sufficient responsiveness, every relationship will take on a life of its own by addressing the specific needs of each mentee. These can include, but are not limited to:

- Wanting help with developing new courses
- Wanting a place to share frustrations and get an outside perspective on issues with their students or colleagues
- Wanting to discuss pedagogy more theoretically and develop their capacity for self-reflection
- Wanting support with coping with negative emotions related to exhaustion and stress

Some mentor-mentee pairings will feel more successful than others, which has to do in part with the very different expectations, philosophies of teaching, and needs of each mentee. Nevertheless, even if the mentor and mentee do not have the same understandings of pedagogy, the exchanges fostered by the program create space for reflection for both parties. A disposition to work in a collaborative way while recognizing individual differences is a key element for the success of the program.

### **A commitment to confidentiality by the peer mentor**

The peer mentor (not the mentees) signs a rigorous confidentiality agreement with multiple parties: one with the Associate Dean, Programs, and one with each mentee (see the Peer Mentor Confidentiality Agreement in the Google folder). This agreement ensures that nothing that the peer mentor learns by virtue of their men-

toring is shared with anyone else, thus ensuring the formative nature of the Peer Mentorship Program. The confidentiality agreement also ensures that if the peer mentor is a member of a departmental curriculum committee they would recuse themselves from any activities related to the evaluation or hiring of a mentee.

### **Optional peer observation**

An important, though optional, aspect of the program is peer observation,

which is defined at Marianopolis as one teacher voluntarily welcoming another teacher into their classroom so that:

- the observing teacher may a) foster learning by offering feedback and/or b) learn through observation;
- the observed teacher may a) foster learning by modelling teaching and/or b) learn through receiving feedback (see the Concise Peer Observation Guide in the Google folder).



The peer mentor's commitment to confidentiality ensures that peer observation remains strictly formative and can have no bearing on any discussions or decisions that have to do with summative performance evaluation of sessional teachers.

The goal of peer observation is professional development or, in other words, enabling teachers to make changes to their pedagogy that enhance student learning. While this is an optional component of the program, those who have participated in peer observation have reported that it is a particularly constructive feature. As peer mentors, both Andrew and Hugo have invited all of their mentees to observe their teaching at least once and sometimes more. In almost all cases, following these initial observations, they noticed an immediate improvement in the mentorship relationship, which can be attributed to:

- Increasing trust by inviting mentees into the peer mentor's classroom and inviting their feedback

- Making the relationship feel more reciprocal by displaying vulnerability and modeling qualities of a reflective practitioner who is engaged in their own ongoing professional development
- Increasing the likelihood that mentees would subsequently feel comfortable inviting the peer mentor to their classroom for an observation and similar feedback
- Most importantly, anchoring subsequent discussions on pedagogy in specific examples

### Meetings among mentees

Just as mentor responsiveness to individual mentee needs is key to a fruitful mentorship relationship, responsiveness of the program itself to the feedback of mentees is a key to fostering the ongoing improvement of the program. This feedback is solicited through an anonymous end-of-semester survey that the Associate Dean, Programs administrators (more on this in the next section). A recent example of an update to the program

based on the input of a mentee in the survey has been the introduction of collaborative meetings with all mentees, facilitated by the peer mentor. Research shows that collaborative group peer mentorship can provide participants with the opportunity to form positive and constructive relationships with their peers, fostering a climate of professionalism and respect for diversity, and to encourage creativity (Pololi & Evans, 2015).

Starting in Winter 2022, Hugo began facilitating common meetings with all mentees, even extending the invitation to past participants in the program, to discuss issues that are common to all teachers, such as student engagement, work-related stress, time management, and evaluations. A new peer-to-peer confidentiality agreement was created by Alison for this purpose and signed by all participants. Four meetings among mentees have taken place this semester and all have been a great success, according to feedback from Hugo and the mentees. These meetings have



enhanced the collaborative and community-building aspects of the program and will certainly remain a key feature in future semesters. With each iteration of the program, we listen to our participants and strive to evolve the program based on their suggestions and needs, while of course staying true to the original goals of the college's Peer Mentorship Program.

## Benefits to the mentees

The mentees' perspective is important to us and we take feedback seriously to reflect on the success and effectiveness of the program. Because of the strict confidentiality agreement that is part of the program, mentee feedback is solicited through an anonymous survey administered by the Office of the Academic Dean (see Mentee End-of-Semester Survey in the Google folder).

At the end of each semester, the survey is sent to mentees to ask for input about a) the peer mentor, b) the experience of participating in the program, c) the value of the program, and d) the overall quality of the program. Aggregate data are shared with the peer mentor to provide them with feedback, while ensuring confidentiality for the mentees. In the surveys, mentees have consistently provided extremely positive responses in all four areas.

The survey ends with 2 open-ended questions to invite feedback on the benefits of the program and suggestions for improvement. In terms of benefits, mentees have identified many, summarized here:

- Learning about the CEGEP education system
- Receiving assistance with integrating into the Marianopolis community
- Learning about and sharing teaching practices and pedagogy, lesson planning, and organization
- Learning through peer observation (both by observing and by being observed)
- Receiving guidance, advice, and reassurance from someone from another discipline
- Being able to ask questions of an impartial and knowledgeable colleague
- Being able to be completely honest with questions and about concerns thanks to the guarantee of confidentiality
- Feeling supported and building their own confidence

These responses echo what Andrew and Hugo have highlighted about the program: the emphasis on pedagogy, not content; the important role of peer observation; and the ability to be honest without being judged. The mentee responses also speak to the professionalism, humility, vulnerability, and passion for pedagogy that our peer mentors have brought to their collaborations with their mentees.

The main challenge that has been raised by mentees is the frequency of meetings—some want more frequent meetings and more support, while others want the opposite.

## Benefits to the mentor

Literature on mentoring shows that the benefits are as rich for the mentor as for the mentee and can reinvigorate the mentor's own teaching practices and increase their motivation (Brightman, 2006). Put another way, just like teaching a course leads to enormous learning on the teacher's part, mentoring can be an incredible learning experience for the mentor. One reason for this at Marianopolis is that the peer mentor observes and is observed by many teachers, leading to insight into alternative pedagogical approaches as well as valuable feedback on the peer mentor's practices.

The one-on-one discussions can also be extremely rich learning opportunities, as they deal with challenges common to all teachers. Those discussions and the brainstorming they sometimes involve can generate new ideas. Finally, our peer mentors have found that, by the nature of the role, they have made efforts to deepen their own engagement in learning about pedagogy by attending seminars, webinars and presentations as well as consulting other types of resources. This knowledge serves the peer mentor both in their role with mentees and in their own teaching practice. In Hugo's words, "being the peer mentor has become the favourite part of my week and offers an extremely rich learning experience for me."

## Closing thoughts

Developing a sense of community and support and embracing a collaborative approach to ongoing professional development are qualities and skills



that carry throughout a teacher's career. As such, the benefits of this program extend well beyond the end of a semester. Through this program, and with our peer mentors' dedication and commitment to the values of mentorship as a core aspect of ongoing professional development,

we are setting our new teachers up for success, supporting their integration, and developing a community and culture of support and collaboration among teachers.

The challenges faced by new teachers are not uncommon and we hope that

this sharing of practice may inspire others to consider a similar program. We would be happy to connect with others who may be interested in developing a similar program, which in one recent mentee's words is "the best way for new teachers to grow." ■

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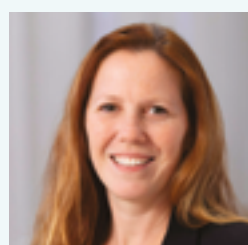
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