

2015

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Recommended Citation

Walton, Hope N., and Roger Mancastropa. "Outstanding Student Retention and Graduation: The Peer Advisors and Mentors Program at the University of Richmond." *Southern Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (SACRAO) Journal* 28 (2015): 21-28.

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Outstanding Student Retention and Graduation: The Peer Advisors and Mentors Program at the University of Richmond

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Today, it is critical in higher education to retain and graduate students. Universities and colleges have instituted efforts to assist students in making key transitions, growing individually and communally, further honing academic and life skills, and acquiring the appropriate business acumen to be successful in the highly competitive, globalized job market they will face upon graduation. Peer mentoring is an excellent opportunity for new students to gain this development. Peers are trusted quickly and allow for faster integration into the new setting and a greater depth of engagement with the campus culture. The University of Richmond's Peer Advisors and Mentors (PAM) program focuses on student integration and engagement through key avenues that have a proven record of success over the past decade.

Mentoring

Universities and colleges have adopted both formal and informal peer mentoring programs as a part of the campus-wide efforts to enhance the experience and personal development of first year students. Informal mentoring programs are key components used to assist incoming students in making the transition from high school to college. Specifically, these programs involve upper-class students mentoring first-year

ABSTRACT

Today's colleges and universities continue to face the challenges of retaining and graduating their students. Historically, peer-mentoring programs have helped to successfully meet these challenges. The Peer Advisors and Mentors (PAM) program has assisted in the retention of students, all while giving students opportunities that develop and hone their leadership, academic, and personal skills. Over the course of 22 years, PAM has evolved into a program that touches on significant facets deemed important by experts on the matters of retention and graduation. Such factors include mentoring, advising, integration, and engagement. This article gives an historical perspective on how a peer-mentoring program has assisted in the retention and graduation of first-year student mentees through mentoring and leadership.

students to promote engagement and integration. Using more experienced students as mentors, rather than staff or faculty, offers the advantage of recent shared personal experiences as students, and thus credibility, to new students who very often are stuck in the high-school mindset of the student-teacher or student-administrator relationships. Thus, the mentoring process allows for a level of familiarity in relationship building that exists between generational peers versus students and staff or faculty. Creating the opportunity for and nurturing these relationships through shared experiences and leadership building is the foundation upon which the PAM program at the University of Richmond is built each year.

Academic Advice

In order to successfully navigate the intricacies of balancing academics and all of the other activities that absorb students' time and energy, it is critical to have good academic advising. Advising helps students to transition and integrate into the community. Though most institutions provide faculty advisors, there are challenges for students due to faculty often being focused meeting graduation requirements and not the first semester's success. The 2013 National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) indicates that the first-year

students and seniors who responded communicated with their formal academic advisor only once or twice per year, and “about one in ten students never met with an academic advisor” most often because “...their advisors provided little to no information on academic support options, academic rules and policies, and special opportunities like high impact practices” (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013). It is therefore no surprise that the PAM program, with its informal academic advising component, would be a well-used and helpful source for more informal academic advice. This is in accordance with the NSSE results which indicate that “about a third of first-year students and 18 percent of seniors identified friends or family as the primary source of academic advice” (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013).

The staff that guide the PAM program consistently promote the use of formal academic advising, both through faculty advisors and the University’s Advising Center. The academic advising provided by peers in the PAM program is often more anecdotal and helpful because they understand the rigorous challenges that heavy course loads can create for first-year students in particular—a challenge that may or not be embraced by faculty advisors. It is important to create a balanced mixture of courses to take the first semester of college instead of a full course load of major specific classes (e.g., chemistry, biology, mathematics, business, etc.). For example, enrolling in a course load with calculus, chemistry, biology and a first-year seminar often overwhelms even the strongest first-year students when they have to also deal with competing issues of acclimating to a new university environment. The PAM mentors, connecting across the summer before first semester, have successfully assisted with this informal advising to help create more diverse course loads that help to ensure a stronger start.

Integration Means A Supportive Environment

Due to the ever-present focus on the academic rigors at the University and the diversity of students focused upon for recruitment to the program, PAM was designed to aid in student integration and peer support. This is the most appropriate and effective focus because as integration is the focus, so then engagement is the key for both intrapersonal development and interpersonal development. Both are developed through academic and social engagement, though they are opposite reactions where interpersonal development is in contrast to peers and intrapersonal development is in self-identifying with certain peers in groups. Integration is a student’s self-identification with the university or institutionalized groups within the academic aspect of the university, whereas “social support refers to the establishment of social networks among other students and emotional support from peers and staff” (Hall & Jaugietis, 2010).

The PAM program does not claim to be the sole reason for the retention and graduation of the students that it serves.

There are a vast number of factors that contribute to students’ ability, perseverance, and commitment to attaining a degree in higher education. To create an environment that will promote high levels of student success, an institution must support students in a variety of ways, not simply by providing opportunities for engagement and integration. Students must be supported socially, cognitively, and physically with the aim of increased satisfaction and performance. Universities must create an atmosphere of encouragement and support for social growth, physical well-being and advancement, and of course challenging instruction (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The University of Richmond’s success is acknowledged and acclaimed, and this effort is to outline the PAM program’s participation in creating this atmosphere.

The PAM Program

During the 1991-1992 academic year, Hope Walton was hired to establish the Academic Skills Center at the University of Richmond. As the Director of Academic Skills, she developed the Peer Advisors and Mentors (PAM) program following her best practices from her previous creation of formal mentoring programs with alumni and faculty. It was officially implemented as a pilot program in the fall semester of 1992 to assist the African-American students to make the often challenging transition to campus life at a predominately white institution. At that time, African-American students were the largest underrepresented population of students attending the institution. In collaboration among staff from the Academic Skills Center, Multicultural Affairs, and Admissions as well as faculty and students, first-year student mentees were identified and invited to the program.

The PAM program was successful in helping first-year students make a smooth transition to the university environment through engagement and by providing opportunities to hone their leadership skills. Of the first-year students who participated in the first year of the program, 87% returned as second-year students, indicating a strong measure of success for first-year mentees’ integration into the university environment. The students engaged in a variety of organizational activities with their peers and assumed leadership positions in numerous organizations. With success in hand, PAM was expanded the next year to include other ethnically diverse students, including white and international students. Many of the white students during that year were sons and daughters of staff and faculty. Because these students had already been exposed to the University of Richmond due to their parents’ employment and had a very solid level of integration in excess of the PAM program, these students did not benefit as much from their participation in PAM. Accordingly, the program adjusted in subsequent years and continued to select white students but did not actively recruit those who had parents working at the University. Additionally, PAM continued to include ethnically diverse

students, but also selected students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, first generation students, as well as students from rural, suburban, and urban areas. Selection became focused upon creating the most socially conscious, service-minded, and diverse population possible from each year's pools of applicants.

Following the same basic programming with some modifications, the program has continued to maintain a retention rate of 90% or above, which has been greater than the university's undergraduate retention for 18 out of 22 years. Noell-Levitz 2013 Student Retention Indicators Benchmark Report indicated that "at four-year private institutions, first year student persistence to the next term was 92 percent..." a standard often eclipsed by the PAM first-year students returning the following fall semester (Noel-Levitz, 2013).

Adjusting to Growth

The program went through various evolutions as its population grew in numbers year after year. Since transitioning is the process that includes the establishment of new emotional and intellectual support systems, connecting with successful students to engage socially is critical the first semester. Accordingly, mentees were matched to mentors based upon gender, major (where possible), interests, hobbies, and self-disclosed personality traits (e.g. introvert or extrovert). Beginning with 15 students, the process focused on creating

opportunities for mentors and mentees to connect socially. It encouraged the discovery of relationship building skills in a safe environment. Mentors were given funds to creatively help them to spend quality time together with their mentees in exploring the campus community or the local Richmond community. What was discovered was that this type of engagement increased integration into the larger community because students reported that it created a sense of familiarity and belonging. By exploring the opportunities offered by it cthe institution and the city of Richmond together, the bonding between the two students took place, and it increased the comfort level of students matriculating from across the United States and the world as they became familiar with their new surroundings, the support offered by the university, and the entertainment offered on campus and locally.

Extending Leadership Opportunities

To develop new leaders in the campus community, the students had to derive a sense of ownership or investment in the activities. So as the number of students in the program grew, the structure of the program continued to develop. Mentors volunteered to be Co-Chairs—student leaders who collaborated among themselves and with staff to plan and execute group events. Another challenge was the continuing growth of the population of the program due to its populari-

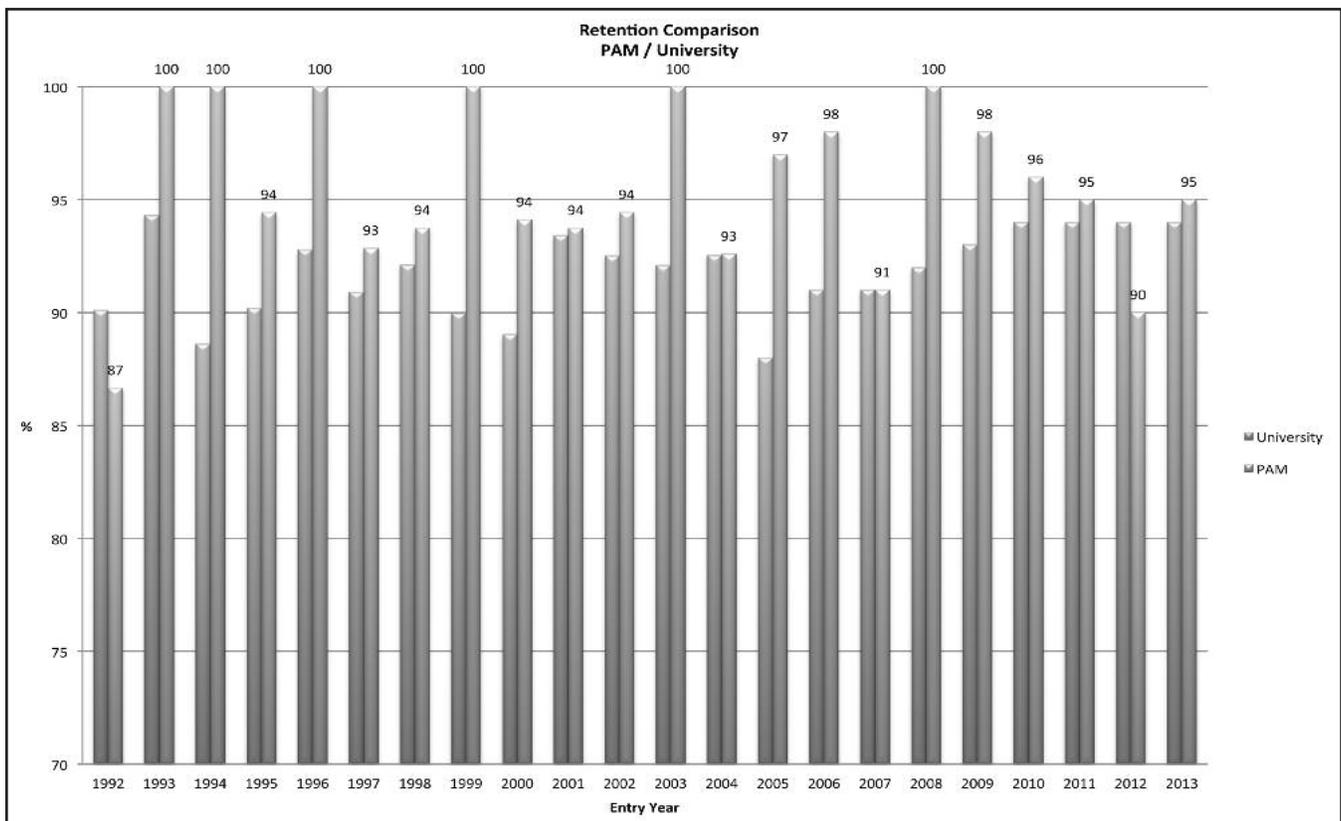


Figure 1

ty. Upon the recommendation of some of the Co-Chairs to the Director in 2002, the large group was broken down into family groups forever to be known as “Family Clusters.” The concept of Family Clusters enabled participants to connect and bond on a smaller scale within the larger framework of PAM. A Co-Chair led each Family Cluster and was assisted by a Family Cluster Co-Chair to share the responsibility of the event planning and communications. Family Cluster Co-Chairs became responsible primarily for planning one Family Cluster event per semester. This offered more opportunities for PAM members to have leadership experience and to network with their peers. It would also prove very beneficial for communication purposes as the program participants continued to grow, doubling in 2005 and then again in 2011.

Sophomore Slump

As more and more institutions begin to look beyond first-year retention toward graduation, the second-to-third-year attrition, or “sophomore slump” is being studied and addressed. According to the 2013 Noel-Levitz Student Retention Indicators Benchmark Report, 16.3% of second-to-third-year students at private institutions are not returning (Noel-Levitz, 2013). The areas of lowest second-year student satisfaction were “Adequacy of the financial assistance available,” “Frequency of communication with academic advisors,” and “Availability of work experiences associated

with student’s career interests” (Noel-Levitz, 2013). The Noel-Levitz study noted that many second-year students in their 2013 study were open to outreach. Where institutions might provide opportunities that the second-year students desired most ranged from identifying work experiences to help balancing the demands of school with work and has been outlined in Figure 1.

PAM provides nearly all of the resources that held the lowest satisfaction levels and the opportunities requested by second-year students. PAM counters the effects of the sophomore slump, whether they return their second year as mentors or not. Mentees who do not return as mentors have still made the connections, had the leadership training, the opportunity to get the internship and job information, the benefits of communal networking, and campus connections. They also have had the opportunity to connect with academic skills staff to sign up for peer tutoring for over 170 different courses, academic skills development, and life-skills development (time and stress management).

Beginning in 2013, PAM staff began to address the “Five Opportunities to Help” through hosting the PAM Academic Achievement Brunch. During an event sponsored by a national corporation headquartered locally, the academic achievement of mentors and mentees was celebrated at a very well-attended brunch where students met professionals

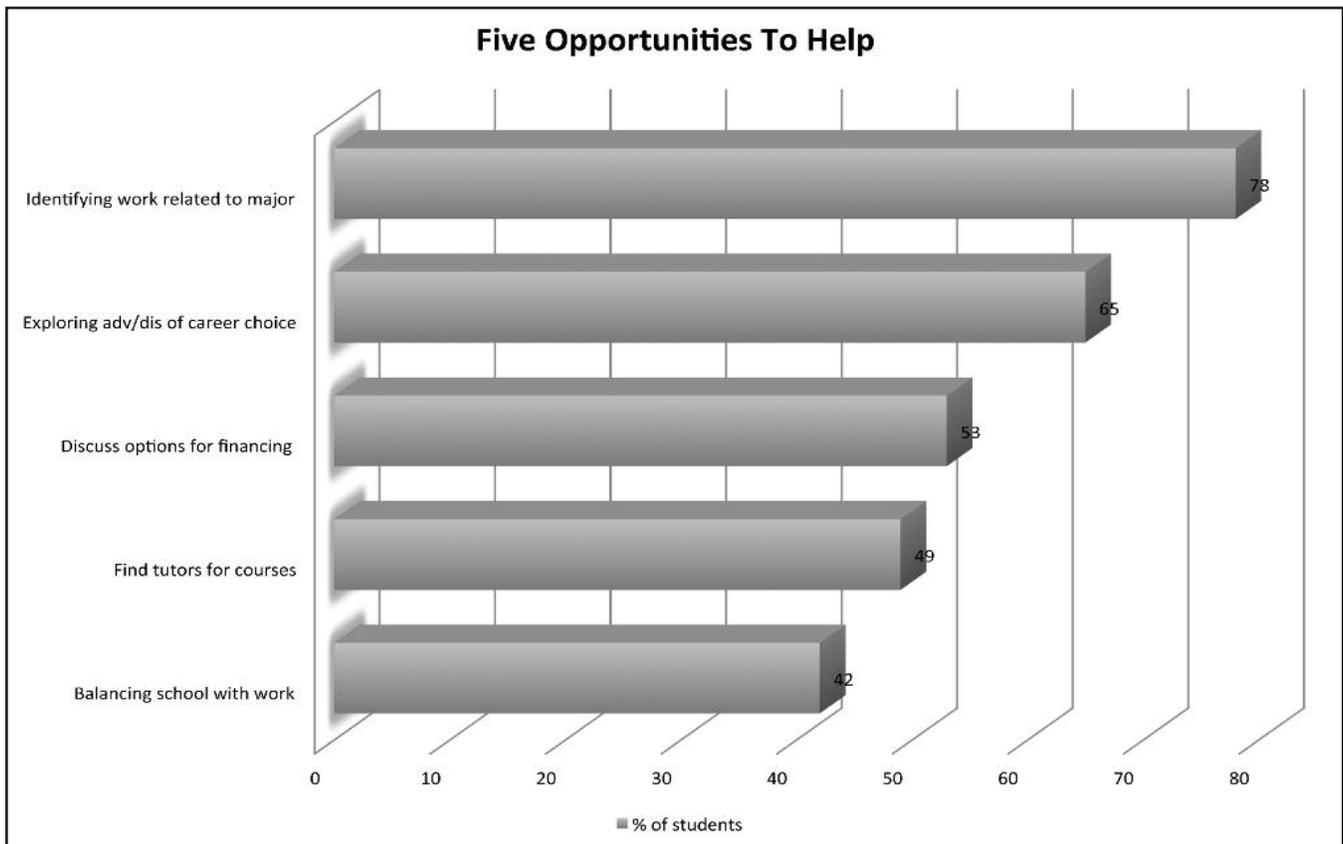


Figure 2

from the recruiting arm of the company and university staff from the Office of Alumni and Career Services. They discussed the many internship and summer job opportunities available to students, while the business professionals related stories and advice for students interviewing for internships or jobs.

Finally, the other key indicator was that 25% of students “were unable to affirm that they have made many friends at college and feel at home” (Noel-Levitz, 2013). The past five years of online evaluations, created to capture participants’ satisfaction levels, revealed that 92% percent of the mentees surveyed indicated that they valued their interactions with their advisors/mentors. Evaluations also revealed that mentors and mentees positively connected with one another through group and Family Cluster activities. This is the key focus of the recruitment process and the matching process for mentors and mentees. Students report that this is why they join the program and have felt that they were able to develop through the program. Having personal power in the program also creates a sense of ownership. In the 2011-2012 academic year, Co-Chairs suggested that new leadership be instituted in order to help increase communications; thus, the role of General Manager was created. These student leaders took on the specific requirements of grants awarded by the Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges (VFIC), but they also became the co-planners with the staff to continue to refine the student’s social and community service events from the students’ perspectives. They provided key feedback about events that does not always make it into the evaluations and plays a very important role in organizing events and getting participation in spite of very heavy academic schedules.

Quality of Interactions

It is important for students to interact with a broad range of faculty, staff and students across campus who support their intellectual and social development. Spending key time with their peers in situations that allow them to develop the emotional bonds and the relationships they need with faculty and student development personnel seems to have a very important role on their retention and graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In the 2013 NSSE results, engagement was one of the key factors. Students who were “overall pleased with their campus interactions,” tended to be more successful (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013). PAM participants, measured on the annual assessment, clearly gave a higher rating experience based upon the quality of engagement. They also responded in assessments with excellent levels of satisfaction when meeting professionals or staff from the university.

International Students

In an age where global travel allows for greater numbers of students to study in other countries or to study abroad, the number of internationally born students who study at the

University of Richmond has increased significantly as a part of the University’s diversity initiative and global outreach efforts. The change in demographics of institutions of higher education nationwide has created challenges for students who come from very different cultural backgrounds (Fischer, 2012). The PAM program has had excellent success with international students in retaining them and engaging them. Creating opportunities for international students to bond with students from the United States as well as with other international students has made the program a success in this venture as well. Measures are being put into place to begin to assess what about this model works so successfully, but the anecdotal evidence is clear. The NSSE examined students who were more likely to engage with a greater diversity of students. It identified seniors and “first-year students who participated in a learning community or service-learning, held a formal leadership role, or lived on-campus had more frequent discussions” with peers from diverse backgrounds than those students who did not (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013).

Naturally, PAM incorporates all of these elements. PAM upper-class mentors who are Co-Chairs or General Managers plan two community service projects per year and then engage with the experience intellectually through evaluations. These projects provide the opportunity for leadership and community service in an academic environment. Mentees, who are all first-year students, engage with their mentors in the community service events as well. During the two annual events, they have the opportunity to take leadership roles in engaging with the Richmond area community members that come to the events. In the fall they help local children and their parents celebrate Halloween and autumn through various games and activities. Each spring semester they engage tens of local members of the Boys and Girls Clubs of greater Richmond. They can lead the events, the set-up, or the cleanup. These events are greatly enjoyed by the participants and the community alike.

Graduation Success

Approximately half of all mentees return to become mentors in the PAM program. This excellent rate of return is due to the program’s design and the natural tendency for students to give back when they have received such benefits from participating in the program. The PAM program’s ability to help students integrate into the institution provides them with the opportunity to secure the resources and emotional support they require to graduate. The 2013 Noel-Levitz study shows that college completion effective practices have been determined, and the PAM program assists with incorporating nearly all of these practices. These programs, by design, are the second most effective internal operation of private institutions to graduate their students, because they were designed specifically for first-year students (Noel-Levitz, 2013).

The University of Richmond provides the majority of the other top effective practices that students were intentionally made aware of through the mentoring process. The Chronicle of Higher Education completed a study of four and six-year graduation rates for students across the nation who matriculated in 2004. For private, four-year colleges, the PAM program outpaced all but the top institution, Washington and Lee (92.8%), while it surpassed the second highest achieving institution, the University of Richmond (87.3%) (Chronicle of Higher Education). As can be seen from the chart below, the graduation rates for both mentees and mentors in the program are an outstanding success, averaging 88% for the 4-year graduation rate since 1999-2000 and 92% for the 6-year graduation rate.

Looking Ahead

As institutions of higher education continue to compete for top students, and as more students face greater challenges to staying in college, programs like PAM will continue to flourish because they are effective. Among the findings in a web-based poll of campus officials in 2013, the first-year student programs "...emerged as the top-ranked, most effective strategies and tactics across higher education for improving student retention and college completion rates" (Noel-Levitz, 2013).

The current President of the University of Richmond demonstrated his support of the program in 2009 by increasing the level of funding supplied by the university. These funds were used to increase the number of large-group activities that students could engage in, including the Campfire, BBQ, Community Service events, as well as greater participation in leadership conferences. One of the key components to the success of the PAM program participants is the enhanced leadership skills they acquire not just from participating in leadership roles within the program setting, but through the program's commitment to providing much of the funding for costs associated with attending National Leadership Conferences. The PAM program provided funds that enabled volunteers to attend a variety of leadership conferences, including the National Black Student Leadership Conference in Raleigh, NC, the East Coast Asian American Student Union in Washington, DC, and the International Student Leadership Conference at James Madison University in Virginia. Other students have received funding to participate in community service projects and even to conduct research. In each of these opportunities, PAM participants submitted applications for funding and, subsequently, submitted short essays, posted on the PAM Leadership Blog <http://pam.richmond.edu/>, describing how they benefitted from attending these conferences. The essays continue to depict the extraordinary effects that these leadership experi-

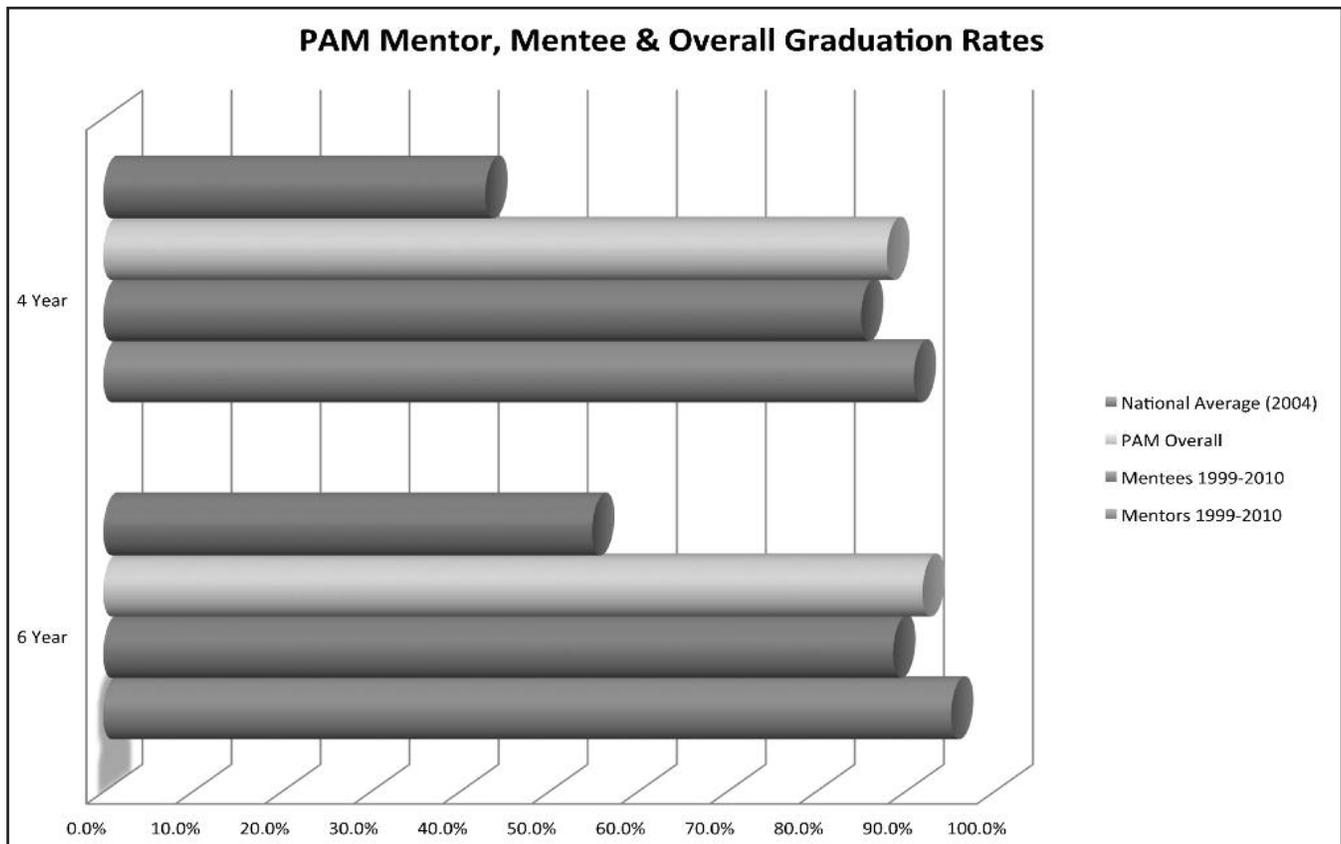


Figure 3

ences have upon the students, on their thoughts, and how they will inform their actions regarding leadership on campus.

Since its inception, the PAM program has grown by 87.5% with a total number of 120 students for the 2014-2015 academic year. In preparing for the new year, hundreds of prospective participant applications were read through, debated over, and decided upon. Once matched with their mentors, the connections begin across the summer via email, phone, Facebook, Instagram, Skype, LinkedIn and other social networking platforms. Over the summer, hand-selected, well-experienced mentors communicated with mentees and mentors across the state, nation and even world, ensuring that authentic connections were made to help cement the crucial initial bonds.

On a final note, there has been an exciting development over the summer that demonstrates the University's contin-

ued support of the program. At present the PAM program is budgeted at \$12,000. However, the Vice President for Student Development agreed to provide further financial support for the program because of its demonstrated support of the overall objectives of the Student Development Division and the University of Richmond of helping students adjust to the university setting and become active members of the community. These funds are beneficial because the more opportunities for engagement and leadership the students have, the more successfully they will integrate into the university their first year, and the greater the chance will be that they will engage in activities that help them find the growth and satisfaction they need to successfully navigate their first-year and continue on to graduation.

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