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The Development of a Survey for GVSU's Honors Freshman Mentoring Program

Elizabeth Strach
Grand Valley State University

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Elizabeth Strach

Honors Senior Project

The Development of a Survey for GVSU's Honors Freshman Mentoring Program

A. Introduction

Peer mentoring has become a common trait of Honors programs. According to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), the overarching purpose of peer mentoring programs in Honors programs is to help incoming freshman acclimate to college's academic and social life. It is important to have a measurement tool to gauge the effectiveness of Honors peer mentoring programs to see if the goals of the program are being met, if changes benefit the program, and to make improvements to better serve the incoming students. Currently, there is no accepted practice for gauging the effectiveness of peer mentoring programs, much less Honors peer mentoring programs. Grand Valley State University's (GVSU's) Honors peer mentoring program currently has a survey that is distributed to incoming freshman students, but it has been determined that a new survey should be crafted that better suits the program's needs.

B. GVSU's Honors Peer Mentoring Program

GVSU's Honors peer mentoring program's purpose is to help incoming freshman acclimate to college and honors, and to help them develop friends and a network on campus. Mentors are chosen the fall before the incoming freshman arrive and go through a three-hour training session to become familiarized with the goals of the program, the expectations for mentors, and resources for themselves and for their mentees. In addition, the mentors are assigned to a member of the Honors Mentor Council, a group of experienced Honors mentors who serve as a resource and a means of encouragement for the mentors. Mentors are asked to blind-copy their Honors Mentor Council lead during all communication with their mentees. After

students are accepted to Honors, they are given a short description of all of the peer mentors—their interests, major, etc.—and are asked to rank their preference of a peer mentor. There are no pictures, names, or genders on the mentor descriptions in order to help eliminate bias.

The peer mentors are matched with between five and eight mentees in July—about a month and a half before the incoming freshman arrive on campus. Upon receiving their assignments, the peer mentors are asked to contact their mentees to introduce themselves, explain their role, and make it known that they are available for questions or comments. Before Honors Welcome Days (two days that students have a “Welcome Week” experience, specifically related to Honors), the mentors are expected to have established contact with all of their mentees. In addition, the mentor should have told her mentees about what to expect during Honors Welcome Days, as well as have set a time for herself and her group of mentees to meet on the first day of Honors Welcome Days. The mentor is expected to host activities beyond the schedule of Honors Welcome Days—such as meeting for lunch, a tour of campus, etc.

Honors mentors are expected to stay in contact with their mentees throughout the first semester; they are encouraged to e-mail the mentees after the first few weeks of classes, and to be available for mentees if they reach out. During October a SurveyMonkey survey is sent to the freshman to measure the success of the Honors peer mentoring program. According to Dr. Jeff Chamberlain (Dr. J), the purposes of the survey are to:

- 1) Find out the satisfaction of incoming freshmen with the mentor program,
- 2) Gauge how well the program (or their mentor) helped acclimate the mentee to GVSU and Honors, and
- 3) Gauge how well the program (or their mentor) helped the mentee develop friends, acquaintances, and contacts.

There have been many changes to GVSU's Honors peer mentoring program over the past few years—how mentors are assigned to students has changed, the Peer Mentor Council has been established, and in 2013, all freshmen were asked to read *What the Best College Students Do*, and participate in subsequent discussions on the book led by the peer mentors. Each year changes are made to the program, and it is important that the measurement tool used gauges the effectiveness of GVSU's peer mentoring program captures the outcome of these changes.

C. Survey Design Research

The current survey for GVSU's Honors mentoring program is distributed in mid-October; the revised version being created through this project is assumed to also be distributed in mid-October. This distribution time will be weeks after the final “structured contact” (for example, Honors Welcome Days) that the Honors College coordinates. Hopefully the mentor will have reached out to the mentee at least one other time after this (as is encouraged), but that is not a guarantee.

It is important to know the distribution timeframe when designing the survey because the responses given may be influenced by the time that the survey is distributed. Traditionally, it was assumed that an opinion is stored in memory and can be called upon when prompted. Now it has been shown that a person's response is built from “all kinds of information that they have stored in memory, and it depends on the context of the request, recent events, and their mood which information will be used and therefore which answer will be given” (Saris and Gallhofer 86). Thus, the mentees' opinions of the successfulness of the Honors mentor program might be influenced by how recently it affected them (for example, the responses of the students who had not been in contact with their mentor in October might be different than those who had been). In

order to account for this variability, it might be beneficial include a question in the survey pertaining to how recently and frequently the student last heard from his or her mentor.

It is important to ensure that questions in the survey are asking what we want them to.

When a sentence is given in a survey such as:

My mentor was approachable.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

the survey is asking the student to evaluate his or her mentor. If, instead, the statement was, “I felt like my mentor was approachable,” the survey would be asking the student to use cognitive judgment (Saris and Gallhofer 89). Since we want to measure the individual student’s experience rather than the evaluation of the mentor, this survey’s statements and questions should be structured in the second manner, rather than the first.

Some measurements gathered can be asked using the same introduction and same responses. For example, the current survey asks:

What kind of things did your mentor help you with? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Academic anxiety
- ☐ Encouragement
- ☐ Study skill (sic)
- ☐ Transition advice
- ☐ Time management
- ☐ Resources not aware of
- ☐ Career advice

Other (please specify)

This form of questioning is called a battery of stimuli. Batteries of stimuli allow for more questions to be asked without burdening the surveyor or the responder with repetitive questions. No negative effect of using batteries of stimuli has been found (Saris and Gallhofer 91). Thus, in a situation such as the former, a battery of stimuli can be an effective, efficient way of measuring a response. However, the introductory phrase in a battery of stimuli must be robust on its own. In our example above, the word “things” is used when referring to what a mentor might have helped with—a vague word that doesn’t add any depth to the statement. There are many ways to rewrite the statement, and even simply removing the phrase “kind of things” from the statement could strengthen it.

Similarly, a type of question that could be used in the Honors mentor survey is a battery of statements. A battery of statements is one or more statements given where the response has a set continuum, such as: Agree, Somewhat agree, Neither agree or disagree, Somewhat disagree, and Disagree. These responses give a set gauge to measure satisfaction and agreeability, thus making them an attractive form of question in a survey. However, batteries of statements tend to encourage respondents to respond to all requests in a battery similarly, in a phenomenon called response set or acquiescence (Saris and Gallhofer 94). The onset of acquiescence is influenced by the interest of the respondent in the topic. However, it has been estimated that after about 30 statements, respondent’s attention may start to waver and acquiescence may start to occur (Brace 119). The questionnaire being revised through this project will be under 30 questions in length, per this suggestion, so this should issue should not present itself.

Response scales that have a continuum, such as the one mentioned in the previous paragraph, are beneficial in situations in which it is important to have more than a yes/no answer. There are many different types of continuum, from a labeled agree/disagree scale from 1-5, to a

continuum where the respondent is asked respond through choosing a number from 1-100. In Rutgers University's "First Year Experience Student Opinion Survey", various scales are used throughout the survey in a battery of stimuli. They switch between four-point, eight-point, and five-point scales throughout batteries in the survey, and even use four-point scales in non-battery statements later on in the survey. The four-point scales do not offer a neutral response, forcing the students to commit to a positive or negative answer. Although this might be beneficial in some situations, for our purposes I would suggest including a neutral response—for some questions students might be neutral, and we won't want to have them choose another response arbitrarily, or leave the question blank.

Additionally, in Rutgers' satisfaction survey some of the four-point scale responses only have one "negative" response, while having three "positive" responses. This can skew the results of the survey, since people are less likely to choose the extremes, and it is less helpful in determining how negative the student's response is (Saris and Gallofer 109). Alternatively, a questionnaire by the University of Wisconsin-Madison used for mentees rating the effectiveness of their mentor utilizes a 7-point scale with their battery of stimuli, which is balanced around a neutral response and has an additional (8th) "not observed" option ("Mentee Pre MCA Preview").

For most questions that have response scales it will be appropriate to use a bipolar scale (such as agree/disagree) that has an odd number of responses and is centered on a neutral response. Many questions asked in the previously-used Honors mentor survey have agree/disagree scales—currently, they have five response options, as outlined previously. Although the five options do cover more than just the yes/no/neutral, it is important to recognize the human tendency to waver away from extremes, and the additional information gained by adding another set of options (Saris and Gallofer 109). There is no accepted standard for how

many points should be in an agree/disagree-type scale, although it is generally agreed that between 5 and 10 options is appropriate. However, “seven is considered the optimal number by many researchers”, depending on the goals of the research and the specificity needed (Brace 71). Someone might feel like her mentor gave good advice about the social aspects of college life, but she still might be hesitant to answer “agree” to a question about whether her mentor helped acclimate her to college life. Thus, in order to distinguish the difference between “somewhat agree” and “agree,” for example, we might add another response, “mostly agree.” For this reason, I believe that it will be appropriate to utilize a 7-point scale for the responses in the Honors mentor survey.

When creating a survey, in addition to focusing on the responses, we should keep in mind how the questions themselves are structured. We want to ask questions that give students enough options to find an appropriate response and are still clear in their meaning. One way that a question can be unclear, or yield an inaccurate response, is through a double-barreled request—a question in which “two simultaneously opposing opinions are possible” (Saris and Gallhofer 87; Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 142). For example, in the current survey used for the Honors mentor program, the following question is asked:

Did your mentor introduce you to others in the Honors College, both students and staff?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Somewhat

This question is asking two things: did the mentor introduce the student to other students in the Honors College, and did the mentor introduce the student to staff in the Honors College.

However, due to the way it is structured, the response may not give much information. A student who briefly interacted with other students and staff might not have considered it an introduction,

and thus might answer “somewhat,” or may answer “no.” Additionally, students who were introduced to students, but not staff, might answer “somewhat” or “no.” Thus, this question leaves room for ambiguity and error. Instead, a question with responses such as:

Did your mentor introduce you to others in the Honors College?

- Yes, other students
- Yes, Honors staff
- Yes, both Honors students and staff
- No

might yield more useful, and accurate, responses.

Another prevalent feature of questions in a survey to consider is an implicit assumption (Saris and Gallhofer 88). For example, in the current survey many of the questions assume that the mentee has interacted with his or her mentor. We might assume that those who would be filling out the survey will have had contact with their mentor, but that might not be the case. Thus, it might be beneficial to ask early on whether the mentee had contact with his mentor or not. If he did not interact with his mentor, another set of questions would be appropriate than those asked to the students who did.

Overall, it is recommended that online surveys should be kept short—they should take between 5 and 15 minutes to complete. Longer surveys are less likely to be completed, and thus could produce biased results. Some tactics to keep the essay shorter include avoiding unnecessary repetition and confusion (such as with the double-barreled request) (Comley and Beaumont 321). Additionally, question stem length should be kept to a minimum—it has been found that many people read answers to questions first and might not read the question stem itself in detail. To counter this it has been suggested that question stems should be kept shorter than 140 characters (Comley and Beaumont 322).

The survey has been administered in the past through SurveyMonkey, an online surveying service. Since the Honors College has the GVSU e-mails of all students, it is relatively simple for an Honors College representative to e-mail the incoming Honors freshman a link to the survey.

D. Focus Group

After creating and revising several drafts of a survey that could be used by the Honors College mentoring program, I held a focus group to help clarify some questions in the survey and gather feedback on what should be included in the survey. In *Focus Group Interviews in Education and Psychology*, Sharon Vaughn, Jeanna Schumm, and Jane Sinagub said, “The goals [of a focus group] are to conduct an interactive discussion that can elicit a greater, more in-depth understanding of perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences from multiple points of view and to document the context from which those understandings were derived.” I crafted the questions for the new survey based on the current survey, the goals for the Honors mentoring program’s survey, and my own experiences from being an Honors mentor for three years. Gaining opinions from students whose experiences differ from my own is invaluable in determining whether the questions I developed are suitable and relevant for the Honors mentoring program’s purposes and that the questions are clear to a variety of readers.

Prior to conducting the focus group, I created a set of questions about the survey that I was hoping to address during the focus group (see Appendix A). Each question was printed out on a separate colored sheet of paper. For each attendee a folder was compiled which contained the set of the questions on papers, as well as a \$10 gift card to GVSU’s bookstore. Five freshman honors students attended the focus group.

The focus group clarified some important aspects regarding the survey questions, question responses, and survey structure. For example, the participants suggested that the survey use “mostly/somewhat” instead of “moderately/slightly” for questions that are asked on a 7-point scale (such as agree/disagree). Their rationale was that “mostly” and “somewhat” sound more like how students speak. Also, they pointed out that “mostly” sounds like a 75% agreement, and “somewhat” sounds more around 50% agreement, while “moderately” and “slightly” sound less differentiable.

The participants had many recommendations regarding the question which asks: “what has your mentor helped you with?” and followed by a list of possible areas. Before they started brainstorming about what areas their mentor helped them with, they suggested that the response options include “yes”, “no”, and “N/A”. The rationale for the three response options is that the response should distinguish between the areas that mentors didn’t help students with, that the students did want help with, and areas that mentors didn’t help students with, but the student wouldn’t have wanted nor needed the help in the first place. If the survey only has a “no” option, then both of these groups will answer “no”, and it will be impossible to know if the mentor is not meeting the mentees needs or if the mentee simply didn’t need help in that area. The participants said that the some of the most important things for mentors to help mentees with are: making friends, navigating the bus system, feeling nervous, homesickness, academic expectations, exam preparation realities, study skills, finding resources, knowledge about campus dining, scheduling, campus tours, tutoring centers, where to get academic advising, getting involved on campus, study habit advice, and meeting people. While not all of these areas can be included in the response options of the survey (it would be too long), some of these should be considered and included in the survey.

The focus group also helped with the structure of the question stems. The participants of the focus group were asked what was about the clarity of the question:

How many times have you had contact with your mentor? (for introduction, in response to their e-mails, to ask a question, etc.—including e-mail, phone, face-to-face, etc.)

☐ 0 times ☐ 1-2 times ☐ 3-4 times ☐ 5-6 times ☐ 7-8 times ☐ 8-9 times ☐ 10+ times

The participants recommended that the “for introduction, in response...” portion of the question stem be removed. The students also brought up that “contact with your mentor” might be ambiguous. Is the mentor adding her mentee on Facebook considered contact? Is each response in an e-mail counted towards this number, or just the initial e-mail? Perhaps “spoken with” might be a better phrase to convey the meaning of the question, with the clarifying examples in parenthesis. Additionally, the students suggested that a time-limit be put on the question, such as “since Honors Welcome Days.” If a question that had a time frame was added, I would suggest breaking it up into two parts—before and during Honors Welcome Days, and after Honors Welcome Days.

The focus group also brought new insights about the structure of the survey. The participants suggested that, as respondents, they would want to know how many questions there are before taking the survey. Their answers varied for how many minutes the survey should take, at most, but the general consensus was that the survey shouldn’t take more than 5-10 minutes, and that the ideal number of questions in the survey would depend on the type of question: they recommended that no more than 1-2 written, open-ended questions be included, but said that it would be alright to have, at most, around 25 questions if they are multiple-choice.

The participants in the focus group also brought up the timing of administration of the survey. All of the participants strongly felt that the survey should not go out over midterm week, the week before midterm week, or the week after. They did not agree about whether it should go

before or after, though. The main benefit of the survey going out before midterm week is that the mentees will have had (or should have had) contact with their mentor during Honors Welcome Days, and that they might remember more about their experience with their mentor before midterms. However, the mentor should keep in touch with their mentees throughout the semester, so if the survey is sent out too early, the mentor's adherence to this won't be able to be measured.

Finally, the last question that was asked during the focus group was asking the participants to indicate the most important aspects of the mentor/mentee relationship. Some responses to this question were: it is less important for the mentor and mentee to have things in common, it is more important to have people who are committed and approachable; the mentor should be knowledgeable about GVSU and the Honors College; the mentor should be accepting of alternative views; and the mentor should be personable and conversational. The purpose of this prompt was to see what kinds of questions could be added to the survey to determine the quality of the mentor/mentee relationship.

E. Conclusion

Every year GVSU's Honors Freshman Mentor Program is different. As such, the survey that is distributed to the students should be revisited each year to ensure that the questions are still relevant and useful, and to add or remove questions as necessary. The survey draft that is included with this overview (in Appendix B) should be used as an example of how questions could be asked in an effective way, and it could serve as a foundation for subsequent surveys. Earlier in this paper, the goals for the Honors Mentor Program Survey were outlined. The draft of the survey has been created with these goals in mind—Table 1 shows which questions in the survey draft might address which of these goals.

Goal	Question number
Find out the satisfaction of incoming freshmen with the mentor program,	6, 8, 9, 13, 16, 17
Gauge how well the program (or their mentor) helped acclimate the mentee to GVSU and Honors	7, 12, 14, 15
Gauge how well the program (or their mentor) helped the mentee develop friends, acquaintances, and contacts	5, 10, 11

Table 1: Goals and survey questions that address them

The guidelines outlined in this report can help those who create GVSU's Honors Mentor Program's mentee survey in the future with formatting questions and responses as well as with structuring the survey as a whole.

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Appendix A

Which set of response options (a or b) would you prefer with the following statement, where you are limited to selecting a single response option:

I feel like my mentor is a good match for me.

- | | |
|--|--|
| a) <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree | b) <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately agree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly agree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree or disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree or disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree |

Why do you prefer the one you indicated?

Consider the following question:

How many times have you had contact with your mentor? (for introduction, in response to their e-mails, to ask a question, etc.—including e-mail, phone, face-to-face, etc.)

- ☐ 0 times
 ☐ 1-2 times
 ☐ 3-4 times
 ☐ 5-6 times
 ☐ 7-8 times
 ☐ 8-9 times
 ☐ 10+ times

Reflect on the clarity of the question. How might it be made more clear?

What is the maximum amount of time you think is reasonable for a respondent to spend on a survey for feedback with the Honors Mentor Program?

What is the maximum amount of questions?

The following question is in the survey; only a few of the possible areas which help might have been offered are listed:

Has your mentor helped you with:

	Yes	No
Academic anxiety	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
Acclimating to college	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Becoming more comfortable with campus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

We want to make sure that we have a comprehensive list of areas in which mentors help their mentees.

Please list up to five areas in which your mentor has most helped you.

What are three to five areas you wish your mentor would have helped you with? (Or helped you more with)

Identify the top five areas that are most important regarding the mentor/mentee relationship. For example: similar areas of study, mentor availability, mentor approachability, etc.

Appendix B

1. Who is your mentor?

2. How recently have you spoken with your mentor? (including e-mail, phone, face-to-face, Facebook, etc.)

- ☐ Within the last week
- ☐ Within the last two weeks
- ☐ Within the last month
- ☐ Within the last six weeks
- ☐ I haven't had contact with my mentor since Honors Welcome Days

3. How many times have you spoken with your mentor? (including e-mail, phone, face-to-face, Facebook, etc.)

- ☐ 0 times ☐ 1-2 times ☐ 3-4 times ☐ 5-6 times ☐ 7-8 times ☐ 8-9 times ☐ 10+ times

4. How many times have you met with your mentor in-person?

[textbox]

5. How many times outside of Honors Welcome Days did your mentor invite you to get together (either individually or as a part of your mentor group)?

- ☐ 0 times ☐ 1-2 times ☐ 3-4 times ☐ 5-6 times ☐ 7-8 times ☐ 8-9 times ☐ 10+ times

6. I feel like my mentor was approachable.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Mostly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree or disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Mostly disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

7. Has your mentor helped you with:

Yes

No

N/A

	Yes	No	N/A
Academic expectations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic stress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adjusting to college	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Becoming more comfortable with campus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Becoming more familiar with honors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Homesickness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information about transportation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information about resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social advice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Study skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transition advice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. I feel at ease talking with my mentor.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Mostly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree or disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Mostly disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

9. I feel like my mentor knew about me as an individual.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Mostly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree or disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Mostly disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

10. Did your mentor introduce you to others in the Honors College?

- ☐ Yes, to both students and staff
- ☐ Yes, only to other students
- ☐ Yes, only to staff
- ☐ No

11. I wish that my mentor had planned more times for our mentor group to get together

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree or disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

12. My mentor helped me feel welcome in the Honors College.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Mostly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree or disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Mostly disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Explanations or comments

13. I feel like my mentor is a good match for me.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Mostly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree or disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Mostly disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Comments (optional)

14. Did you attend:

	Yes	No
Tuesday's information sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The discussion on "What the Best College Students Do"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The honors picnic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The talk given by Ken Bain	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

15. Overall I found the information sessions during Honors Welcome Days beneficial.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Mostly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree or disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Mostly disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Did not attend sessions

Explanations or comments

16. Overall, how satisfied are you with the Honors Mentor program?

- ☐ Very satisfied
- ☐ Mostly satisfied
- ☐ Somewhat satisfied
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat unsatisfied
- ☐ Mostly unsatisfied
- ☐ Very unsatisfied

Explanations or comments

17. Please provide your overall thoughts about the Honors Mentoring program [comment box]