

Reflecting on 10 Years of the Mentor and Dorm Advisor Programs -Background, Educational Impact, and Future Outlook-

メンター・ドームアドバイザープログラム10年間を振り返って

— その背景、教育効果と未来の展望 —

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Abstract

Over 10 years the Mentor and Dorm Advisor Programs have overcome administrative challenges and academic scrutiny to become cornerstones of the International Communications Department on Tokai University's Sapporo Campus. Offered as on-campus internship, both programs provide daily opportunities for language and cross-cultural interaction between Japanese and exchange students. Mutually rewarding to both groups, the cultural understanding, communication skills, and confidence derived from participation in these programs have contributed to an increase in the number of students studying abroad and foreign students returning to Japan for further study. As university students increasingly seek opportunities for active learning, and as the market for attracting overseas students becomes more competitive, broad support from both faculty and administration, as well as continued educational innovation, are needed to ensure the future success of these programs.

要旨

この10年間で、メンター及びドームアドバイザープログラムは、多くの運営上の課題や大学の要求に応じていくことで、ようやく東海大学札幌キャンパス、国際コミュニケーション学科の基本方針に沿ったものとなった。両プログラムはキャンパス内でのインターンシップであるため、海外に出ずして、日本人学生と留学生の間の言語及び異文化交流の機会を日常的に与えることができた。両プログラムの二つのグループともにやり甲斐があり、プログラムに参加することで、異文化理解、コミュニケーション能力、自信などが引き出され、それが留学する日本人学生や再び日本に戻り勉強を深めたいと希望する外国人留学生の数の増加につながっている。ここ数年、アクティヴ・ラーニングの機会を求める学生がさらに増えていること、さらに各大学で留学生の獲得競争が激化していることから、今後とも学部と経営側双方の幅広いサポート、そして教育の革新が、これらのプログラムを成功させるために必要とされるであろう。

Keywords: Mentor, Dorm Advisor, Peer Support, Authentic Learning, Student Engagement
キーワード: メンター, ドームアドバイザー, ピアサポート, 真正の学び, 学生関与

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Introduction

Officially launched as on-campus internship opportunities in 2004, this year marks the 10th anniversary of the Mentor and Dorm Advisor (DA) Programs on Tokai University's Sapporo Campus. This significant milestone offers an opportune time to reflect on why and how the programs started, measures taken to solve problems encountered, the educational value for students, the impact on the campus environment, and finally the future direction of the programs.

Background of the Mentor Program

Prior to its official inclusion in the curriculum as internship, the Mentor Program was initiated on a trial basis in the 2002 fall semester to address three key problems observed in my first year at Tokai.

1) A lack of interaction between Japanese and international students

Both physical and psychological walls existed between our students. International students took language classes separate from Japanese students, and lived in a secure on-campus dormitory that strictly prohibited the entry of any visitors. The marginalization of foreign students was exacerbated by perceived language barriers and shy demeanours keeping students on both sides from initiating contact. The lack of interaction between the students had reached a point where the student circle known as the International Friendship Association (IFA) had been disbanded due to insufficient members. As a language teacher, this situation was particularly unfortunate in the missed opportunities for authentic language practice that interaction could potentially provide to both groups of students outside the classroom.

2) Ambiguous roles related to services for international students

Challenges in communicating with the exchange students also meant the reluctance of any administrative department or faculty member to assume comprehensive responsibility for the management of the international programs. As a new and English-speaking member of faculty, I was soon recruited to act as Tokai's International Student Advisor. In this role, I was inundated with "campus life" related inquiries from international students. In the struggle to balance my commitments to both Japanese and international students, mediate problems, and navigate time-consuming administrative procedures, I quickly discovered the value in leveraging student power and resourcefulness. Many minor issues were better delegated to Japanese students who had already overcome similar challenges themselves. This opportunity for Japanese students to support international students provided a natural starting point and catalyst for interaction.

3) Declining numbers of Japanese students studying abroad

Finally, there was a significant drop in the number of Japanese students applying to study abroad. In one year the total dropped nearly 50% from 40 students studying abroad in 2000 to only 22 in 2001. Admittedly a contributing factor was the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, but it coincided with the start of an overall downward trend across Japan in students going abroad (Japanese Ministry of Education, 2014). Could friendlier relations with the international students on our campus provide a preliminary 'domestic study abroad' experience to build confidence and language skills that would lead to more students taking the next step and venturing overseas to study?

From challenge to opportunity

While recognizing the reality of these challenges, from a different perspective, they also presented educational opportunities. On a trial basis, the first Mentors were recruited from my senior seminar class and matched with international students who shared similar interests and hobbies as described in written Personal Profiles. Self-assessed language proficiency was also solicited in order to match international students who spoke beginner level Japanese with more advanced Japanese speakers of English and vice versa.

In the fall of 2002 there were 13 international students and 15 seminar students who became mentors on a one-to-one or two-to-one ratio. Support activities included help with shopping, obtaining mobile phones, introducing school clubs, tutoring, and meeting the daily challenges of living in a foreign country. All of these activities were voluntary and took place outside of scheduled seminar times. However, as a result of the connections made, 3 international students joined my seminar regularly and the opportunities for interaction with proficient speakers of English increased fourfold.

In the spring semester of 2003, 19 international students were conveniently matched with 19 seminar students. Students continued to provide on-campus support for the international students and increasingly arranged activities off-campus. Encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive interaction between students over the course of the semester, in July I wrote a report to formally propose the idea of the Mentor Program to the International Exchange Committee that oversees our international programs.

The number of international students increased to 23 in the fall semester of 2003, so members of the English Speaking Society (ESS) were also recruited to assist with the Mentor Program. Details of the program were also introduced in a Communications Department meeting with hopes of attracting the support of Media Course teachers and students. There was a growing need for online information in English and this task presented an ideal opportunity for collaborative project-based learning. With faculty oversight, Mentor support activities expanded to include meeting students at Chitose Airport and escorting them to Tokai University, assisting with registration and orientation, conducting a school tour and shopping excursion, organizing a Welcome Party, and hosting other events such as a Sapporo Photo Rally, Sports Challenge, Christmas Party, and Slideshow/Farewell Celebration. Based on follow-up surveys and interviews, mentors began compiling information that is now distributed in a Guidebook each semester to incoming groups of international students.

In the spring of 2004, in collaboration with the Japanese Language teacher, IFA was revived, and in the interest of building student leadership skills, direct management of the Mentor Program was relinquished to executive members of the club. Acting as a Faculty Advisor, I allowed students to make autonomous decisions regarding publicizing the program, funding activities, liaising with administration, registering and matching mentors, establishing a website and organizing events. Due to a high level of student engagement and growing awareness of the program, 30 students from across all faculties registered to become mentors to 18 international students. Despite the growth in mentor participation, considerable criticism was received from some faculty and staff for mistakes made. In particular, unauthorized entry of Japanese

students to the International Student Dorm was controversial. I again took a different perspective and viewed these mistakes as valuable learning experiences.

Start of the DA Program

In the fall of 2004, to address some of the problems experienced in the spring semester, the Mentor Program was expanded to include 2 Dorm Advisors (DA). Two members of the IFA Executive who had shown the strongest leadership in managing the Mentor Program in the spring, were selected from among several students interviewed to become the first DAs. The DAs provided a high level of support and cultural interaction as they lived together with the international students in the International Exchange Hall over one semester.

For the university, the DAs also served an important role as a liaison between administration, teachers, and international students. Their positive contribution and timely intervention when problems arose, was well received by all stakeholders. The DAs also benefitted from their participation by developing skills in cross-cultural communication, problem solving, leadership, event planning, and report writing. My belief that these educational outcomes should be recognized, paved the way for the Mentor Program and Dorm Advisor Programs to be listed as Internship in the course timetable allowing students to earn credit for their participation.

Although the DA Program received official recognition as internship by administration, the Mentor Program proposal was met with resistance by some faculty. The affiliation with a school club and high degree of student autonomy came under scrutiny and the academic rigor of the Mentor Program was questioned. As a result, students outside the International Communications Department were not able to register for credit. In order to clarify the educational objectives and requirements of the Internship program the following guidelines were added:

Guidelines for receiving credit as Internship:

Although IFA maintains a role in organizing many events for the international students, expectations of mentors receiving credit for internship go above and beyond the scope of club activities.

Pre-screening

Candidates are chosen through interviews held by a DA Selection Committee including the Department Head, Administrative Director, and International Student Advisor. Interviewees are screened based on a written application including:

- 1) Motives for becoming a Mentor/Dorm Advisor
- 2) Suitability for supporting international students including leadership skills, language certification, and study abroad experience
- 3) Self-determined learning goals and objectives

In Progress

- 1) Students plan/manage events and record their roles and contributions
- 2) Students keep a journal of their interaction with international students to be submitted to all related faculty/administration departments weekly by e-mail
- 3) Students attend weekly meetings to discuss problems and propose solutions
- 4) Students must contribute a minimum of 30 hours to be considered for 2 credits

Final Evaluation

Mentors and Dorm Advisors must submit a 5-page written report of the roles they fulfill outlining skills learned, goals accomplished, challenges overcome, and how they feel the experience will benefit them in the future. They are also required to reflect on ways to improve the programs, and participate as trainers in orientation sessions for successive participants. In addition, they must make a 5-minute oral presentation reflecting on their experiences. DAs present this speech at the International Student Achievement Ceremony and Mentors jointly participate in delivering bilingual presentations at a “Memory Memories Photo Rally Showcase” (see photos in Appendix A).

Although first year students are ineligible to become DAs or earn credit as Mentors, they are encouraged to serve as volunteers and paired with upper classmates repeating as mentors. This peer support model has been effective in adding another level of mentorship between Japanese students, and in ensuring the continuity of membership.

To foster early student engagement and opportunities for cross-cultural interaction, part of the international student program also involves participation in the International Communication Freshmen Orientation Seminar. These collaborative lessons adopt an active learning approach and the activities of mutual merit include a Campus Rally (orienteering and information sharing), World Café (theme-based discussion), Field Trip (Park Golf and BBQ) and Leadership Challenge (team-building and group problem solving). The latter activity requires high-level communication skills, and a few international students have commented on a lack of communicative ability and emotional maturity among some first-year students. For first-year students who struggle in the activity, it is a “wake-up call” to the challenges of interacting in a global society.

Educational Impact

Since 2004, 450 students have acted as Mentors and 45 students have served as Dorm Advisors in support of 249 international students from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Russia and Thailand. With no test scores and only subjective feedback, it is difficult to objectively evaluate the educational impact on nearly 750 individuals. However the formation of “lifelong friendships” and improved confidence in international communication consistently rank as top benefits listed by participants.

Among 45 DAs, all served as Mentors prior to becoming DAs, and over 60% of DAs have gone on to study abroad themselves. Alternatively the program provided students who had already studied abroad an ideal opportunity to further strengthen their language skills, and build on their international experience. Most of these students listed the opportunity to reciprocate the support they received at partner universities as motivations for applying. In terms of post program results, 4 former DAs are currently working overseas and 6 others report work in international fields.

In 2014, 40 students studied abroad marking a return to peak levels achieved on Sapporo Campus prior to 2001. Among the junior class for which I am an Academic Advisor, over 50% of students have studied abroad. This marks a hopeful shift upwards after consecutive years of decline across Japan since 2004 (Japanese Ministry of Education, 2014).

In a survey upon completion of their studies in 2014, all of the international students reported positive (12 excellent, 13 very good) overall impressions and stated they would recommend the program to successors. This year I have written letters of recommendation for four former international students who have since successfully returned to Japan to continue their studies in Japanese.

Change in the Campus Environment

The overall campus atmosphere has improved with several international students joining some department classes and seminars, in addition to their Japanese classes. Primarily they have taken classes taught by English teachers, but some have participated in content classes taught in Japanese.

Mentor events based on daily themes such as Movie Monday, Tutor Tuesday, Winning Wednesday, Thirsty Thursday and Fitness Friday are held regularly. The Mentor Memories Photo Rally is the culminating event of the Program, in which Mentor teams prepare and give bilingual presentations showcasing theme-based photos and videos taken over the semester. Team prizes are awarded for Best Presentation, Best Photos and Best Teamwork. On two occasions the event has been followed by a Talent Show with students from various school clubs performing.

The International Friendship Association now boasts more than 60 active members and hosts several big events each semester including the welcome and farewell parties, cherry blossom parties in spring, a booth at the Campus Festival in summer, a Halloween party in the fall, and Christmas party in winter.

Due to the high level of interaction, the Dorm Advisor and Mentor Programs have provided many valuable images in promotional materials for the International Communications Department. DAs, Mentors and international students also regularly participate in Open Campus events. In an online survey 5 out of 45 DAs listed awareness of the opportunity to become a DA as a deciding factor for entering Tokai.

Dormitory rules continue to restrict DAs and international students from accepting visitors, however administration now permits gatherings to be held in the dormitory as long as an event plan and list of attendees is submitted in advance. It is hoped that the success and lack of problems associated with these gatherings, will lead to further loosening of restrictions. Expectations are also high as the construction of a new gymnasium on campus will allow for the conversion of facilities in the International Exchange Hall, currently used as a training gym, to become an open community space that can be used for further student interaction and events.

A DA Support Team meets once a week for the timely discussion of problems and open communication between all of the stakeholders in the international program. The team includes one international student (in rotation), the Dorm Advisors, the Japanese Language Instructors, the International Student Advisor, and a representative from each of Student and Administrative Affairs, General Affairs, and the Planning and Coordination Department. In November 2012, the Dorm Advisor/International Student Support Process received special recognition, by a panel of judges in a contest promoting school improvement, for its level of cross-departmental collaboration. It is hoped this model of shared responsibility, timely team input, and

open communication in solving problems can lead to further collaboration and innovation on the Sapporo Campus.

Emotional Impact

American author Maya Angelou is quoted as saying “people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel” (Gallo, 2014). With this in mind, the emotional impact of the Dorm Advisor and Mentor Programs goes beyond numbers that can be recorded in a report. To truly “feel” the impact of these programs, it is best to witness the heartfelt words that are spoken by DAs and addressed to foreign students at their Achievement Ceremony, and to see the warm embraces and words of gratitude exchanged by Mentors at the Farewell Party (see photos in Appendix A). The strength of these bonds and shared learning experiences cannot be measured, but remain key to the success of the programs.

Future Outlook

Despite these signs of success and promising trends in our outbound student mobility, the end of an exchange agreement with a key partner this year will mean the temporary absence of any short-term international students in the spring semester of 2015. This is an unfortunate administrative decision, and in an attempt to offset the loss, efforts will be made to establish a Mentor Program for Japanese students to support each other. The lessons learned in the growth and development of the DA and Mentor Programs will be invaluable in setting up this new Peer Support program. With the current construction of Tokai’s Daiyon High School on the university campus and with future plans for greater integration and collaboration with our affiliate school, the initiative is well timed.

Tokai University promotes “practical education to develop fundamental skills needed as members of society, in particular the ability to think independently, tackle challenges, connect with others, and accomplish goals” (Tokai University Educational System, 2014). The active learning and student-centered approach of the Dorm Advisor and Mentor Programs are ideally suited to instilling these skills. By their nature, however, the programs’ success relies on delegation of control, a high level of trust, and belief in the power of students. It has taken time to earn this recognition by many administrators and teachers accustomed to managing the delivery of education within classroom walls via one-way lecture style teaching.

If Tokai University hopes to expand our international exchange programs and attract new partnerships, it is crucial that all of our faculty and staff also learn from students and take more active and innovative approaches to integrating international students as equal members of our student body. I hope the Dorm Advisor and Mentor Programs continue to serve as models for inclusion and recognition of the potential of students.

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Appendix A: Photos from Dorm Advisor and Mentor Programs



International Students, Dorm Advisors, and Mentors
Achievement Ceremony, Fall Semester 2014



Dorm Advisor Speech at the Achievement Ceremony
Fall Semester 2014



“Mentor Memories” Photo Rally Presentation,
Fall Semester 2014



Farewell Party, Fall Semester 2014



DAs Sharing Japanese Culture, Kimono Event
Fall Semester 2014



Leadership Challenge,
Spring Semester 2009