



First-Year Students, Pen Pals, and Educational Transitions: A Service-Learning
Project

Senior Project

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By

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Abstract

Throughout the academic career of a student, many important transitions occur. One of the most important transitions is that from high school to college made by first-year university students. This project takes a close look at this transition through the researcher's experience coordinating a service-learning project that engages first-year students. Since fall 2016, UNCP students enrolled in Honors UNV 1000: First-year Seminar have participated in a service-learning project in which they write letters to middle school students enrolled at CIS Academy in Pembroke. Their letters relate their experiences as a new student at the university, what they are experiencing as they transition from high school to university, and advice about how their pen pals can also successfully make this transition. The CIS students in turn advise their first-year pen pals about success in school, describe their hopes and goals for the future, and ask questions about the experiences of university students.

Keywords: first-year university students, educational transitions, pen pals, service-learning

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Introduction

First-Year Students, Pen Pals, and Educational Transitions is a service-learning project that pairs first-year university students with local middle school students in a pen pal writing program. Over the course of one semester, the students write pen pal letters and discuss strategies for success in school, challenges in transitioning from one educational environment to another, and advice for reaching future goals. At the end of each semester, the program culminates with a final party that brings together all the pen pals to meet for the first time, get to know each other beyond their letters, and spend time celebrating with games, food, and fun. This program has a threefold purpose:

1. To provide first-year university students an opportunity to reflect on the challenges they have faced in their transition to college and to practice the skills and strategies they will need to be successful in college.
2. To provide the university professors an authentic opportunity to learn from their students about the challenges they are facing and to give the faculty the opportunity to reach out with relevant, timely, and meaningful help and advice.
3. To provide middle school students from a rural area with the opportunity to learn about higher education, to practice their reading and writing skills, and to reflect on and share their own advice about academic success.

Since its inception in 2017, more than two hundred and fifty UNCP and CIS Academy middle school students have participated in this program. It is my hope that all

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students will remember this experience and carry with them long into the future the lessons they have learned.

For three years as the Service-Learning Teaching Assistant for the program, I have worked incredibly hard to make the program the best that it can be. I have loved every minute of work on this project. I know that this program has the potential to grow and change to impact many more students in different situations and circumstances. All of the information and history provided in this document has been pulled from a Google site that I created to house all the information about the project. I hope that this site will make it possible for the project to continue to impact the lives of students after I graduate, not only at UNCP but at other universities and schools. To learn even more about this project, access materials, and learn about implementing this program please visit:

<https://sites.google.com/view/uncpservicelearningpenpals/home>

History

Fall 2016

In fall 2016, a pilot of the pen pal program was launched by Scott Hicks, professor of English at UNCP, and Ann Kinlaw, CIS Academy teacher. Unfortunately, the project was interrupted by the devastation of Hurricane Matthew, which damaged or destroyed the homes of almost 20,000 people in Robeson County. Thus the first iteration of the project consisted of only three pen pal letters, and its focus shifted to checking with the middle school students to see how they were faring in the aftermath of the hurricane.

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There was no end of semester celebration during the pilot of the program because of the interruptions the hurricane caused.

Fall 2017

In August 2017, 35 first-year UNCP Honors students, five Honors student volunteers, and 40 CIS Academy middle school students embarked on the second round of this service-learning journey. 2017 marked the true beginning of a program that has continued to grow and change ever since.

During the fall semester, the UNCP and CIS Academy students wrote five letters back and forth; the prompts of these letters can be found in Archives. The letters were built as assignments in the first-year UNCP students' UNV 1000: First-year Seminar class. The UNCP students succeeded in providing helpful advice, using age-appropriate language, and describing their successes and struggles in transitioning to college life. Some UNCP students, however, chose not to participate and/or submit their letters on time, but with some encouragement and reminders about the importance of completing their letters, nearly all students completed this activity.

For the first time during this second try at the program we were able to have our pen pal party as planned. For the party, the CIS Academy students visited the university for breakfast, games, and giveaways. The party was held in the Chancellor's Dining Room in the UNCP cafeteria. The students enjoyed breakfast in the cafeteria before spending time playing board and card games with their pen pals. Finally, the party's organizers gave

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away items solicited from on-campus officers, both in bundles for every CIS Academy student as well as in a raffle of larger items.

This final party was planned for the final week of the semester during exams in the hope that all UNCP student participants would be able to attend. Unfortunately, some of the students were unable to attend because they had exams that fell at the same time as the party; others had already left the university to head home for Christmas break. Even though many students were unable to attend, we still had an enjoyable time with the visiting middle school students. The final party was an excellent way to wrap up the semester of letter writing. Everyone had an amazing time, and we became excited to replicate the program the following year.

Fall 2018

The fall 2018 semester started out just as well as the previous fall if not better. We had worked out some of the kinks; we made plans for the party much earlier in the semester; we found a larger place to have the final party; and we had even more students -- 50 from UNCP, 59 from CIS Academy -- participating! Because of the difference in the number of students, some UNCP students had two or three pen pals instead of just one as originally planned. These students chose to write multiple letters to their pen pals or to just write one letter and make copies for each pen pal, an approach that worked very well.

Unfortunately, the UNCP students had only written their first letters and had not yet received any replies when disaster hit, again devastating the county. Another major

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hurricane, Hurricane Florence, tore through the coast of North and South Carolina, once again devastating Robeson County with its torrential rains. The hurricane's flooding severely damaged CIS Academy, and students were out for almost a month. They were only able to return to classes after administrators found an undamaged building big enough to hold classes until the school was repaired. Even so, thousands of students, including some UNCP students, were displaced by the massive storm.

The hurricane closed UNCP for two weeks, and we faced again struggles with student participation. Because CIS Academy was closed longer than UNCP, there were no replies to the UNCP students' letters. The UNCP students continued to write their letters despite this drawback, but many students struggled with the motivation to continue writing without the reward of hearing from their CIS Academy pen pals. We combated this slump by continuing to encourage students and planning for the final celebration.

Because of the increased number of students participating during this semester we required more space for the final party. After much searching we were finally able to book the lobby of the Givens Performing Arts Center for our final celebration, an excellent venue with plenty of room for the number of people in attendance. Like the previous year, we planned the party for the course's exam period so as to avoid interfering with the UNCP students' other exams. Again, however, we had many UNCP students who said they were not able to attend due to exams or traveling home. In fact, we had so many students unable to come that we solicited volunteers from the Esther G. Maynor Honors College to act as chaperones for the CIS Academy students during the party.

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Even with a high number of students unable to attend the final celebration, it was a smashing success. The party started with a game of Get-to-Know-You Bingo that the students played with their penpals. The students then went to the UNCP cafeteria for lunch. We worked out a deal with the cafeteria management to provide lunch at a discounted rate for the students in exchange for donations to the dining service's annual canned food drive. The CIS Academy students loved having lunch in the cafeteria with its variety of foods and all you can eat buffet.

After lunch the students returned to GPAC for a story-writing contest and raffle. We were again able to solicit giveaway items from UNCP offices for party bags and a raffle for CIS Academy students. The items were even better: tickets to a show at GPAC, UNCP water bottles, hats, and t-shirts. The celebration was an amazing success despite all the challenges that the semester brought, and it provided a perfect end to an otherwise rocky semester.

Fall 2019

The fall 2019 semester brought many changes to the pen pal project. To start, the Maynor Honors College inaugurated an Honors learning community to include four sections of UNV 1000. These four cohorts of first-year students were all included in the project, bringing the number of UNCP students and faculty participating in the program to all-time highs of 60 and four, respectively.

The semester also brought a change in the letter prompts for both the UNCP and CIS Academy students. After some discussion, the project organizers cut the number of

letters to four instead of the original five. We found in previous semesters that five letters were really too many for one semester; at the same time, a change in the curriculum for UNV 1000 necessitated that we rewrite the four prompts to align with new student learning goals and objectives. Changing the number of letters from five to four turned out to be an excellent decision. The semester felt less rushed because there was more time between letters to resolve any problems that arose.

In addition, scheduling the final celebration to occur earlier in the semester also worked extremely well. In past semesters, having the celebration during exam week had caused many problems with UNCP students' participation in the party. To eliminate these problems, this semester we planned the final celebration for the last full week of class, with the provost's approving the party as a University-sanctioned event that excused UNCP students from class for the day. This turned out so well: More than fifty UNCP students attended, and the majority of them stayed the entire time.

The final celebration for the fall 2019 semester was the best yet. We were able to book the University Center Annex for the celebration, so we had plenty of room and a working sound system. We started out with a get-to-know-you game where the students would stand up or sit down in response to a series of questions. This was so extremely fun and interesting, and it succeeded in helping the nearly 110 participants get to know each other in a relaxed and positive way.

Then, the students then walked to the UNCP cafeteria for lunch. After the students returned from lunch, they again took part in a story-writing contest. While the

professors and teachers judged the story-writing contest, I led a raffle of items collected from different offices around campus.

Finally, after the winners of the story contest were announced and awarded prizes, the students were split into five groups and headed off on a scavenger hunt that had them walking all around campus based on clues about different buildings. The students returned after the scavenger hunt completely tired out but well familiarized with the many resources and operations of a university campus. We concluded our celebration by giving the CIS Academy students take-home packages that we had made from UNCP offices' generous donations.

Conclusion

Each year, the pen pal project grows and changes. Though each year brings new challenges, the project seems to get better each year with every new group of students. There is no doubt that next year will be even better. The challenges over the last four years have slowly built this project into what it is today. To see the materials we used for this project, see pictures from past years, and learn about how to implement this program please visit: <https://sites.google.com/view/uncpservicelearningpenpals/home>