CARNEGIE MELLON

Community
ThinkTank

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Findings
Fall 2015

Building Networks of Support

Decision Dialogues Between Peer Mentors and Partners

An Interactive Guide for Peer Mentoring
Based on the Experiences of CMU's
Independent Students

The Findings from the Community Think Tank on
Building Networks of Support and Independent Students at CMU

In the demanding culture of CMU, our Independent (1ˢᵗ generation and self-supporting) students are also learning to navigate a institution on their own, while working up to 20 hours a week. That is why we started with their insight into *building networks of support* and the *unanticipated decisions* many students face.

The CMU Community Think Tank, conducted by the members of the Leadership, Dialogue and Change seminar and Dr. Linda Flower, carried out critical incident interviews and round table problem-solving sessions with over 60 members of the CMU campus. These intercultural, cross-hierarchy dialogues designed to draw out rival hypotheses, revealed diverse representations of some shared problems, options, and outcomes in student experience.

Inspired by the Peer Mentors program of Dietrich College, we translated this research into a Guide that draws Mentors and their Partners into meaningful dialogue, planning, and problem-solving to explore common (but often unanticipated) challenges in the shared experience of CMU students.

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Organized by the members of Leadership, Dialogue and Change, Professor Linda Flower
(lf54@andrew.cmu.edu.) Please visit *Findings* from previous Think Tanks at
www.cmu.edu/thinktank/docs.html).

Student, Staff and Faculty Participants

On behalf of the entire Leadership, Dialogue and Change seminar, we would like to thank all those who participated in our inquiry into *Building Networks of Support*. Your insights and experiences have allowed us see where shared concerns lie and at the same time put them in the context of real student experience, which we hope this *Guide* reflects.

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Survey Of Problems and Challenges

Early in the project, after reviewing past Think Tank *Findings* on Independent Students (www.cmu.edu/thinktank/docs.html) and other studies, we used our initial interviews and class discussions to pose a set of hypotheses about some key challenges students are facing. Although these issues are often more pressing and explicit for Independent students, they appeared to be relevant for many students. So in addition to the in-depth critical incident interviews the class began conducting, we asked our participants to rate the significance of the problem/situations we predicted students might run into. By selecting which problems to rank at a level 1 (or level 2) for significance, they were telling us what we should focus on in mentoring students. The sample was small (roughly 3 per student), but it suggests that these are live concerns (participants only ranked ones they saw as relevant), and many elicit a "level 1" sense of urgency.

CHALLENGES RANKED	At LEVEL 1	At LEVEL 2	TOTAL HITS
1) Not fitting In; Not living up to social norms?	6	7	13
2) Relationships are being affected	10	0	10
3) Facing a 2nd Chance –after a setback or even failure	8	3	11
4) Need to self advocate: stand up for yourself or justify a need or request	6	5	11
5) Building a Network of Support to help solve a problem or make a decision	7	3	10
6) Someone projects a racial, ethnic or other stereotype on to you. Or you apply it to yourself?	4	2	6
7) Choosing/managing a job to pay for school/living expenses?	10	0	10

The Decision Dialogues:

A Guide for Peer Mentors and their Partners.

Developed by the Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank

Dialogue 1. Fitting In

When you feel you don't fit in or live up to social norms, stereotypes

> Competing Social Norms
>
> Dealing with Racial / Ethnic Stereotypes

Dialogue 2. Negotiating Home and School Relationships

When you feel caught in the tension of different expectations

> Relations with Home
>
> Relations at School

Dialogue 3. Dealing with Setbacks

When you face a second change, but must be a self-advocate

> Managing a Second Chance
>
> Being a Self-Advocate

Dialogue 4. Building a Network of Support

When it will take more than your social network to solve a problem

> Building a Network
>
> Why don't we act?

Dialogue 5. Finding Your Place in a New Place

> Have You Tried? The Pittsburgh Bucket List

The *Guide* and the *Findings* on which it is based are available on the
CMU Community Think Tank website www.cmu.edu/thinktank.
For help using the *Decision Dialogues Guide* contact
Dr. Linda Flower @andrew.cmu.edu

An excerpt form

The Decision Dialogues:

A Guide for Peer Mentors and their Partners.

Mentoring can take many forms:
A cup of coffee Friend. An informative Contact. A wise, trusted Advisor.
A problem-solving Partner.
What kind of mentor do you want to be?

When Mentors and their Partners join in a CMU **Decision Dialogue** they*:*
- **explore** some of the actual challenges students face (in scenarios based on campus-wide problem-solving dialogues held by CMU Community Think Tank)
- **enter a dialogue** with each other responding to these real life *scenarios*—proposing decisions, making predictions about options and outcomes, and comparing their ideas to what the Think Tank said.
- then use these situations to **share their own personal experiences**, comparing the decisions and options both Mentor and Partner see.

The *Decision Dialogues Guide* lets you and your Partner join in five different dialogues on:
1.   Fitting In
2.   Negotiating Relationships
3.   Dealing with Setbacks
4.   Building a Network of Support
5.   Finding Your Place in a New Place

Walking through a Decision Dialogue

An excerpt from the *Decision Dialogues* with commentary on the roles of Mentors and Partners

Dialogue 3: Dealing with Setbacks

Scenario 1: Managing a Second Chance/Self-Advocacy

This Dialogue begins with an Introduction and some student comments on the academic demands they face. Partners are invited to work through a Decision Point scenario. Here is a small excerpt. .

Decision Point Excerpt:

Michael:	Hey Tina, what did you get on your test?
Tina:	Augh, I can't believe it…42 percent! Guess I'll have to study harder next time. How did you do?
Michael:	Not much better. I got a 46 percent. I really thought I was going to pass this one…I studied hard for it and everything.

Tina:	Have you gone to any of the Academic Development tutoring sessions for this class?
Michael:	No, not yet. I know it's offered, but I've never tried it…

At the end of the drama, the partner and mentor are prompted to TALK, first to imagine Michael's solution and then compare the scenario to their experience.

PAUSE AND CONSIDER

So what is the solution? Does the answer to Michael's problem seem obvious to you? "Go get help! But the truth is many people don't do that - or do it way too late. So what   is the problem? And why? What are some Options for Michael. And what might the Outcome be?

Here The Mentor and Partner begin a dialogue, sharing ideas, building towards personal experience, and ultimately a set of Options tested by predicting Outcomes.

Options What can Michael do?	**Outcomes** What might happen as a result?
Plan to create a compromise between "having a life" and doing academic work	This could be a "hit or miss" approach. Michael might do better by convincing himself that he will make more time for school, but he is the only one holding himself accountable.
Another option…	

Given the reasons Michael gives, what might he be thinking? (Is there a rival to that?)

How good are you at imagining what other people may be thinking? Or at supporting someone facing a set back? Let's see if we can predict the Story behind the story for each of these characters.

Here The Mentor and Partner begin a dialogue, sharing ideas, building towards personal experience, and ultimately a set of Options tested by predicting Outcomes.

Let's Talk: What is your own experience with setbacks?

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Does this relate to you?   What is the connection to your experience?
What Options did you try?   What was the Outcome?
What did you learn?

To wrap up this Reflection, Mentor and Partner share their own personal experience to explore how to deal with setbacks.