Peer Mentors Report
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Introduction
According to the results of the YCC Fall Survey, 71% of students said that they were unfamiliar with the existence of peer mentors in their major. However, Yale College regulations dictate that each department must administer some sort of mentorship program. This peer mentorship program is a compulsory, university-wide initiative in which departments provide upperclassmen mentors to help advise underclassmen interested in that major. Unfortunately, many departments at Yale lack such a program, and students cannot receive advice pertaining to taking specific classes in their major and accompanying coursework. To ensure these peer mentorship programs exist in each department, the YCC aims to meet with departments that lack them and to work alongside them to create such programming. With assistance from departments with existing peer mentorship programs, we intend to help create a better student advisory system in humanities and social sciences departments, focusing specifically on these two areas due to a coexisting YCC project for STEM departments.

Background
Many students enter Yale undecided on their major, and others that know their major may be unsure of its specific requirements. Though students have a number of advising options during the first few years on campus, including an advisor and their residential college dean, the purpose of these advisors isn’t to advise students in navigating the intricacies of a student’s prospective major. Additionally, many of the obvious resources for gathering information about required classes, prerequisites, and the differences between majors are not easily accessible to younger students. Many younger students do not have strong relationships with upperclassmen in their major, and DUS office hours often have long waits and give priority to students already declared in that major. Personal experiences from taking classes within a major can prove extremely useful to students looking at a specific major. This combination of factors creates unique difficulties for students seeking to make informed decisions about their respective majors.

To combat these advising blind spots, Yale requires every department to have some type of peer mentorship program, yet many departments do not have such programs. However, some Yale departments do have peer mentorship apparatuses, ranging from peer mentors with office hours to student groups that take major-related trips together. That being said, the information about these groups is often buried deep within departmental websites and therefore not easily accessible to students. As a result of this inaccessibility and the lack of standardized programs across majors, 71% of over 3200 students said they were unfamiliar with their major’s peer mentorship program, according to the YCC Fall Survey.

Peer Institutions
Harvard University and Princeton University have similar peer mentorship programs in which upperclassmen in each major are assigned to first-year and/or sophomore students in their corresponding major to help them choose classes and talk with them about future plans.
At Harvard University, there are peer concentration advisors available for students interested in concentrating in social studies, according to the university’s website. These peer concentration advisors are available in many of the houses (a residential hall in which the undergraduate community lives and interacts with one another) at Harvard, making them very accessible.

At Princeton University, they have a general “Peer Academic Advising” program (PAA) in which the peer advisor, typically an upperclassman, works alongside a residential college advisor to help assist first-years and sophomores. While they are assigned to one group of students within a residential college, Michelle Greenfield (’18) writes in her blog post that she can also be used as a resource for anyone inside or outside of her residential college that may be interested in her major, ecology and evolutionary biology.

Data Analysis
According to the 2018 YCC Fall Survey, more than 80% of the 3200 students that responded did not feel completely informed about the series of courses they should take for their prospective major. Additionally, 71% of the 3200 respondents were unaware that they could be advised about their courses, but 89% of students said they would have found it helpful to have a peer mentorship resource offered by the department in which they planned on majoring. Of the students who had visited a peer mentor, 82% found the experience helpful.

These numbers point to both significant demand for peer mentorship programs as well as success among existing, required programs at reaching underclassmen.

Recommendations
1. Each department should institute a peer mentorship program to allow underclassmen who are prospective majors to ask questions of and learn from upperclassmen in the major
   a. These peer mentors should have regular office hours that are easily accessible and posted on the department’s website.
2. In terms of recruiting peer mentors, departments could assign certain upperclassmen whom they deem knowledgeable and pay them for their office hours, while also having their contact information on the department’s website.
3. The YCC would play a role in a department’s publicizing by putting the office hours in the YCCatch-Up newsletter and reminding students that peer mentorship contact information is on a department’s website.

Progress
- Compiled an extensive list of departments with and without peer mentor programs.
- Met with leaders in the English Department to begin the conversation about implementing a peer mentorship program.
At the meeting, we talked to the English Department’s Assistant DUS Sunny Xiang to discuss the infrastructure of our project. However, we lacked certain specifics, such as how to begin and the structure of a successful program, which will be obtained after winter break by meeting with departments who have successful programs.

Ms. Xiang loved the idea but wanted to know the first steps and an outline for the project. We then expressed our interest in meeting with other departments at Yale to better implement a successful program in the English Department, rather than just using the English Department as a trial run.

Challenges

- Despite Yale regulations that each department must have a peer mentor program or an equivalent, we have had difficulty making contact with DUSes and other departmental leaders to schedule conversations.
- A few departments already have a DUS advisory committee or similar organization comprised of students and believe this satisfies the university’s peer mentorship requirement. However, these groups tend to fill a different role—such as a clubs or side organizations (i.e., YEEBUG in the ecology and evolutionary biology major)—and information about them is not easily accessible to interested students.

Next Steps

As we enter the spring semester, we intend to continue working with the English Department to craft a peer mentorship program that fits the major’s needs and provides information and guidance to prospective majors. This process will include frequent meetings with departmental leaders to better understand their vision of the program and how it will help students, along with YCC’s vision of improving these programs in an effort to create a useful resource for the student body. This process will also include working on logistical considerations, including determining who will serve as peer mentors, when and how often they will be available to students, how they will be compensated, and how their office hours will be publicized.

In addition to working with the English Department, we hope to spearhead peer mentorship programs in other humanities and social science departments over the upcoming semester. We also look forward to working with the YCC STEM Peer Mentorship team to trade observations, information, and best practices regarding how to successfully implement this type of program.

In terms of working with departments to create their own peer mentorship programs, we first plan to meet with the Political Science and Economics departments to get advice on how theirs are set up. Then we would like to move on to our first interested department, English, and begin building the infrastructure and adapting to any challenges we may face in the process. We would
like to have at least 5 departments with peer mentorship programs by the end of the Spring 2019 semester (depending on responsiveness and other obstacles), but we plan to start with English after having received an outline of their existing program.

Conclusion

We believe that bringing peer mentorship programs to more departments across Yale will improve the educational experience of Yale students. A vast majority of students have some level of difficulty learning about their prospective majors. Yet the students who utilize peer mentorship programs have overwhelmingly found them useful, and nearly 90% of students said they would like these programs to be available across the board. Implementing peer mentorship programs in more departments would improve the state of advising at Yale by making information about majors more accessible to Yale students.