

## Near-peer mentorship as a welcome ritual: exploring the what and how of McGill's "Buddy program"

Le mentorat entre pairs comme rituel de bienvenue : explorer le quoi et le comment du « Buddy program » de McGill

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Published ahead of issue: May 5, 2025; published: Sept 10, 2025. CMEJ 2025, 16(4). Available at <https://doi.org/10.36834/cmej.78902>

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### Implication Statement

Since 2015, the "Buddy Program," a near-peer mentoring program operated by the McGill Student Society, has successfully welcomed 1,152 first-year medical students into medical school with the help of 848 dedicated second-year medical student mentors. This innovative, low-cost, time-efficient, automated and scalable model offers a reproducible framework and toolkit for similar institutions that wish to realize the benefits of near-peer mentoring. With unique features such as matching based on personal interests and continual improvements, such as the Meet-&-Greet event and associated orientation booklets, the program is a pioneering example of student-run near-peer mentorship.

### Énoncé des implications de la recherche

Depuis 2015, le « Buddy Program », un programme de mentorat entre pairs géré par la Société des étudiants en médecine de McGill, a accueilli avec succès 1 152 étudiants de première année en médecine grâce à l'aide de 848 mentors dévoués de deuxième année. Ce modèle novateur, économique, peu chronophage, automatisé et évolutif offre un cadre reproductible ainsi qu'une trousse d'outils pour les établissements souhaitant tirer profit du mentorat entre pairs. Avec des caractéristiques uniques, telles que l'appariement selon les intérêts personnels, et des améliorations continues comme l'événement de rencontre et les livrets d'orientation associés, le programme constitue un exemple novateur de mentorat entre pairs dirigé par des étudiants.

### Introduction

Near-peer mentoring is a topic of interest in medical education, especially in high-stress transition periods such as the one into higher education.<sup>1</sup> Near-peer mentoring relationships may be described as those in which a more experienced learner offers direction and assistance to a novice learner so that the novice learner can successfully complete their academic journey.<sup>1,2</sup> Akinla et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review and found three main functions of near-peer mentoring as they apply to first-year medical students: professional and personal development, stress reduction, and ease of transitioning to medical school.<sup>3</sup> Near-peer mentoring also benefits mentors by enhancing their professional skills, self-awareness, empathy, and leadership abilities, while providing

rewarding personal growth and opportunities to reinforce their own learning.<sup>3</sup> A meta-analysis by Lim et al. (2022) found decreased stress levels in nursing students with peer mentors.<sup>4</sup> Despite the growing body of evidence on the benefits of near-peer mentoring, very few articles describe how near-peer mentoring is established within institutions in a low-cost, sustainable fashion. We present a cost and time-effective automated framework for near-peer mentoring with an associated comprehensive toolkit to help others organize similar programs (Appendix A and via author correspondence).

## Description of the innovation

The McGill Medical Student Society has a student-run near-peer program established in 2015 that has successfully welcomed 1,152 first-year medical students since its debut with the support of 848 second-year medical student mentor volunteers (Figure 1). Registration to the program typically occurs in three separate rounds starting four weeks before the initial orientation period via social media and email newsletters (Appendix A, Figure 1 & Table 1). Students and mentors are matched by the coordinators according to hobbies and interests, language and campus preferences, academic trajectory, and special requests. Mentors have the choice of welcoming one or two students. Both mentor and mentees, via email, receive instructions on the program's ground rules and the first steps. In eight years, we streamlined the program with cost-effective automation, requiring about 5-10 hours of commitment annually from approximately two dedicated student leads. In this paper, we provide a concrete framework and describe the tools necessary for other institutions to offer such a program and share some of the lessons we learned.

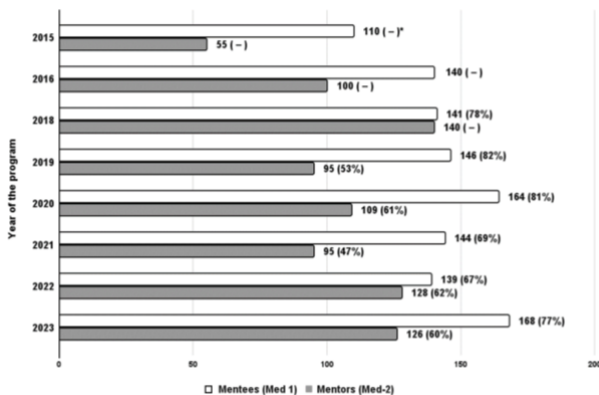


Figure 1. Buddy program overview from 2018 to 2023 ( $n = 1152$  mentees,  $n = 848$  mentors). \*Represents the proportion of medical students in a particular cohort who are registered in the Buddy Program.<sup>5</sup> Items with (-) represent total cohort sizes that are unknown.

## Evaluation

Every year, an average of 76% (SD: 6%) of the entering class will register for a second-year mentor (Figure 1). The program's popularity over the past eight years exceeds the student engagement rate of any other student initiative within our student association, with overall drop-out rates as low as 5%. Financial costs are negligible given all logistics, including automation processes, are completed using no-cost options. The full toolkit, which includes sample registration forms, sample budget, orientation booklet and frequently asked questions, is available upon

request by emailing the corresponding author. Appendix A highlights the key considerations and checklist to establish the program's processes. We have identified five core steps and 13 sub-steps (Appendix A, Figure 1 & Table 1). Each year, we ask first-year medical students in an open-ended questionnaire: "What can we do to improve the program?". First-year students shared with the organizers that they often felt intimidated about contacting their mentors. As such, we have implemented an in-person Meet-&-Greet event with ice-breaker activities. Students also reported that they were often overwhelmed by information at first and requested a document they could refer to later. As such, we have also compounded all the recurrent questions that first-year students have into an 80-page peer-to-peer orientation booklet divided into eight categories according to students' information needs. The orientation booklet includes: General information, Medicine at Your Institution, Academic Life, Student Life, Social Life, Other Resources on Campus, For Non-Locals / Newly Moved-Out, Before Your Year Begins, and Per Block Tips, Tricks & Resources.

## Suggestions for next steps

Future research should include a comprehensive review of near-peer mentorship initiatives across diverse healthcare programs, the long-term outcomes of student-run near-peer mentoring, program adaptability in diverse institutions, and the possible addition of mentor training to enhance medical education. Additionally, studies should aim to identify which specific components of these programs provide the greatest educational benefit relative to their implementation cost, in order to inform the design of efficient and effective mentorship models.

**Conflicts of Interest:** None declared.

**Funding:** None.

**Acknowledgements:** We acknowledge the exceptional work of past and current Ambassadors for Comprehensive Education (ACE) sub-committee within the McGill Medical Student Society: Evicka Veilleux, Moustafa Fouad, Maya Verma and Adelina Dobromir Angheluta, Julie-Anne Lemay and Emily Wu, amongst many others. We thank McGill's undergraduate medical education leadership for supporting this endeavour each year.

**Edited by:** Anita Acai (senior section editor); Marcel D'Eon (editor-in-chief)

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## Appendix A. Overview of how to organize the program

### Buddy Program Logistics

Examples of de-identified files, such as registration forms, automated email communications and automation protocols through Microsoft Power Automate, can be provided at no cost by request via email ([ace.mss@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:ace.mss@mail.mcgill.ca)).

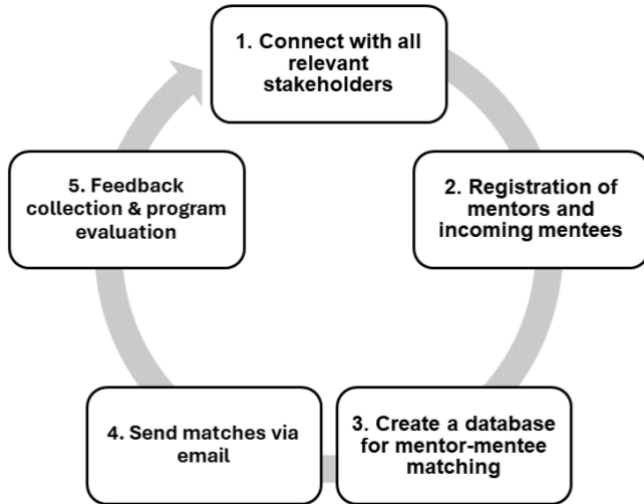


Figure 2. Buddy program logistics

Table 1. Buddy Program Checklist

Steps	Sub-Steps
1. Connect with relevant stakeholders	Seek collaboration from your local medical student association. This will be essential to gain traction amongst your student body. Contact your undergraduate medical education (UGME) leadership and ask for their support.
2. Registration of mentors and incoming mentees	Prepare <i>registration form</i> for mentors* sign-up. We recommend using a form platform linked to your institutional email to allow for better automation in step 4. We recommend a 4-week registration period. Prepare <i>registration form</i> for incoming students* sign-up. We recommend using a form platform linked to your institutional email to allow for better automation in step 4. We recommend a 4-week registration period. Publish the opportunity to participate in your institution's social media and via email newsletter. Ask your UGME leadership to share with first and second-year students.
3. Create a database for mentor-mentee matching	Import either directly using your preferred online forms options such as Microsoft Forms (Microsoft, Redmond, WA, U.S) or Google Forms (Google, Mountain View, California, U.S.) or manually (copy-paste) your mentee and mentor registration into either a Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets. Assign each resident to a Match ID. Assign up to 2 mentees per mentor according to their preference indicated on the initial registration form. Using <i>VLOOKUP</i> functions, create a compendium of the matched mentees and mentors with their emails.
4. Send matches via email	Once the matching has been completed, use an automated software to send individualized emails with instructors to all your mentees and mentors. In the Google interface, this can be done via Mail Merge options (Mountain View, California, U.S.). In the Microsoft interface, this can be automated via Outlook and Power Automate (Microsoft, Redmond, WA, U.S.).
5. Feedback collection & program evaluation	Send a post-match feedback survey to all <i>mentors</i> using your previously established automation protocol. Send a post-match feedback survey to all <i>mentees</i> using your previously established automation protocol. Thank all the stakeholders who have participated in the process including student associations and UGME leadership.