

How Ryerson University upholds its equity, diversity & inclusion values with structured mentorship programs

Ryerson
University

LOCATION

Toronto, Ontario

ALUMNI

200,000

TOTAL ENROLLMENT

46,000

PROGRAMS

120+ undergraduate
and graduate programs

A Framework for Powerful Student Mentorship

Since its inception as a technical institution in 1948, Ryerson University devotes itself to the advancement of career-focused education and research to address societal needs. Initially founded as a trade school following World War II, Ryerson is now home to a culturally diverse student population in the heart of one of the largest cities in North America. As such, Ryerson prioritizes equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) with an array of programs.

The Tri-Mentoring Program (TMP), hosted in the Office of Student Life and Learning Support, offers three types of mentorship opportunities: Peer-to-peer, Group, and Career. Mentorship is open to students of all identities as they seek support to navigate the school, their academic programs, and their community. Mentorship opportunities span the entire student lifecycle, as students enroll in, move through, and graduate from Ryerson.

“TMP was developed in response to a need that was identified by our counseling center 20 years ago—it was **born from a retention gap among specific student populations**,” said Rena Jennifer Barcelona, Manager at the Tri-Mentoring Program at Ryerson. “Racialized, marginalized students were making it to Ryerson, but not necessarily sticking around.”

Tri-Mentoring Program



Academic Success

PHASE 1 PEER MENTORING

First year students matched with upper year students in same program/faculty to help navigate Ryerson



Student Life

PHASE 2 GROUP MENTORING

Monthly sessions focused on topics such as identity, community and role models



Career Outcomes

PHASE 3 CAREER MENTORING

Students tap into current practices and trends in the workforce through the guidance of highly passionate and involved mentors

PHASE 1

Peer Mentoring

The Peer Mentoring Program matches first year students with upper year students in the same academic program (or with similar interests) in order to help incoming students successfully transition into Ryerson.

PHASE 2

Group Mentoring

Students also have the opportunity to get involved in Group Mentoring with various equity-seeking groups in order to connect and share their experiences. This includes groups for students who are 2SLGBTQ+, Black, Indigenous, Filipinx, Latinx, Lusophone or Portuguese speaking, Muslim women, mature students, students with disabilities, and women in STEM.

PHASE 3

Career Mentoring

The Career Mentoring Program guides 3rd year or above students in making a successful and informed transition after graduation into the workforce. Participants have the opportunity to be matched with an industry professional to receive guidance and progress towards their goals.

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Rena Jennifer Barcelona

Manager at the Tri-Mentoring Program, Ryerson University

Evolution

While Ryerson's Tri-Mentoring Program enjoyed success in its early days, their internal program management system struggled to keep up with demand. Like many institutions, scale was proving difficult to achieve and important benchmarks for success were getting lost in the shuffle. Their homegrown database "never gave us the ability to track engagement and other important metrics," recalled Jennifer. "As our program continued to grow, we needed to be able to measure how many students were coming through the door, how many times they were engaging, and how many times students and mentees were chatting with one another. Our process for gathering data was very manual."

Not only was data tracking difficult, the Ryerson team struggled to efficiently match a student with a suitable mentor. Their internal system was so limited that staff couldn't easily match students based on anything other than their academic program.

Maricruz Rodriguez, Mentoring Facilitator at the Tri-Mentoring Program, reflected on yet another aspect of the program that needed improvement—the mentor-mentee experience was fragmented. "People were working in silos. Mentors didn't have a way to consult with fellow mentors, and mentees didn't have a way to connect with their peers in the program." TMP staff saw a need for participants to forge relationships outside of just their single mentor-mentee pairing.

With those challenges in mind, Ryerson turned to PeopleGrove to improve the mentorship experience for both its program architects and end users.

Implementing Customized Matching

Using PeopleGrove formal Programs matching algorithm, Maricruz and her colleagues are now able to match their mentees using a wide range of factors. Criteria for matching includes everything from gender pronouns used, to international student status, to women in STEM, just to name a few. "With our peer-to-peer mentoring program, we make sure to look at how the student self-identifies," says Maricruz. "We want to consider the student as a whole, rather than just pairing them based on their academic studies. [PeopleGrove's] bulk matching allowed us to consider a variety of factors when pairing a student with a mentor, in a fraction of the time it used to take us."

The TMP is steeped in Ryerson's commitment to serving its diverse student population, and program facilitators leverage the PeopleGrove platform to take that commitment to a new level. "We're embedding EDI in all of our mentorship programs," said Maricruz. "One of the things students have told us is there's lack of representation in some of the professions that they'll be seeking after graduation. A woman in STEM wants to be matched with another woman in STEM, who also happens to be racialized. We consider all these factors when matching, because ultimately, we want students to feel comfortable. We want them to be confident they'll see representation in their chosen profession. We're intentional in our matching and in making our programming accessible, inclusive, and representing diverse viewpoints."

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Maricruz Rodriguez

Mentoring Facilitator at the Tri-Mentoring Program, Ryerson University

Building a Supportive Community

Now that all of the Tri-Mentoring Program activity is hosted online in the PeopleGrove platform, Ryerson is able to offer students a structured way to meet and engage with peers and career role models alike. “The PeopleGrove portal allows our program participants to have informal conversations with other people. It helps them feel like they’re a part of a community,” said Maricruz. “They can see other people who are part of the same Program and join the conversations happening on the discussion board. We can distribute resources, and communicate via bulk email. It’s a one-stop shop for everyone.”

Like so many other higher ed institutions, Ryerson continues to feel the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly the sense of isolation that many students have experienced. Students attend class remotely, and many found themselves moving back in with their families. Jennifer acknowledges that while meeting students’ need for connection and community has always been a cornerstone of their programs, it’s especially important now. “We’ve seen through our programming that students are yearning for a touchpoint with another student....they want to feel connected and like they’re part of the ‘Ramily’” (a reference to the school’s mascot, the Rams).

“We’re all human beings—social beings—and when we don’t have that one-to-one interaction with others, we can develop mental health challenges,” added Maricruz. “It can be really helpful to have a peer you can talk to, who’s been through the same academic program, or is a member of the same equity-seeking group as you.”

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Maricruz Rodriguez

Unprecedented Growth

Ahead of the 2020-2021 academic year, the Office of the Provost outlined a new initiative for the university: Get every new student to join Ryerson's online community (hosted in PeopleGrove). Despite the fact that student participation remains completely optional, their platform—which had seen a steady increase in usage since launching in 2018—witnessed explosive growth in usage and engagement from March through October of 2020. Thanks to marketing tactics such as bulk email, newsletters, and campus outreach, Ryerson now has more than 9,000 users in its Tri-Mentoring Program. "EDI programs are in our university's DNA, and they continue to thrive," said Jennifer.

A Look Back at 2020



90% ↑

Increase in Total Users



75% ↑

Increase in Messages Sent



68% ↑

Increase in Users
with a Connection



1000 ☆

Total User Reviews to
Date – Averaging 4.42
out of 5 Stars

Planning for What's Ahead

This year, Ryerson celebrates 20 years of formal mentorship programming for its students—a remarkable milestone that in some ways, feels like just the beginning of even more great things to come. Maricruz shared their ambition and vision for the future of Ryerson mentorship programs, saying that they aim to "promote and leverage the PeopleGrove platform so that we become the mentoring platform for the entire university, where we work with all faculties at Ryerson. As Ryerson continues to grow and open doors, more and more people will need the help and support of a mentorship program."

"As we catch wind of what other faculty are talking about, we try to reach out and say hi, and tell them about mentorship programs and our platform," says Jennifer. "The platform has made us look fresh, which helps."

The team agrees that regardless of what happens, they're light-years ahead of the program's early days, when staff conducted matching by examining printouts of mentees and mentors spread out across the office floor. "PeopleGrove helped us build up the Ryerson community, and show our progress with data," said Maricruz. "We depend on reliable data to be able to successfully report our high-impact practices to donors, and keep these programs in place at Ryerson for years to come."

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240 Stockton St, 4th Floor
San Francisco, California 94108

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