

Overview

Research surrounding peer education shows students can and do have significant positive impacts on the development and learning of their peers. As early as 1968, the Committee on the Student in Higher Education (Hazen Foundation) reported that the most effective teachers on a college campus were other students. Chickering (1969) echoed these findings with his report that peer groups were primary forces influencing college student development. Research over the past 40 years (Astin, 1993; Cuseo, 1991; Ender & Newton, 2000; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996) has continued to support the idea that peer educators are an effective resource in programs designed to enhance student learning. Astin (1993) concluded “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). In particular, he suggested “students’ values, beliefs, and aspirations tend to change in the direction of the dominant values, beliefs, and aspirations of the peer group,” including political orientation and social activation and attitudes toward cultural awareness and diversity (Astin, 1993, p. 398).

Given its potential for shaping student learning and development, peer education is growing in many areas across campus, including residence life, admissions, health education, and academic support. The use of peers in the recruitment and orientation processes is especially common, with students serving as telecounselors and/or tour guides for prospective students. This interaction with current students provides prospective students with an honest perspective of what it means to be a student at a given institution. Peer-to-peer engagement continues through the orientation process, where older students are specifically trained to assist with the various responsibilities associated with hosting and acclimating new students to campus. Usually taken in the first semester of enrollment, first-year seminars are an extension of the orientation process and provide a space for students to share their challenges and learn from their peers facing similar transitions (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Thus, it would seem reasonable to continue using peer educators throughout the

orientation process, including the first-year seminar. Yet, there is much room for growth in peer educator involvement in seminars. The 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (Padgett & Keup, 2011), for example, found that only 5% of institutions with first-year seminars used undergraduates as part of the instructional team. As such, this volume provides rationale for and methods to support a peer education component in the first-year seminar.

What Is a Peer Educator?

Peers are used to assist students in a variety of ways on campuses across the United States and internationally. To some extent, the definition of a peer educator is contingent on the role the student plays. In an effort to gauge the breadth of peer education on college and university campuses, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted a national survey of peer leadership in spring 2009 (Keup & Skipper, 2010). Respondents reported involvement in peer education programs hosted by athletics, academics, community service, counseling or mental health, judicial affairs, multicultural affairs, orientation, physical health and wellness, religious organizations, residence life, student government, student productions, and study abroad programs. Students were also likely to have held a range of peer educator roles. More than half reported holding between two and four positions throughout their college experience. Academic programs were the most commonly reported sponsors of peer leader experiences, with 58.6% of survey respondents indicating involvement in such a program. Titles for academic peer leader roles included first-year seminar leader, tutor, academic mentor, peer advisor, and teaching assistant (Keup & Skipper, 2010). Throughout the volume, we examine the responses of academic leaders to learn more about the peer educator experience.

This focus on academic support roles in some ways mirrors the definition presented by Newton and Ender (2010), who describe peer educators as “students who have been selected, trained, and designated by a campus authority to offer educational services to their peers. These services are intentionally designed to assist peers toward attainment of educational goals” (p. 6). Using Newton and Ender’s definition as a framework, this volume assumes peer educators play an instructional role (i.e., helping plan the syllabus and selected activities or assignments, facilitating classroom activities, providing course-related assistance to enrolled students) in the first-year seminar. While the emphasis

here is on the educative function, the terms *peer educator*, *peer leader*, and *peer mentor* will be used interchangeably throughout this volume since they reflect the range of terms colleges and universities have used to refer to an upper-division student who has been selected to help a full-time faculty or staff member plan and facilitate a first-year seminar. Many components of peer education have universal application, regardless of hosting department, title, or position description. Thus, educators from a range of departments, programs, and disciplines are likely to find the information presented in this volume useful and applicable to their programs.

Organization of the Volume

Chapter 1 serves as an overview of the various roles and responsibilities of the peer leader. Through the lens of the 4 Cs (i.e., companion, connector, coach, and champion), the expectations of peer leaders for the first-year seminar are presented. Program developers will be prompted to consider the expectations they have for peer leaders. Readers will also find practical methods for building the relationship between peer leaders and faculty, and peer leaders and first-year students.

In chapter 2, we look to the benefits of connecting peer education to the seminar. Because the focus in the literature tends to be on the benefits that accrue to the students served, we place special emphasis on the learning and development that occurs for students engaged in the peer leadership role. The chapter begins with an exploration of the educational context of the seminar and the potential impact on the peer leader's attitude toward learning, academic motivations, and behavior. We also explore a range of outcomes related to the peer leadership experience, including transferrable career skills, academic skills, and interpersonal skills. The chapter closes with a discussion of strategies for supporting peer educator development through assessment and training.

Chapter 3 provides practical and easy-to-apply processes and procedures for recruiting and selecting peer leaders. Readers will be prompted to reflect on the profile of an ideal peer educator given the parameters of their course and institution. Once the position description is refined, program directors can begin the process of recruiting and selecting peer educators. The chapter offers a framework for developing an application and describes strategies for marketing the position and selecting a cohort of peer leaders. Chapter 3 also takes up the ever-important question of how peer educators should be compensated.

Chapter 4 provides a rationale for the importance of training programs designed to build skills and confidence in peer leaders, including the development of learning outcomes and use of assessment results to shape training content and processes. Intentional training efforts help distinguish students as educators rather than mere influencers of their peers. The chapter will also provide strategies for developing successful ongoing development programs and examples of agendas for one-day and semester-long training experiences.

Chapter 5 identifies the various constituents who benefit from a peer education program (i.e., first-year learners, peer educators, and first-year seminar programs) and recommends assessment and evaluation efforts that measure the impact on each of these groups. Program evaluation should serve not as the end point for a peer leadership program but rather the cornerstone when developing or rejuvenating a program. Effective evaluation can help program personnel justify the resources that are dedicated to peer leadership programs and should also drive decisions about the future of the program, including defining peer roles and responsibilities, selecting staff, and developing training initiatives.

Additional Resources

Throughout the text are examples of materials used by various campuses. These samples are provided to assist readers in creating new programs and rejuvenating or sustaining existing programs. To help program leaders gain a better understanding of the theory and research undergirding peer education, a bibliography is included in appendix A. The resources listed touch on a broad range of peer education roles both within and beyond the first-year seminar. Program administrators may find it valuable to review the literature on different peer education roles to gain diverse perspectives on recruiting, training, developing, supporting, and evaluating peer educators. Other appendices in the volume offer models for building peer-instructor relationships, training peer leaders, and evaluating the peer leader experience.

This volume, written by professionals whose work is heavily focused on administering programs and supporting students who are helping other students, was developed to provide a blend of the theoretical basis for peer leadership within the first-year seminar and the practical applications of our work. Readers will find this publication useful whether considering the implementation of a new peer leadership program or seeking to improve an existing program.