

I This chapter provides a review of the literature on peer leadership with specific emphasis on the benefits of these programs to the students being served, to those who engage as peer leaders, and to the institution.

The Benefits of Peer Leader Programs: An Overview from the Literature

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The powerful influence of peers in human development has been widely documented, particularly within education. Throughout the history of higher education, peer interactions have been a component of scholarly explorations of student types (Astin 1993), campus cultures (Clark and Trow 1966; Feldman and Newcomb 1969), and even the cycle of student “generations” (Coomes and DeBard 2004; Strauss and Howe 1991). In addition, most student development theories attribute great significance to the process of maturation in interpersonal relationships and the impact of peers in this process (as summarized in Evans and others 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005; Skipper 2005). In fact, Astin (1993, 398) concludes that “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years.” Further, the impact of peers is not only a matter of degree but also an issue of scope. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 620–621) summarize the results of their review of findings from a host of researchers to deduce that “students’ interactions with their peers . . . have a strong influence on many aspects of change during college, [including] intellectual development and orientation; political, social, and religious values; academic and social self-concept; intellectual orientation; interpersonal skills; moral development; general maturity and personal development.”

In addition to the influence of peers on personal development, higher education theory and research also show that they play a large role in student success and can affect students’ transition to college (Brissette, Scheier, and Carver 2002; Crissman Ishler and Schreiber 2002; Feldman and Newcomb 1969), satisfaction (Astin 1993; Coffman and Gilligan 2002); learning and academic performance (Astin 1993; Donahue 2004; Kuh and others 2005; Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling 1996), and persistence

and retention (Braxton 2002; Cuseo 2010a; Thomas 2000; Tinto 1993). However, it is important to note that there is also evidence of negative peer influence, most notably with respect to relationships that focus on partying and socializing (Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling 1996).

Given the powerful and ubiquitous qualities of peer influence, higher education professionals have begun to harness this resource in student education, support, and service delivery by using undergraduate peers in leadership roles. Peer leaders are defined as “students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers [that] are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals” (Ender and Kay 2001, 1). Thus, peer leaders are chosen and empowered to exert a positive influence upon their peers and to do so in a way that is less intimidating and more accessible to fellow undergraduates than would the actions of professional staff and faculty members (Cuseo 1991; Hart 1995). The flexibility of the peer leader role gives it even greater potential as a resource in the undergraduate learning environment. For example, such students can “provide leadership in [a] variety of contexts—ranging from micro to macro,” including as an individual mentor, a group leader, head of an organization, or community leader (Cuseo 2010b, 4). In addition, the range of roles that a peer leader can play is wide and includes that of role model, personal support agent, resource and referral agent, academic success or learning coach, and college success or life coach (Cuseo 2010b).

In 2001, Ender and Kay conducted a meta-analysis of research on peer leadership that identified many important trends in the movement toward greater use of these programs in higher education. Peer leadership first emerged in residential life and orientation programs, and the literature shows that it remains prominent in those settings. However, students are also used in leadership positions in judicial affairs, student activities, placement centers, religious centers, counseling centers, advising programs, and crisis intervention. Cuseo (2010b) expanded this list of types of peer leader involvement to include student ambassadors, community service leaders, alumni mentors, health and wellness educators, and transfer support agents. Overall, peer leaders are least often used in an instructional capacity, although they are being used more frequently as tutors, in Supplemental Instruction, and as coinstructors in first-year seminars (Stone and Jacobs 2008; Tobolowsky and Associates 2008; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, and Associates 2005). Ender and Kay also found that “the number of institutions reporting the use of students in leadership roles has increased” and that “the number of campus settings...using campus helpers has increased substantially” (2001, 5).

This chapter serves as a foundation for the volume by providing a review of the literature on peer leadership. It identifies and discusses the many benefits of these programs to the students being served, to those who engage as peer leaders, and to the institutions themselves.

Benefits of Peer Leadership from the Student's Perspective

The core purpose of peer leadership programs is to provide services and support to fellow students. As such, the students who are recipients of these experiences are the primary beneficiaries of these programs. As the result of their interaction with more experienced and well-trained peers, students can develop a stronger sense of community, greater social and academic integration, and a rich network of resource and referral agents dedicated to their success.

Community. Many theories of college adjustment, student development, and retention identify the importance of community, social networks, and engagement to student learning, retention, and success (summarized in Evans and others 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005; Skipper 2005). For example, Bean (1985) recognized the importance of socialization into the college environment and suggested that if students find themselves looking outside the campus community for friends they will be less likely to fit in their new community. Further, Bean (1985) observed that as students' commitment to friends beyond the campus community increased, their institutional fit decreased, thereby impeding students' transition and success in the collegiate environment. On the most basic level, peer leaders represent formalized, informed, and experienced agents to help the socialization process of fellow college students (Russel and Skinkle 1990).

Peer leadership also provides an important opportunity for community development among specific populations of students, most notably those who are historically underrepresented or at risk in higher education. Examples of such programs include one-on-one mentoring, peer outreach and tutoring, and involvement in student organizations dedicated to women and minorities in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); African-American and Hispanic students on predominantly white campuses; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students; and provisionally admitted and first-generation students. In these situations, the definition of the "peer leader" is critical and should represent a person who shares a defining student characteristic; similar background; or common educational pathway, challenge, or experience. The successful experience of the slightly more advanced peer can represent "a model of the affiliation peer group," help the development of campus community, and contribute to the success of the student(s) whom the peer is mentoring or leading (Ender and Kay 2001, 4; Tinto 1987).

Guiffrida (2003) found that African-American students described the opportunity to interact with other African-American students as a source of comfort and that black student organizations provide "a safe outlet in which to stay connected to their cultures" (314). Further, Guiffrida (2006) found that cultural connections—such as those provided by peer interaction, leadership, and mentorship—have a positive impact on minority student persistence.

Similarly, in a study of African-American and Hispanic students' educational experience, Cole (2008, 591) found that, second only to interaction with faculty, "peer involvement has the most empirical support in predicting the academic performance and educational satisfaction of minority students." Finally, Davis (2010) summarizes studies of peers and their effect on the experiences of first-generation graduate and undergraduate students with similar conclusions: peers, particularly student role models, fulfill a unique need and provide a positive influence on the transition and success of first-generation college students. By formalizing these positions through peer mentorship and leadership, it is possible to capitalize upon the profound impact of peers on the success of historically underrepresented or marginalized students.

Although peer leaders have historically exerted their influence on building and sustaining community through the cocurriculum and within the social realms of college, students also have need of positive peer influence in academic domains. Donahue (2004) found that "students need peers who provide personal and intellectual support" (77) and that students view peers as academic mentors. Light (2001) also identified the value of student support groups and noted that many students' inability to succeed academically in their new college community is often linked to their peer group. "A large fraction of students who underperform can be characterized as having left a support group they had in high school—often a support group crucial to their success in high school—without finding a new, similar group at college" (Light 2001, 98). Further, even if students do reach out to peers for academic assistance in college, the quality of informal peer support can be unreliable. More specifically, Whitt and others (1999) found that students tend to go to their friends for assistance in academics but that these friends may not be very helpful or informed. As such, undergraduates, especially first-year students, need more opportunities to engage in educationally purposeful activities that will facilitate cognitive growth. The recent increase in peer leaders who serve in academic roles such as first-year seminar leaders, tutors, academic mentors, peer advising, and teaching assistants (Keup 2010) represents a response to this need. The associated positive impact of these peer interactions on student outcomes (Astin 1993; Cooper and Mueck 1990; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005) illustrates the potential of peer leadership as an important resource to meet the demand for student support, guidance, and community in academic activities.

Resource and Referral. In addition to serving as the foundation of community, students benefit from their interaction with peer leaders as resource and referral agents. In some instances, these two areas overlap, most notably when peer leaders provide a referral to students who are seeking a new peer group and community at an institution. The referral process is frequently more intuitive and proactive among peers because "students

are on the front lines and may have knowledge of other students having problems well before anyone else on campus” (Sharkin, Plageman, and Mangold 2003, 691). Because fellow students are usually the first to discover issues, demonstrated through behavior or attitude, it is fitting for them to be a source of referral. For example, one of the many responsibilities of resident assistants is “to recognize, evaluate, and refer students who might be experiencing emotional or psychological problems” (Sharkin, Plageman, and Mangold 2003, 691). Peer leaders serve most effectively in the capacity as referral agent when they are provided appropriate training to refer their peers to the available campus resources and when this training regime models effective resource referral practices.

Newton and Ender (2010) note that peer leaders are especially useful as resource and referral agents not just because of their relevant knowledge, specialized training, and general accessibility but also because of their proximity to the student experience. This close perspective “can provide an important and advantageous service by getting a student to sources of assistance before the crisis breaks” (249). A student’s crisis can negatively affect his or her progression through college, can lead to emotional or physical damage, or can result in a student’s decision to leave the institution. Peer leaders are able to give timely and effective referrals to students, which can result in a better experience overall. For instance, aside from community building and health and safety expectations, resident assistants can serve their students by being “in the best position to make an early assessment and intervention” for students who are at risk (Grosz 1990, 193). In another example, student leaders who conducted presentations on wellness behaviors to their peers were believed to be “more likely to affect changes in behavior” of their students through discussions and referral (Clason and Beck 2001, 59).

Referral opportunities are not limited to residential peer leaders or peer leaders promoting lifestyle change. Supplemental Instruction (SI) leaders, through their observations of student study groups, can refer students to additional resources on campus that may also contribute to their course success. Tutors can identify their students’ anxiety and make an informed referral to the counseling center. Peer leaders also have the opportunity to be a resource for students whose lifestyles or outlooks are unhealthy or dangerous.

Peer leaders can assist students in finding their “fit” on campus and can encourage them to take risks and experience something new. Students benefit from peer leaders’ referrals because they are able to discover new opportunities such as a student organization or an academic support service. Peers can also help students find new friends and support groups that reduce the stress of transition. As a result of peer support, students may be more confident to pursue their interests, discover community within the campus environment, and become more accountable for their actions, thereby leading to their institutional fit and retention (Tinto 1987).

Benefits of Peer Leadership from the Peer Leader's Perspective

Although the ultimate goal of peer leader programs is to serve and support fellow students, the power and potential of these programs also lie in their mutual benefit to those students serving in the leadership roles. A theoretical foundation for such positive gains can be found in Astin's Involvement Theory (1999), which includes postulates that can easily be identified within a peer leadership experience. For example, Astin (1999) posits that involvement is the "investment of physical and psychological energy" in the student experience that has "both quantitative and qualitative features" and spans a continuum (519). Further, the tenets of his theory state that "the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program" (519). With their dedication of training, time, and expertise in service to their fellow students, peer leaders would be considered highly invested and involved according to Astin's theory and poised to reap true educational and personal benefits, including greater awareness of the campus community, an enhanced sense of belonging, and meaningful interpersonal relationships within that institutional environment.

More recently, the Association of American Colleges and Universities has identified "integrative and applied learning" as one of four essential learning outcomes of college for the twenty-first century. This renewed focus on experiential learning provides another framework for the benefits of peer leadership programs for students serving in these roles. Whether it is through service as the elected leader of a student organization, an academic tutor, an orientation leader, or a mentor, these positions provide an excellent forum for the "application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems" (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2011, 7).

By fostering and applying skills and capabilities such as self-direction, leadership, oral communication, intercultural skills, civic engagement, teamwork, and critical thinking, peer leaders are honing abilities that have been identified as twenty-first century learning objectives for college and that are also highly desirable skills among employers (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2011). For example, peer mentors who serve first-year students report increased confidence in their ability to manage group dynamics, facilitate learning, and empathize with their students (Harmon 2006). Orientation leaders report growth in their ability to communicate effectively, lead groups, and work under pressure (Russel and Skinkle 1990). Finally, peer leadership experiences not only facilitate the development of multiple applied skills but also are a forum for the integration of these different skills. Such "integrative experiences often occur as learners address real-world problems that are unscripted and sufficiently broad to

require multiple areas of knowledge and multiple modes of inquiry” (Rhodes 2010, 50).

Data from the 2009 Peer Leadership Survey administered by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition offer empirical evidence of peer leaders’ perceived outcomes of the experience. Responses from nearly two thousand students in peer leader roles at 145 colleges and universities across the country provided insight into the experiences and outcomes of these positions. The majority of respondents held at least one peer leader position that was sponsored by an academic or academic support program or department (57 percent), orientation (32 percent), residence halls (30 percent), or community service units (25 percent). However, there was representation, albeit at a lower rate, of peer leaders from student government (12 percent), athletics (9 percent), religious organizations (8 percent), multicultural organizations (7 percent), counseling or mental health (7 percent), student productions (5 percent), physical health (3 percent), judicial affairs (3 percent), and study abroad programs (3 percent) (Keup 2010).

Overwhelmingly, these students were pleased with their involvement as peer leaders and 98 percent would recommend the experience to a fellow student. The survey also asked students to rate the outcomes of their leadership experience with respect to self-rated change in eight dimensions of the undergraduate experience. In response, a large proportion of students indicated that their responsibilities as a peer leader increased their knowledge of campus resources (91 percent); meaningful interactions with faculty, staff, and peers (83, 86, and 89 percent, respectively); feeling of belonging at the institution (81 percent) and desire to persist (71 percent); and the understanding of and interaction with diverse people (79 and 78 percent, respectively) (Keup 2010). These peer leaders also reported self-rated change in the development of six skill areas: interpersonal communication (94 percent), organization (81 percent), time management (80 percent), presenting (79 percent), written communication (61 percent), and academic (51 percent). Although self-rated gains certainly have their limitations, growth in critical thinking, problem solving, group processing, and interpersonal skills as a result of involvement in peer leadership experiences has been validated elsewhere in the research literature (Astin 1993; Bargh and Schul 1980; Ender and Newton 2010; Harmon 2006).

Given the high number of survey respondents engaged in academic peer leader roles, it is interesting to note that gains in academic skills were the lowest of all areas (52 percent). Data from an open-ended item on the survey, “Please describe how being a peer leader has affected your academic performance,” help explain the impact of peer leadership experiences on this area of outcomes. Coding of these data reveals many positive influences upon their academic experiences such as improved leadership skills, better time management skills, sharper career focus, the responsibility of being a

role model, knowledge and use of campus resources, confidence in talking to faculty, and greater connection with the institution. However, students also discussed the fact that peer leadership experiences can also have negative impacts including overinvolvement in activities to the detriment of their grades, too much time devoted to peer leadership responsibilities, and stress associated with the peer leader role. These qualitative data suggest that, much like other areas of student involvement, engagement in peer leadership does not have a direct linear relationship with student outcomes. Instead it appears that the relationship may be curvilinear, with students who are not involved or overinvolved suffering negative consequences.

Benefits of Peer Leadership from the Institution's Perspective

Given the extensive impact of peer leadership on the students who are the target of these programs as well as the ones who are providing the leadership, mentorship, and education, it would be sufficient to frame the discussion of institutional benefit as a mere aggregation of student-level effect. Although such outcomes are certainly noteworthy, there are other advantages of peer leadership programs at both the programmatic and institutional levels.

Peer leaders can offer budget relief to the programs and offices that need to provide more student assistance to meet the demands of a larger campus community or to offset the effects of budget cuts on staffing levels (Hamid and VanHook 2001). Student paraprofessionals provide a cost-efficient and yet high-quality alternative to better accommodate the large number of students who need services. With the involvement of peer leaders, student support and programming offices are better able to administer broad interventions and conduct large-scale events without hiring additional full-time professional staff members. This is especially apparent within residence life, orientation, and academic support, where student demands are great but resources are not available to hire professionals to conduct the responsibilities held by peer leaders. For instance, SUNY College of Technology at Delhi, which is a two-year institution, engages six to eleven peer leaders to reach almost one thousand students each year through presentations and activities that discuss healthy decision making and stress management (Jones, Barnes, and Tryon-Baker 1990). Presentations made by these peer leaders offer significant suggestions, strategies, and resources to their students in regard to topics such as alcohol, stress management, and interpersonal relationships. At Sweet Briar College, peer leaders are incorporated in the academic realm through undergraduate research programs. These peer leaders serve as a support to student colleagues in pursuit of their respective research projects. The observation is made that "using students as mentors also increases the number of students who can participate in a meaningful way in research and connects faculty with both advanced and beginning students" (Kuh and others 2005, 197).

Further, the network of peer leaders can be a valuable source of information dissemination to the campus community as well as feedback to the offices providing student services and support. For example, student service and programming offices can enhance their campus presence through the representation of current and former peer leaders on campus. Peer leaders' accessibility to students, strong communication skills, and potential as role models make them outstanding advocates for any programming office (Russel and Skinkle, 1990). Having a large staff of peer leaders extends offices' informal network via word of mouth and social media communication strategies, which aids promotion and recruitment efforts. These communication channels are not only inexpensive ways to announce accurate and timely information, but are also ones that undergraduates typically are more comfortable using. Finally, given their close involvement in programming and service delivery, peer leaders "often provide evaluative feedback . . . regarding students' perceptions of the services in question" (Newton and Ender 2010, 249). There is insight to be gained from the student perspective, particularly when it is filtered through the interpretive lens of a peer leader who is trained and more experienced. The information generated via these channels can be used to improve the work within the programming office.

These benefits for campus offices ultimately support the institution as a whole; however, there are additional benefits that peer leader programs present to the institution. For example, student ambassadors—peer leader positions often found in admissions offices, visitors' centers, or campus tours—have a significant role in prospective students' first impression of the campus and their subsequent decision to attend ("Don't Overlook" 2005). Student enrollment is a significant factor in the success of an institution, and peer leaders who serve in these roles are a helpful resource to support recruitment efforts.

In addition to helping students enter the institution, peer leaders also contribute to persistence and completion. Further, students who have served in a peer leadership role tend to feel a stronger connection to the institution and to persist at higher rates (Cuseo 1991).

Finally, through their service peer leaders develop significant skills and deeper knowledge of themselves and others (Astin 1993; Harmon 2006; Newton and Ender 2010; Whitman 1988). When peer leaders graduate, they are likely to be engaged alumni and to contribute to the institution through service and financial contributions. Because of their peer leadership experience, these students are often more prepared for the work environment because many of the skills required of entry-level employees mirror those gained from peer leadership. Engaged graduates and high postgraduate employment rates reflect well upon the reputation of the institution and are often a hallmark of successful recruitment and outreach strategies.

Conclusion

Students are influenced by their peers (Astin 1993) and peer leaders, through their service and connection to a campus program, have the potential to provide positive interactions with students at the institution and contribute to important developmental outcomes. Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996, 156) suggest “when peer interactions involve educational or intellectual activities or topics, the effects are almost always beneficial to students.” Currently, there are many opportunities for interactions among peers on campus including in residence halls, organizations and clubs, classroom discussions, and student support programs. Trained peer leaders are effective because they have the potential to be role models and encourage academic and social responsibility. Peer leadership has grown because it works: research has validated the major benefits provided to the students who receive the service, the peer leaders themselves, and the institution as a whole.

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