Peer educators play a variety of roles in the academic support of other students and have significant positive effects on student learners.

Providing Academic Support Through Peer Education

Jennifer A. Latino, Catherine M. Unite

The preceding chapters noted the many roles that students play in the orientation, acclimation, and education of their peers and summarized the research literature on the benefits of peer leadership to the student, the peer leader, and the institution. It is clear that peer influence in academic settings can have significant positive effects on student learners. McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, and Smith (1986, 63) concluded “the best answer to the question of what is the most effective method of teaching is that it depends on the goal, the student, the content, and the teachers . . . but the next best answer is students teaching other students.” Examples of peer support of academic endeavors, most notably tutoring, date back to the colonial period of U.S. higher education and persist today (Newton and Ender 2010; Powell, Plyler, Dickerson, and McClellan 1969). However, over the years, peer education has evolved from being a marginal endeavor in which academic support educators were employed to help “at-risk students” to a mainstream enterprise that improves teaching and learning experiences for all students (Vorster 1999).

Today, peer leadership in the academy has expanded to include roles in Supplemental Instruction, first-year seminars, academic advisement, academic coaching, and health education. In the 2009 Survey of Peer Leadership administered by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 59 percent of respondents reported that their peer leadership experience was sponsored by an academic campus-based organization (Keup and Mullins 2010). Further, research has demonstrated the positive impact of these expanding programs. For example, Cooper (1997) found that peer collaboration in academic settings had a “robust” positive effect on educational outcomes such as academic achievement, student
retention, and liking the subject matter, and Metz, Cuseo, and Thompson (forthcoming) summarize literature that shows the positive effect of peers on cognitive development.

This chapter focuses on the role of peer leaders and educators in first-year seminars and Supplemental Instruction programs. There are many other programs in which peers can play key roles. However, these two areas were selected because of their extensive research base and their significant impact on a large number of campuses. The authors present a brief history and rationale for these programs, provide evidence of success, and identify essential program components. Many of the structures used to support peer educators in these roles can be applied to other areas of peer education in colleges and universities.

**First-Year Seminars**

First-year seminars have been part of the higher education environment since the turn of the twentieth century. However, many of today’s first-year seminars have developed based on the first-year experience movement started at the University of South Carolina with the creation of the University 101 course. This course was introduced in 1972 as an intentional academic intervention in response to student riots that occurred in 1970 in protest of domestic and international social injustices. The course was developed with the goal of building “trust, understanding, and open lines of communication between students, faculty, staff, and administrators” as well as for the purposes of increasing retention, enhancing students’ understanding of the purposes of higher education, and facilitating a faculty development initiative to enhance undergraduate teaching and learning (University of South Carolina 2002, para. 3). Recognizing the value of a course with these outcomes, many other institutions began to offer credit-bearing seminars focused on the unique needs of first-year students. In the past thirty years, first-year seminars have been successful in providing a curricular space where students having similar experiences can interact with and learn from one another while guided by a caring faculty member.

First-year seminars are offered in a variety of formats that include extended orientation seminars, academic seminars, professional or discipline-based seminars, seminars focused on basic study skills, and those that draw from all approaches to create a hybrid approach (Barefoot 1992; Tobolowsky and Associates 2008). Regardless of seminar type, upper-level undergraduate students play a role as peer facilitators or co-instructors in a small proportion of these courses. Across the eight administrations of the National Survey of First-Year Seminars since 1988, between 5 and 10 percent of responding institutions have reported undergraduate students among the ranks of their instructional staff for the first-year seminar (Padgett and Keup 2012; Tobolowsky and Associates 2008).
At institutions where upper-level undergraduates serve as peer mentors or co-instructors in first-year seminars, they provide many benefits. First, they are a cost-efficient means of adding additional staff to the seminar. Most peer educators are compensated in some way such as a stipend, course credit, or incentives, but at a far lower rate than a full-time instructor. Because few experiences provide this type of opportunity to practice leadership skills while building meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, and students, enthusiastic peer educator candidates are abundant on most campuses.

In addition to being plentiful and affordable, peer educators provide measurable benefits to the students enrolled in the seminar. Most notably, first-year seminar peer educators can complement the role of the seminar instructor. For example, first-year seminars inform new students about the many services and opportunities available on campus. Peer educators bring a current and experienced perspective on campus resources and thus can offer relevant information to students. Further, first-year students often take their cues from experienced peers. Based upon the model of peer educators in first-year seminars, new students will frequently mimic positive academic behaviors of peers and gravitate toward programs or activities in which peer educators are involved.

Peers in the classroom also can be less intimidating than professors, and students will share concerns with a peer educator more willingly than with a faculty member. This interaction often occurs through communication vehicles such as e-mail, text, and social media (Cuseo 2010b). The approachability of peers can be especially important in first-year seminars because these classes often address sensitive issues such as homesickness, developing a sense of belonging in a new environment, and high-risk behaviors. Messages of transition and responsible behaviors can be better received from someone who has recently had the experience or is currently facing similar challenges. For example, at Appalachian State University, peer leaders for the freshman seminar “serve as a bridge between the instructor and students; assist in facilitating class discussions; communicate with students outside of class; provide feedback to the instructor; serve as a guide to campus resources; and serve as role models for academic, cocurricular, and leadership behaviors” (Griffin and Romm 2008, 2).

Beyond their roles as instructional, counseling, and referral agents, peer educators play an important role in shaping the reputation and culture of a first-year seminar program. Ender and Kay (2001) noted the significance of this role stating “the peer leader program and the students who work within it are . . . models of [the learning] outcomes, beliefs, and values [of the program]” (9). Knowing that peer educators can motivate students academically and encourage them toward engagement in cocurricular experiences (Astin 1993; Kuh 1996; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991), program administrators and faculty have the opportunity to place peers in significant positions within and outside the seminar environment. By serving as models of
appropriate behavior and exemplifying the spirit of the seminar, peer educators can help establish and sustain a seminar program.

Peer educators also reap many benefits themselves through participation in this type of leadership role. Results from the 2009 Survey of Peer Leadership administered by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition found that the most common theme among peer leaders was that the experiences were both personally motivating and intrinsically fulfilling (Keup and Mullins 2010). Further, as the result of their service, first-year seminar peer educators reported enhanced “sense of belonging” at their institution. They built positive relationships with faculty and staff, had a better understanding of institutional governance, and improved their academic skills and achievement. In addition, their personal development was affected, as peer leaders and educators reported feeling increased responsibility toward and awareness of professional and ethical issues (Hamid 2001; Keup and Mullins 2010; Latino 2008).

**Supplemental Instruction**

In addition to peer education in first-year seminars, students are also being engaged as “near peers” to assist their fellow students by facilitating independent learning in small discipline-based groups outside of class, called Supplemental Instruction.

Traditionally, academic support meant one-on-one tutoring or generic study skills courses, particularly focusing on assignment writing and exam preparation (Blunt 1997). However, this generic skills-based approach became increasingly expensive to deliver, insufficient to meet students’ changing needs, and perceived to be marginal and stigmatizing—“sending students to be fixed”—in the “clinical medical model” of student support (Clark-Unite 2007, 15). Supplemental Instruction (SI) was one of the first academic development strategies available for students at all ability levels as the program’s focus is on high-risk courses rather than high-risk students.

SI was developed in the late 1970s by Deanna Martin at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) in response to high dropout and failure rates in historically difficult courses. SI is an institution-wide approach to learning and retention that provides regularly scheduled, out-of-class, peer facilitated learning and support sessions that are connected to courses with higher-than-desirable rates of Ds, Fs, and withdrawal. SI is based upon principles of peer learning and student centeredness. It also emphasizes a facilitative approach in which students are encouraged and shown how to take responsibility for their own learning. SI has been validated by the U.S. Department of Education as an exemplary higher education academic support program, and a broad base of research literature documents that SI increases academic performance and retention (Congos and Schoeps 2003;

Fundamental features of SI programs are that they are voluntary, embedded within the context of a particular high-risk course, and, most critical to a discussion of peer education, student driven (Clark and Koch 1997). The SI facilitators are fellow students who have successfully completed the respective course, received intensive training in nondirective leadership of small groups, and are equipped to lead their peers toward higher levels of understanding (Vygotsky quoted in Tudge 1990). Facilitators are required to attend all course lectures and then lead small-group instructional sessions that integrate content with learning skills and study strategies. The program is most often offered to students in selected first-year “gateway” courses and in some cases at sophomore and postgraduate levels.

Wilcox (1993) suggests several key reasons that SI has been chosen as a peer educational model and describes the benefits it provides to students who take advantage of the program. First, the structure of SI offers students the chance to develop transferable study strategies and engage in proactive participation thereby gathering, retaining, and transferring knowledge at higher levels (Dale 1969). Further, SI creates a nonthreatening learning environment because it is facilitated by peers. Finally, the peer-to-peer aspect of SI provides a forum to make personal connections and create a sense of community.

Peer education through SI programs also provides numerous benefits to the students serving as facilitators, most notably academic skills enhancement, professional development, and supervisory support that are provided via rigorous SI leader training. Smuts (1996) identifies some of the other benefits for students who teach their peers. Peer educators develop a sense of personal adequacy as well as communication and relationship building skills. Further, they often find a meaningful use of the subject matter in their own studies. In some cases, the acquisition and application of this material helps their own grades improve. Similarly, SI leaders reinforce their own knowledge of fundamentals, and the review of materials assists them with their performance on professional school entrance exams. In addition, the authority position and status of “instructor” helps them develop citizenship skills and skills for the workplace.

Other Peer Education Practices in the Academic Domain

Supplemental Instruction and first-year seminars are significant and common arenas for peer education; however, there are other opportunities for peer-to-peer learning in the academic domain of the college experience. Some of these experiences, like SI and first-year seminars, are long term, with the relationship between peer educator and student continuing for a
full semester or more. Other opportunities—such as tutoring, advising, coaching, and providing information about health—are much shorter, lasting only one or a few class sessions.

**Tutors.** Tutoring has a long history in postsecondary education beginning in the early years of the colonial college. Beginning in the late 1960s, the widening of access and admission for college students, many of whom were underprepared, marked a significant change in the needs of students for academic assistance and institutions’ mechanisms for delivering such services (Maxwell 2001). Currently, most colleges and universities offer peer tutoring for first-year and sophomore students through centralized learning centers, whereas some departments, such as languages and mathematics, still retain and oversee their own tutoring programs. The continuum of peer tutoring is broad and includes a diverse range of models. Peer tutors have played, and continue to play, an essential role in educating U.S. college students (Marsh 2001), particularly with respect to listening and questioning skills, critical thinking, learning styles and strategies, and knowledge of campus resources (Macdonald 1994).

Peer tutoring is considered cost effective because both students and tutors gain from the experience, and, in fact, some theorists argue that peer tutors gain even more than their tutees (Maxwell 1979; Treuer 1995; Upcraft, Gardner, and Associates 1989). Maxwell (2001) suggests that peer tutors strengthen their own academic performance, increase their confidence, and improve their communication skills. Maxwell (2001) describes tutoring as “socialization for college teaching.” Metcalf (1997) supports this notion, and states that tutors discover their motivation for learning in finding meaningful use and application of their ideas by tutoring others.

As with all peer education and leadership experiences, training and ongoing supervision of tutors are essential for successful peer tutoring programs. In a national study of developmental education, those programs that included training for tutors graduated large numbers of developmental students, whereas those programs that lacked training opportunities produced fewer graduates (Boylan, Bonham, and Bliss 1994; Boylan, Bonham, Bliss, and Saxon 1995). Formalized tutor training programs and assessments are currently available through the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) and the National Association of Developmental Education (Clark-Thayer 1995).

**Peer Advisors.** Advising is one of the most influential factors affecting students’ perception of their college experience (Kuh and others 2005). Advisement responsibilities typically fall either to faculty or staff members at a college or university. However, large advising loads often make it difficult for advisors to build strong relationships with all of their advisees. Students desire regular contact with an advisor and note a higher value on academic counseling relative to other student services (Wyckoff 1999). In addition, it is important for new students to recognize the importance of
an ongoing advising relationship early in their academic career (Cuseo, n.d.; Schreiner 2009). For these reasons, institutions are recognizing peers as valuable supplements to the advising process. Peer advising is not meant to replace faculty advising; however, when trained properly, peers can provide an effective complement to a faculty advising system (Clason and Beck 2001).

Formal peer advising programs are rapidly growing enhancements to traditional academic advising programs. The National Academic Advising Association (2004) found that over 65 percent of respondents to an ACT survey reported that their institution used peers in the advisement process. Further, over 36 percent of the institutions without formal peer advising programs were considering implementing such a program (Koring 2005). Common components of a peer advising program include peer advisor-advisee partners within the same major, regular communication between peer advisors and faculty partners, and ways to forge additional connections to advisees such as living in same residence hall and serving as a peer leader in orientation or the first-year seminar.

Peer advisement can be effective on campuses of all types and sizes, although it is often used at large institutions. For instance, at the University of Washington, Undergraduate Academic Affairs Peer Advisors provide advisement services within the residence halls. Students who were unable to meet with their departmental advisor or who want to receive some supplemental advisement can meet with a peer advisor. Peer advisors are trained to assist with course scheduling, verifying that general education requirements have been satisfied, exploring major options, and preparing for graduate school. In another example, the University of Michigan uses peer advisors within majors to assist with a variety of advisement issues, serve as academic role models, and help students with course registration. These peers work alongside departmental advisors during orientation to help students with course selection and adjustment issues. For example, a psychology peer advisor would “help students analyze and assess their progress in fulfilling their Psychology course requirements, . . . help students declare Psychology as a major, discuss graduate school and career options, and go over research opportunities and options for independent study in the department” (University of Michigan, n.d., para 2).

Academic Coaches. The practice of “coaching” peers has been used broadly in business as a means of training or providing support for new employees. This concept is growing in higher education as many of the components are applicable to student transitions. As a coach, the peer educator plays a less authoritative role than other academic peer educators. Rather, he or she is seen as a mentor whom students can trust. Much like in a peer mentoring role, academic coaches model appropriate behavior for their peers. Cuseo (2010a) defined the academic success or learning coach as one who “empower[s] students for academic success by supplying or modeling learning strategies” (p. 5).
The University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) hosts a peer coaching program that was first implemented in 2005 in an effort to increase retention. Peer coaches have three to five first-year students in the coaching relationship. Coaches and students meet throughout the semester to set and review the progress on academic goals and develop essential academic success skills. UMKC presents the roles of peer coaches as a first point of contact for students and a resource of academic and social information.

**Health Educators.** One growing area of peer education is in student health. There is sufficient evidence that students’ decisions are influenced by the behaviors and beliefs of their peers (Astin 1993; Cooper 1997; Hamid 2001; Newton and Ender 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). By effectively using that influence, peer educators can promote positive behaviors with respect to students’ decisions on health and wellness issues. Wawrzynski (n.d.) explains that “peer education programs continue to grow exponentially because college-age students often feel more comfortable talking with peers when it comes to sensitive issues such as sexuality and drug use” (para. 5).

There are several examples of peer health education in higher education. For instance, the Boosting Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students (BACCHUS) network is a nonprofit organization committed to student health education and initiatives to promote safe lifestyles and address high-risk behaviors such as alcohol abuse, tobacco use, illegal drug use, and unhealthy sexual practices. These behaviors are prevalent among college-age students and therefore are often incorporated into the undergraduate curriculum and cocurriculum.

The University of South Carolina designates some students as peer health educators. These students provide instruction and education on a variety of health topics including body image, tobacco cessation, stress management, and nutrition. They visit a variety of courses at the invitation of faculty and engage students in learning about the designated topic(s). Peer health educators are prepared for their role through a three-credit course offered through the university’s School of Public Health.

**Considerations for Supporting a Successful Peer Education Program**

Creating or sustaining a peer education component as part of a first-year seminar, Supplemental Instruction, or any other academic support program requires significant resources. The most critical components of a peer education program are training and development. This volume contains a chapter that addresses the recruiting, training, and management of peer educators, but the following issues are specific to those who serve in the academic domain.

**Recruitment.** The selection of peer educators who are best suited for an instructional or academic support role requires intentional, directed
PROVIDING ACADEMIC SUPPORT THROUGH PEER EDUCATION

recruitment efforts. Criteria for these peer educators are often more ambitious than for other peer leadership roles. Common criteria for academic peer educators include a high grade point average, upper-class status, and faculty nomination. Targeting students who meet these particular expectations requires significant time and effort and can be best achieved through detailed marketing, recruitment, and selection plans (Latino and Ashcraft 2012).

Training and Development. Intentional and ongoing training is perhaps the most important aspect of a successful peer education program. Program administrators should devote as much time to the training of peer educators as they do to faculty development (Latino and Ashcraft 2012). Training for peer educators who support academic functions should be intentionally designed to adequately prepare students for their responsibilities in and around the classroom and to help them develop the necessary helping skills to mentor and support students.

Challenging Responsibilities. Peer educators who are appropriately selected and prepared for their role will likely be most satisfied if they are provided with challenging responsibilities. These may include active involvement in course planning and facilitation, the opportunity to provide feedback and mentoring to learners, participation in program development, and meaningful interaction with course instructors. The peer education role goes beyond that of a teaching assistant. Many academic peer educators provide classroom support and they also serve as a liaison to the instructor, mentor to the students, and representative of successful student behaviors.

Recognition and Compensation. Peer educators should feel recognized and should be compensated for their efforts. Rewards can come in many forms, many of which require minimal financial resources. One common method of compensating students who work in instructional and academic support roles is course credit. Peer educators may receive course credit for time spent in service in the first-year seminar, time spent in training and development, and time dedicated to helping students outside of class. Other methods of compensation include scholarship funds, textbook stipends, leadership certificates, and incentives such as priority registration.

Reflection. As with any leadership experience, the opportunity for peer educators to reflect on the impact of their service is important. Peer educators often come to their role for selfless reasons: the desire to help others, give back to the institution, and share their own talents and lessons learned with their peers. However, peer educators can also experience significant learning and growth. It is important to help peers make sense of this learning by prompting them to consider their impact on others and providing opportunities for them to write and speak about the personal impact of the experience.

Evaluation and Assessment. The final program component that is often given too little attention is the evaluation of the work of peer educators. Evaluation efforts must be diverse and multifaceted to capture the many aspects of the peer-to-peer learning experience. Latino and Ashcraft (2012)
recommend that program administrators look for evidence of success in three areas. The first is the impact of the peer educator on the students served. The second represents the impact of the peer education experience on the peer educators themselves. The third is the impact that the peer education program has on the overall success of the academic program.

Conclusion

The implementation and enhancement of programs that place peers in leadership roles in the academic domain are on the rise (Keup and Mullins 2010). These peer educator positions include in-class instruction, out-of-class academic service delivery, and supplemental support through academic mentoring and advising. Such peer influence can lead to positive outcomes for the students receiving the support as well as the peers performing the role.

References

PROVIDING ACADEMIC SUPPORT THROUGH PEER EDUCATION


Providing Academic Support Through Peer Education


Jennifer A. Latino is the director of first-year experience at Campbell University and the instructor/facilitator for several development programs on peer leadership offered through the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

Catherine M. Unite is the director of University College Learning Center at the University of Texas at Arlington.