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The Role of Peer Leaders in an Honors Freshman Experience Course

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe the role peer leaders play in Introduction to Honors Professional Development, a 1-credit, graded, honors course for first-year students at the University of Florida. Peer leaders are experienced undergraduate students who co-instruct the course along with an honors advisor. While the specific roles of peer leaders may vary from section to section, in general all peer leaders are expected to be advisors, resources, and role models to first-year students.

PEER LEADERS AND OTHER PARAPROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Peer leaders are a part of a growing number of student positions falling under the umbrella category of peer educators. Other similar positions may include paraprofessional staff, peer mentors, tutors, peer counselors, residence hall assistants, and orientation leaders. Generally these educators have specialized, although limited, training to assist with student transition issues such as satisfaction, adjustment, and goal setting (Ender & Newton, 2000). Additionally, peer educators are cost-effective to the institution in that they are supplementing the work of professional staff in major service and department areas (Rode & Kubic, 2002; Ender & Newton, 2000). The goals of peer mentoring programs tend to focus on developing relationships with such students who are adjusting to college although the hope is to maintain those relationships throughout the college experience (Jeske & Rode, 1999).

Rode and Kubic (2002) found in their study of peer instructors at their own institution that these educators were able to assist students in achieving academic and personal success. Mentees have the potential to grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally through their involvement with their peer mentors (Jeske & Rode, 1999). Peer mentors can serve as the liaison in the classroom between the students and their faculty instructor (Rode & Kubic, 2002). Astin (1993) found that every aspect of undergraduate students' development in college that he studied was somehow affected by their peer group. In fact, "the

student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398).

Serving as a peer educator has shown positive benefits for the educator as well. Typical peer mentor tasks may include recording attendance, sharing their experiences, presenting class topics, and discussing current events with students (Rode & Kubic, 2002). Astin (1993) found that student-faculty interaction, including assisting a faculty member with a class, created positive gains in student satisfaction such as satisfaction with faculty, quality of instruction, support services, and the college experience as a whole. Harmon (2006) found that the peer mentors he studied were learning skills such as time management, communication, group dynamics, and group planning, which not only helped them become better mentors but also helped them with their own academic and career goals.

Although research has shown that mentor programs and peer support in general are some of the most effective ways of retaining students (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1987), there is limited research on the actual experiences and outcomes of peer educators on college campuses. The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition serves as the clearinghouse for much of the research and activity on first-year experience programs. In their summary of the 2006 National Survey on First-Year Seminars (National Survey, n.d.), they found that almost 85% of the institutions responding to the survey (n=968) offered some type of first-year seminar for their students. Almost 8% of the institutions responding noted that undergraduate students taught those seminars. It is not clear if institutions include undergraduate students as co-instructors or as sole instructors.

HONORS PROGRAM AND COURSE BACKGROUND

The University of Florida Honors Program focuses on academic programs developed primarily for freshmen and sophomores. Out of an overall freshman class of more than 6700 students, the honors program typically enrolls 725–750 new students through traditional admissions procedures and 70–80 students through the spring-semester lateral admissions process. The program features specialized academic advising, honors housing, honors courses, and academic opportunities such as study abroad, internships, and research. The program staff is composed of one interim director, two assistant directors/academic advisors, an office manager, a program assistant, and a database administrator.

The Introduction to Honors Professional Development course (originally called Honors Freshman Experience) first began in the fall of 2004 as a specialized offering of the university's freshman experience course. Offered during the fall and spring semesters, more than 500 first-year students have completed the course since it was first offered. I was charged with revamping the curriculum upon my hire in 2005 to align it more closely with the needs and interests of honors students. Peer leaders for the course were selected and matched with honors advisors by the Office of New Student Programs, which coordinated the overall freshman experience course.

In 2007 the honors program formally separated its course from the university's program and began offering it under the title "Introduction to Honors Professional Development." Since that time students interested in serving as peer leaders have approached honors advisors directly to inquire about position openings. Each individual instructor is now responsible for selecting his or her own peer leader. Most peer leaders have held other leadership positions within the honors program, serving as either summer orientation leaders or Honors Ambassadors, a student organization tasked with developing programs for prospective students and families. Other peer leaders have been former students from the class. Instructors look for peer leaders whom they know personally, with whom they share a similar teaching philosophy, and who have taken advantage of many of the opportunities they will be discussing in class. The peer leaders may receive independent study credit for their service as they are not paid for their position. Most peer leaders have opted not to receive credit and simply to assist with the class as a leadership opportunity.

As one of the assistant directors, I currently coordinate all sections of the course. I design the curriculum and offer assistance to any instructors or peer leaders who need help implementing components of the course. The administrative time needed to coordinate the course varies although the bulk of work takes place just before and during the fall semester when the majority of sections are offered. The instructors spend at minimum one hour per week on the course—the actual instructional time. They may also spend time each week meeting with their peer leader, meeting individually with students in the course, and planning upcoming class sessions.

A former peer leader and I currently are developing an assessment plan for the course. We have recruited focus groups of students who have taken the course and students who have not taken the course, and we have distributed an online survey. The assessment is at the very early stages, but we hope to have completed our initial review by the end of the spring 2009 semester.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND REQUIREMENTS

In Introduction to Honors Professional Development, students work closely with an honors advisor and a current honors student leader (peer leader) to develop an action plan for university involvement. Students learn how to find and apply for scholarships and awards, internships, study abroad programs, research opportunities, and leadership and service projects. Students get to know the inner-workers of the university and discover available resources and opportunities, all while working with other highly motivated honors students. Finally, they learn how to display the skills and experiences gained through these activities. Approximately six sections of the course are offered in the fall, and one section is offered in the spring each year. Sections are capped at 25 students, and the six sections offered during the fall of 2008 ranged from 12 to 25 students.

The course objectives include helping students become familiar with opportunities for academic involvement such as undergraduate research, internships, and international experiences. Students also begin applying the knowledge gained in the course and to developing skills in writing, oral presentation, and teamwork. They learn practical skills in writing resumés, interviewing effectively, understanding academic documents such as degree audits, and working with faculty. Lastly they build a positive mentoring and working relationship with their honors advisor and peer leader.

Course highlights include panels on undergraduate research, study abroad, and internships. Honors students who have participated in these opportunities are invited to participate on the panels to share the nuts and bolts of their experiences and what they gained from them. Students also participate in three workshops on resumés, mock interviews, and academic advising prior to course registration for the following semester. Finally, each section of the course selects a nonfiction book to discuss throughout the semester. Previous book selections include *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Nathan, 2006), *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* (Suskind, 1999), and *The Last Lecture* (Pausch & Zaslow, 2008).

Students are graded on a variety of projects and reflection papers. They respond to ten online discussion topics throughout the semester and participate in a class community service project. They submit an updated resumé after the resumé workshop, and they write a reflection paper following the mock interview workshop and an interview with one of their faculty members. They are required to make separate appointments with their honors advisor and peer leader. They attend two university events outside of class and write review papers, and they partner with a classmate to review a local attraction or restaurant, then presenting the review to the class. At the conclusion of the course, they submit their action plan for involvement based on the panels, activities, and meetings in which they have participated throughout the semester.

PEER LEADER ROLE IN THE COURSE

As mentioned earlier, each honors advisor is responsible for selecting his or her peer leader. Half of the peer leaders who taught during the fall 2008 semester took the course themselves as freshmen. The other half were returning peer leaders who opted to continue teaching the course for the second or third time with their honors advisor. Four of these peer leaders were juniors, and the other two were seniors. While the general curriculum for Introduction to Honors Professional Development is provided by the course designer, each teaching team of honors advisor and peer leader can customize the syllabus to fit their strengths and interests. Many teaching teams opt to meet weekly to plan the following week's session while other teaching teams meet for an extended time at the beginning of the semester and then touch base periodically throughout the semester.

The specific roles of the peer leaders are outlined at the beginning the semester as the teaching teams agree on how they will split the course duties. In many sections the peer leader is responsible for coordinating the online discussion forum for the students. The peer leaders develop and post the discussion topics and then track the responses for the final grade. They also coordinate the three panels on undergraduate research, study abroad, and internships. They are responsible for finding the appropriate panelists and then facilitating the actual panels in class. Peer leaders meet with each student in class, either individually or in small groups, so they can get to know each other better, relate to their students' transition questions, and suggest opportunities for involvement. Honors advisors generally reserve at least one class session as an open topic for the peer leaders to develop on their own with guidance from the advisor.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT OF PEER LEADERS

At the conclusion of the semester, students complete the standard university evaluation of the instructor and course. The course designer developed a separate peer leader evaluation given at the same time as the standard evaluation. A peer leader evaluation has twice been distributed to students, but the results have been compiled in aggregate only once. The peer leader evaluation consisted of five Likert-scale questions and four open-ended questions. The Likert-scale questions asked students to rate the following descriptions of their peer leaders on a scale of excellent, above average, average, below average, poor, or not applicable. The descriptions included:

- Facilitation of learning
- Availability to assist students in or out of class
- Enthusiasm of subject
- Knowledge of campus resources
- Ability to serve as an academic and social role model

The four open-ended questions included:

- What personal qualities or teaching skills of your peer leader contributed to the success of this course?
- What personal qualities or teaching skills of your peer leader hindered the success of this course?
- What impact did your peer leader have on your first semester at UF?
- Additional comments

The results of the Likert-scale questions are outlined in Table 1. Ninety-six students completed the evaluation. At least two thirds found that their peer leaders performed at an excellent level in each of the five areas. At least 95% found that their peer leaders performed at an above average level or higher in each of the five areas.

Table 1: Summary of Likert-Scale Answers

Question	Excel	Above	Aver	Below	Poor	N/A
Facilitation of learning	72%	26%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Availability to assist students	71%	26%	4%	0%	0%	0%
Enthusiasm for subject	82%	13%	5%	0%	0%	0%
Knowledge of campus resources	85%	14%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Ability to serve as a role model	75%	19%	5%	0%	0%	1%

The answers to the open-ended questions were categorized based on themes. For the first question—"What personal qualities or teaching skills of your peer leader contributed to the success of this course?"—the students logged 37 comments about their peer leaders being friendly, personable, and nice. Students noted 34 times that their peer leaders displayed enthusiasm and 33 times that the leaders' knowledge about resources contributed to the success of the course. Twenty-eight comments focused on the peer leaders' availability, approachability, and helpfulness while 19 comments focused on the peer leaders' experiences with campus involvement. There were 94 total comments listed for the first question although some comments contained multiple themes.

The question "What personal qualities or teaching skills of your peer leader hindered the success of this course?" elicited only seven responses out of the 96 evaluations. Most evaluations listed "none" or left this question blank. Four of the comments related to course facilitation, such as an activity not going as planned or grading taking longer than the student desired. The other three comments related to the peer leaders' personalities; one student found her peer leader "too peppy, but only occasionally," while another student found his peer leader "kind of quiet."

Students listed 76 comments in response to the question "What impact did your peer leader have on your first semester at UF?" Only five students said that their peer leader did not have a significant impact on their first semester. Most of the comments focused on the general guidance and assistance provided to the students as well as the specific advice about getting involved on campus. The following statements are highlights of the responses about the peer leader impact:

- He showed me that balancing activities is difficult, but entirely possible.
- She shared very relevant information on research. She also introduced me to an after-school mentoring organization for elementary school kids.
- He showed me how good it is to be involved and how much fun it can be. He reassured me that I could balance activities and school work.
- His super-involvement is encouraging, and he is a wonderful role model of a well-rounded student.
- He really inspired me to get involved by serving as a role model and also by encouraging me as well as my peers to keep applying for things. He was definitely a valuable connection to make.

- She made me aware of numerous opportunities that I would not have discovered on my own.
- He definitely helped me become more familiarized with the school and the abundance of resources and opportunities I may not have known about without his help and the help of this class.
- She helped me to realize that it is a huge, hard transition, but give it time and everything gets a whole lot better.

These comments demonstrate the variety of roles that peer leaders played in influencing the lives of first-year students in their courses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Although the peer leader roles detailed above may not be appropriate to every honors program or college, several may be adapted to multiple contexts. Institutions with a freshman experience course for honors freshmen should consider roles for upper-division students in such courses. Whether they serve as teaching assistants, co-instructors, guest speakers, or panelists, peer leaders provide a wonderful opportunity to share first-hand accounts coupled with realistic advice, tips, and tricks about involvement in a variety of arenas. At least in our situation, our upper-division students served as credible resources about research, study abroad, and internships because they actually had participated in these activities. The honors advisors then could supplement the panelists' experiences with information about related university programs and resources if the students wanted more information.

In programs with a freshman experience for honors students, the peer leaders should have an active role in planning and implementing the course, as allowed by university policy. In many freshman experience courses, peer leaders are relegated to the "fun activities," managing icebreakers and out-of-class activities but not much else; when they take a more substantial role in the course, students see them as a more credible resource, and the peer leaders benefit from increased responsibility.

In programs without a freshman experience course, student panels can be offered as part of a workshop series. Again, the key is to find upper-division students who have participated in relevant activities and can share their experiences and advice, supplemented by information provided by advisors or administrators. These workshops can be offered in an honors residence hall or as part of a brown-bag lunch series. Freshman mentoring programs are another possibility; they can provide first-year students with access to successful upper-division students.

CONCLUSION

The peer leader component of our Introduction to Honors Professional Development course has been very successful as evidenced by our peer leader evaluations. Peer leaders and other upper-division students who serve

as panelists play a key role in our course. They have substantial responsibilities in implementing our course, and students rely on their advice and guidance about getting involved during their first semester in college. We plan to continue offering this leadership opportunity to students as there are numerous benefits to the program, the advisor serving as instructor, the students taking the course, and the peer leaders themselves.

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