

Appalachian State University Peer Leaders and Freshman Seminar

The Institution and Its Students

Appalachian State University, located in Boone, North Carolina, is a public, comprehensive university that enrolls approximately 15,000 students. Ninety percent of Appalachian students are full-time undergraduates with 50% of students living on campus or nearby. Eighty percent are under the age of 22. Nearly 94% of the students are White with 6.5% representing minorities, including 3.5% African American, 1.2% Asian American, 1.2% Hispanic, 0.4% Native American, and 0.2% nonresident alien. Additionally, Appalachian students are 47.3% male and 52.7% female.

Description of the Initiative

Peer leaders are successful upperclass students who have been assisting instructors teaching the Freshman Seminar (US 1150) at Appalachian since 1995. Freshman Seminar is a three-credit, graded extended orientation course that enrolls approximately 60% of the first-year class throughout the academic year. It is taught by faculty members (full-time and adjunct), student development professionals, and administrative personnel. The course aims to acquaint students with the opportunities and demands of higher education; support them in their transition to the University; help foster cognitive and psychosocial development; broaden horizons; and assist in developing relationships with faculty, staff, and peers.

Peer leaders are selected based on their high level of involvement in campus life and outstanding academic achievements. Prospective peer leaders complete an application and submit two letters of reference. Students are then selected for an interview based on the quality of the application materials, and the selection committee makes a final decision following the interview.

Once hired, peer leaders attend a two-day orientation during the spring semester. The goals of this training include (a) developing an understanding of the purpose, goals, and successes of Freshman Seminar; (b) developing a deeper understanding of the role of the peer leader; (c) developing tools and ideas for specific activities; and (d) exploring ways to deal with challenges associated with the role. In addition to attending Freshman Seminar, first-time peer leaders enroll in Peer Leader Seminar (HPC 3150) during the fall semester. Peer Leader Seminar is a three-credit, graded elective course designed to (a) help peer leaders continue to explore and develop the role of the peer leader; (b) strengthen communication, helping, and leadership skills; (c) build community with other peer leaders; (d) develop tools and ideas for specific course activities and discussions; and (e) explore ways to deal with challenges associated with the role. The class meets seven times over the course of the semester. Specific class topics include leading community building activities, facilitating alcohol discussions with first-year students, making effective presentations, and leading group discussions. The course also focuses on helping and leadership skills.

Peer leaders attend all sessions of their assigned Freshman Seminar class and assist in the planning and implementation of the course content. They 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.

The assistant director of Freshman Seminar supervises the peer leaders through e-mail contact and teaching peer leader seminar; however, the Freshman Seminar instructor is responsible for evaluating the peer leader's performance. The Freshman Seminar instructor meets with the peer leader to provide feedback following a mid-term and end-of-course evaluation. The end-of-course evaluation is used to assign 30% of the peer leader's grade for peer leader seminar.

During the fall 2006 semester, Appalachian offered 69 sections of Freshman Seminar. Sixty-two of those sections had a peer leader, 49 of which were first-time peer leaders.

Research Design

Peer Leader Seminar is assessed at the end of every semester using a Likert-scale questionnaire designed by the authors (see Appendix A). This study used the results of the fall 2006 questionnaire ($N = 46$) to analyze whether or not first-time peer leaders were satisfied with their role in Freshman Seminar and what peer leaders learned as a result of the experience. In addition, these results were further analyzed to determine whether a peer leader's first-year experience in Freshman Seminar or a prior relationship with their Freshman Seminar instructor impacted their satisfaction or gains in learning.

Descriptive statistics were used to answer the first part of the research question. *T*-tests were run to analyze the data based on enrollment in Freshman Seminar and the relationship with the instructor.

Findings

Peer leaders reported being very satisfied with their experience. More than 87% of the peer leaders agreed or strongly agreed that they found the experience worthwhile and felt their advice and feedback were valued by both the Freshman Seminar instructor and students (Table 1). Additionally, peer leaders reported gains in the areas of interpersonal communication skills, presentation and facilitation skills, helping skills, and leadership skills (Table 2).

Table 1
Peer Leader Satisfaction With Their Experience (N = 46)

	Mean	SD	% agreed or strongly agreed
The experience was worthwhile.	4.67	.56	95.7
I would make the decision to be a PL again.	4.65	.82	93.5
My advice and feedback were valued in planning for the class.	4.52	.86	87.0
I believe I made a difference in my students' lives.	4.26	.61	91.3
I was satisfied with my role in Freshman Seminar.	4.32	.96	87.0

Note. Five-point Likert scale with 5 = strongly agree.

Table 2
Student-Reported Learning Outcomes From Peer Leader Experience (N = 46)

As a result of this course and experience, I have strengthened my...	Mean	SD	% agreed or strongly agreed
Interpersonal communication skills	4.30	.66	89.1
Presentation/facilitation skills	4.35	.77	87.0
Helping skills	4.26	.77	80.4
Leadership skills	4.37	.77	91.3

Note. Five-point Likert scale with 5 = strongly agree.

The results were analyzed to learn if participation in Freshman Seminar as a first-year student impacted a peer leader's satisfaction or learning outcomes. The *t*-test revealed no significant difference between those peer leaders who had taken Freshman Seminar and those who had not (Table 3).

Table 3
Participation in Freshman Seminar (FS) and Peer Leader Satisfaction and Learning Outcomes (N = 46)

	Mean (SD)		<i>p</i>
	FS (<i>n</i> = 33)	No FS (<i>n</i> = 13)	
The experience was worthwhile.	4.73 (.57)	4.54 (.52)	.308
I would make the decision to be a PL again.	4.67 (.89)	4.61 (.65)	.851
My advice and feedback were valued in planning for the class.	4.42 (.97)	4.77 (.44)	.104
I believe I made a difference in my students' lives.	4.77 (.44)	4.15 (.55)	.463
I was satisfied with my role in Freshman Seminar.	4.18 (1.01)	4.31 (.85)	.695
<i>As a result of this course and experience, I have strengthened my...</i>			
Interpersonal communication skills	4.27 (.67)	4.38 (.65)	.611
Presentation/facilitation skills	4.30 (.81)	4.46 (.66)	.534
Helping skills	4.24 (.79)	4.31 (.75)	.800
Leadership skills	4.33 (.85)	4.46 (.52)	.617

Note. Five-point Likert scale with 5 = strongly agree.

Additionally, a *t*-test analysis exposed no significant difference in satisfaction or learning outcomes for those who knew their instructor prior to working with him or her as a peer leader and those who did not (Table 4).

Table 4
Relationship With FS Instructor and Peer Leader Satisfaction and Learning Outcomes
(*N* = 46)

	Mean (SD)		<i>p</i>
	Knew instructor (<i>n</i> = 16)	Did not know instructor (<i>n</i> = 30)	
The experience was worthwhile.	4.56 (.63)	4.73 (.52)	.330
I would make the decision to be a PL again.	4.56 (1.09)	4.70 (.65)	.595
My advice and feedback were valued in planning for the class.	4.25 (1.12)	4.67 (.66)	.188
I believe I made a difference in my students' lives.	4.13 (.62)	4.33 (.61)	.277
I was satisfied with my role in Freshman Seminar.	4.06 (1.18)	4.30 (.84)	.432
<i>As a result of this course and experience, I have strengthened my...</i>			
Interpersonal communication skills	4.25 (.58)	4.33 (.71)	.689
Presentation/facilitation skills	4.31 (.79)	4.37 (.76)	.822
Helping skills	4.31 (.79)	4.23 (.77)	.745
Leadership skills	4.44 (.89)	4.33 (.71)	.667

Note. Five-point Likert scale with 5 = strongly agree.

Conclusion

These data suggest that peer leaders are satisfied with their experience and are learning or improving various leadership skills as a result of their experience. Because a previous relationship with the Freshman Seminar instructor does not impact satisfaction or learning outcomes, we will not increase efforts to encourage Freshman Seminar instructors to recruit their own peer leaders. Additionally, given that previous Freshman Seminar experience does not appear to affect satisfaction or learning outcomes, we will not require future peer leaders to take Freshman Seminar as a prerequisite to working with the course.

We encourage other institutions that have or are implementing a similar peer leader program to adopt similar requirements. Many students without these types of connections have plenty of enthusiasm for the program and find the peer leading experience worthwhile. Further recommendations include (a) establishing goals or learning outcomes for your peer leader training, (b) developing a peer leader advisory board comprised of current and experienced peer leaders, (c) selecting peer leaders who are enthusiastic about the university and are both academically and socially successful, and (d) developing a comprehensive training program that reaches peer leaders both before and during the experience.

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Appendix A

**Peer Leader Evaluation
Fall 2006**

Your work in Freshman Seminar this year has helped shape the college experience for some 1400 new students. You have added to the University's rich heritage of caring about students. Your work, viewed from the many angles of student evaluations, faculty reports, and outcomes assessment, demonstrates that your commitment mattered in the lives and success of the 2006 freshman class. We sincerely appreciate what you have done this semester.

Although you have given so much already, we are asking that you make yet another contribution to Freshman Seminar. An honest and thorough evaluation of your experiences as a peer leader is needed to pave the way for improvements next year. Please complete this survey to help us learn from our mistakes and build on our successes.

Role in Freshman Seminar Class

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I frequently talked to some students in my section outside of class time.	5	4	3	2	1
I had an open dialogue with my instructor about my role in the class and/or course plans.	5	4	3	2	1
I met with my Freshman Seminar instructor before the syllabus was completed.	5	4	3	2	1
I often met with the instructor outside of class for planning.	5	4	3	2	1
I had a daily duty such as taking attendance, leading an activity, etc...	5	4	3	2	1

Satisfaction

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The experience of being a Peer Leader was worthwhile.	5	4	3	2	1
If I had it to do over, I would make the decision to be a Peer Leader.	5	4	3	2	1
My advice and feedback were valued in planning for the class.	5	4	3	2	1

I enjoyed the relationship with my instructor.	5	4	3	2	1
I believe I have made a difference in my students' lives.	5	4	3	2	1
I was satisfied with my role in the Freshman Seminar classroom.	5	4	3	2	1
	Very Much				Not at all
How time consuming were your duties in Freshman Seminar?	5	4	3	2	1

Peer Leader Seminar/Experience

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Seminar class time was well spent.	5	4	3	2	1
Having a former Peer Leader as a co-instructor was valuable.	5	4	3	2	1
The instructors encouraged meaningful class discussions.	5	4	3	2	1
The instructors provided sufficient opportunities for questions.	5	4	3	2	1
The amount of work required was reasonable.	5	4	3	2	1
The following topics discussed in class were helpful:					
Alcohol discussion	5	4	3	2	1
Teaching class/effective presentations	5	4	3	2	1
Helping skills	5	4	3	2	1
Leadership	5	4	3	2	1
Marketing the peer leader experience	5	4	3	2	1
I learned things in Peer Leader Seminar that I applied to my Freshman Seminar class.	5	4	3	2	1
I learned things in Peer Leader Seminar that will be useful in other settings.	5	4	3	2	1

<u>Peer Leader Seminar/Exper. Cont.</u>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I felt I had a place/person to go to if I experienced difficulties with any aspect of my role as a Peer Leader.	5	4	3	2	1
Peer Leader Seminar is a necessary co-requisite to being a Peer Leader.	5	4	3	2	1
I would have become a Peer Leader even without academic credit (thus no Peer Leader Seminar).	5	4	3	2	1
As a result of this course and experience, I have strengthened my:					
Interpersonal communication skills	5	4	3	2	1
Presentation/facilitation skills	5	4	3	2	1
Helping skills	5	4	3	2	1
Leadership skills	5	4	3	2	1
The training session in the spring was useful.	5	4	3	2	1

Demographics

Did you take Freshman Seminar?	Yes	No
Did you know your FS instructor before this semester?	Yes	No
Did you attend the training session this spring?	Yes	No
Did you attend some or all of the New Directions conference in August?	Yes	No

What information/strategies discussed in Peer Leader Seminar did you use/apply in your Freshman Seminar class?

What aspects of your Peer Leader experience as a whole will you apply to other settings?

Please share any suggestions you have for improving the Peer Leader Seminar below or on the back of this sheet.