

# Canadian and International Peer Leader Experience: Theoretical and Research-Based Perspectives

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Canadian data from the 2014-2015 International Survey of Peer Leadership provide a portrait of peer leadership experiences (PLE), recruitment, training, compensation strategies, and time commitment. Additional survey findings highlight the relationship between involvement in PLEs and students perceptions of gains in skill development, academic performance, and employability outcomes. Research results, student quotes, and reflection questions will ground a discussion about the application and implications of these findings for campus programs, future research, and working towards a theoretical framework for understanding peer leadership based on sociological and psychological perspectives (i.e., intersectional concentric solidarity).

Canadian and International Peer Leader Experience:  
Theoretical and Research-Based Perspectives

**PRESENTATION OUTLINE:**

1. Roles Peer Leaders Play
2. Theoretical Considerations
3. Benefits to Peer Leaders
4. Results from the 2015 Canadian Survey of Peer Leaders
5. Connecting Theory, Research, and Practice



# Roles Peer Leaders Play



The largest proportion -63%- almost 2/3 - of Peer Leaders served in their longest tenured position for the equivalent of two academic years.

## Canadian and International Peer Leader Experience: Theoretical and Research-Based Perspectives

### The literature clearly points out that peers are important conduits in terms of:

- **Transition to college** (Brisette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Crissman Ishler, 2002; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Paul & Brier, 2001; Schlossberg, 1981).
- **Aid in social and emotional development** (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Guon, 1988; Harmon, 2006).
- **Help promote leadership and career skills development** (Astin, 1993; Astin & Kent, Gardner, 2010; 1983; Pascarella, Ethington, & Smart, 1988; Schrah & Lavery, 1983).



## Canadian and International Peer Leader Experience: Theoretical and Research-Based Perspectives

### The literature clearly points out that peers:

- Promote learning and academic performance (Astin, 1993; Donahue, 2004; Kuh, Kirzle, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996).
- Assist in persistence and retention (Bear, 1985; Braxton, 2002; Potts, Schultz & Foust, 2003-4; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1993).
- Impact satisfaction with college (Astin, 1993; Coffman & Gilligan, 2002).



# Peer Leadership: Theoretical Considerations



The largest proportion -63%- almost 2/3 - of Peer Leaders served in their longest tenured position for the equivalent of two academic years.



## Peer Leader Framework of Intersectional Concentric Solidarity

Peer leaders can have a notable impact in the first year of university and throughout the transition as they act as conduits between instructional staff and students that may further social and emotional development, leadership and career skills development. Peer leaders may also impact post-secondary satisfaction, learning, academic performance, and retention.

The literature clearly points out that peers are important conduits to students' transition to college (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Crissman Ishler, 2002; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Paul & Brier, 2001; Schlossberg, 1981), aid in social and emotional development (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Guon, 1988; Harmon, 2006), and leadership and career skills development (Astin, 1993; Astin & Kent, Gardner, 2010; 1983; Pascarella, Ethington, & Smart, 1988; Schuh & Laverty, 1983). They can also potentially impact satisfaction with college (Astin, 1993; Coffman & Gilligan, 2002), learning and academic performance (Astin, 1993; Donahue, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996), and in persistence and retention (Bean, 1985; Braxton, 2002; Potts, Schultz & Foust, 2003-4; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

While there is abundant research on the impact of peer leaders, there does not seem to be a model explaining how peer leadership works or the process by which Peer Leaders influence peer learning, development, and integration into university life. It would be helpful to have a framework or theory to help educational researchers and administrators understand how post-secondary peer leadership works.



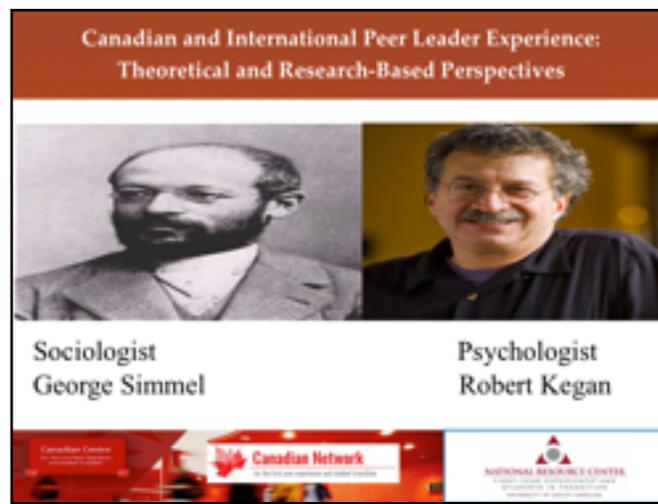
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Durkheim's (1893, 1933, 1964) work on social solidarity and cohesion could provide a structural approach that helps frame how post-secondary peer leaders may be viewed conduits between professors/staff and fellow students inside and outside the classroom. These leaders may create a connection through mentoring, educating and helping students throughout the post-secondary transition. They may reinforce social cohesion through what Durkheim (1893) refers to as mechanical and organic solidarity or what we would view as mechanical and organic associations. They may also act as conduits or what Simmel refers to as "intersections" between groups through mentoring, guidance, and peer education (Simmel, 1955).

Mechanical solidarity highlights cohesion and integration based on similarity or common connections of individuals through people being connected based on work, education, beliefs, and lifestyle. For Durkheim, mechanical solidarity is based on homogeneity and "traditional" small scale societal groupings that may be established along kinship, familial, and more intimate micro associations or networks (Durkheim, 1893). For instance, in the case of peer mentors and tutors those from the same ethnic group may prefer to have associations and mentored by peers that have had similar ethnic experiences, speak the same language, from similar religious backgrounds (Kenedy, 2015). They may also want to be mentored by those associated with similar areas of study, with compatible educational interests, professional goals, or career paths. It is the idea of being possibly connected to peer leaders based on familiar association that promote peer leadership as more intimate and recognizable conduits.

Organic solidarity involves the interdependence that arises from specialization of work and the complementarities between people in "modern" and "industrial" societies. Social cohesion is based on the dependence of individuals in advanced often industrialized societies where individuals perform interdependent specialized tasks. There is often more diversity of values, beliefs, interests, lifestyles, and education

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Peers may be from different ethnic, religious, educational, or professional backgrounds that may be based on peer shared or cross-cutting social networks (Blau and Schwartz, 1984) and the web or circles of group affiliation (Simmel, 1955) by bridging the gap between their peers and faculty/staff and expands the student experience. In this way peer leaders may be seen as conduits and connections based on social networks and group affiliations. The peer leaders are the intersections between the university and their fellow students. Peer leaders could have “multiple group affiliations” as conduits (Simmel, 1955: 141). Simmel believed that groups are “concentric” and related to each other and “intersect” by virtue of affiliation (Simmel, 1955: 149-150). In this case there may be connections or associations based on diversity and difference that creates interdependence through learning from others who are from varying ethnic, religious, educational, or other background. Peer leaders may serve in these roles as conduits between instructional staff and students based on difference and students wanting to learn from peers in order to increase knowledge, become engaged, or more connected to the post-secondary institution. In addition, through the process of peer leadership, peer leaders will also learn, increase their academic and resource knowledge, as well as become more engaged and connected to their institution.

Combining Durkheim’s organic solidarity and Simmel idea of concentric circles, then it is possible to view peer leaders as conduits that connect students to staff and faculty in interdependent ways at a boarder level. As noted, there also could be more mechanical connections between peer leaders and students that may be based on promoting similar and homogeneous solidarity. Peer leaders may be creating educational liminality as they assist in facilitating student transitions, learning, and development.



Kegan's (1994) theory of orders of consciousness has promise as a theoretical lens for understanding how peer leaders as social conduits can lead to improved cognitive and interpersonal outcomes. Kegan (1994) presents a theory of individual development describing the ways humans organize experiences in increasingly ordered and complex ways, through increasing "orders of consciousness." In this scheme, late adolescence is marked by a transition into more complex cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal meaning making structures. Thinking becomes more abstract, individuals have greater self-awareness of feelings, and they can commit to communities of people and ideas. This higher order of consciousness is referred to as *cross-categorical thinking* (Kegan, 1994) or the *socialized mind* (Kegan, 2000). Moreover, Kegan asserts that the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains are interrelated; when development in one domain occurs, development in the others is facilitated.

Moreover, there are benefits to the peer leaders themselves. Recent research has demonstrated that student involvement through peer leadership yields measurable returns. For example, peer mentors for first-year students reported increases in their ability to manage groups, empathize with students, and facilitate learning (Bunting, Dye, Pinnegar, & Robinson, 2012; Harmon, 2006; Kenedy, Monty, & Lambert-Drache, 2012). Other research has noted improved communication and presentation skills; leadership abilities; integrative and applied learning; higher-order thinking skills; knowledge of campus resources; interaction with faculty, staff, and peers; critical thinking; problem solving; ability to work under pressure; and interpersonal skills (Astin, 1993; Bunting et al., 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010; Russel & Skinkle, 1990; Wawrzynski & Beverly, 2012). Additionally, students who serve as peer leaders have demonstrated increases in factual knowledge, helping others, friendships, personal growth, positive regard for instructor skills, personal responsibility, and decision making (Bandura, Millard, Johnson, Stewart, & Bartoloemei, 2003; Bunting et al., 2012; Kenedy & Skipper, 2012).

What benefits have you seen Peer  
Leader Experiences provide to the Peer  
Leaders themselves?



## Framework of Intersectional Concentric Solidarity: Benefits for Peer Leaders

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Peer leaders are asked to take on multiple perspectives as they act as conduits; as a result, they move from a social-cognitive frame where they are able to consider, but not integrate the perspectives of the parties for whom they are acting as intermediaries to a situation where they are expected to operationalize shared expectations by both parties that transcends a diversity in individual interests. As development in the social-cognitive domain occurs, the ability to engage in cross-categorical meaning making extends into other psychological domains, including logical-cognitive and interpersonal-affective areas of the person (Kegan, 1986). As peer leaders live and function between two worlds in which they have social affiliations, they are forced to take perspectives, one perspective representing former and one representing aspirational form of thinking.

## Framework of Intersectional Concentric Solidarity: Benefits for Peer Leaders

- Peer Leaders have demonstrated/reported improvements in:
  - communication and presentation skills;
  - leadership abilities;
  - integrative and applied learning;
  - higher-order thinking skills;
  - knowledge of campus resources;
  - interaction with faculty, staff, and peers;
  - critical thinking;
  - problem solving;
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  - and interpersonal skills

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Thus, when peer leaders facilitate mechanical and organic solidarity or associations and engage as links in social networks, they are working to build and reinforce the psychic structures necessary for higher-order thought. This is manifest as peer leaders develop improved capacity for problem solving, critical thinking, interpersonal communication, responsibility, and decision-making. In other words, engaging as social, cultural, and intellectual intermediaries creates conditions through which peer leaders develop improved metacognitive abilities.

## Framework of Intersectional Concentric Solidarity: Benefits for Peer Leaders

- Peer leaders have also demonstrated increases in:
  - factual knowledge,
  - helping others,
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  - personal growth,
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# How Are Peer Leader Experiences Structured?

## Results from Canadian Survey of Peer Leaders - 2015



The largest proportion -63%- almost 2/3 - of Peer Leaders served in their longest tenured position for the equivalent of two academic years.

**Types of Peer Leader Experiences:  
Most Commonly Reported (n = 419)**

Peer Leader Experience	Freq.	%
Academic: Peer mentor	205	48.9
Student clubs, societies or social organisations	157	37.5
Campus activities	140	33.4
Orientation (e.g., new student, extended, or summer orientation)	128	30.5
First-year experience	108	25.8
Academic: Peer tutor	98	23.4
Community service or service-learning	71	16.9
Future/Prospective students ambassador	64	15.3
Academic: Other (e.g., teaching assistant, lab assistant)	63	15.0
Academic: Peer advisor	56	13.4



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**Types of Peer Leader Experiences:  
Least Commonly Reported (n = 419)**

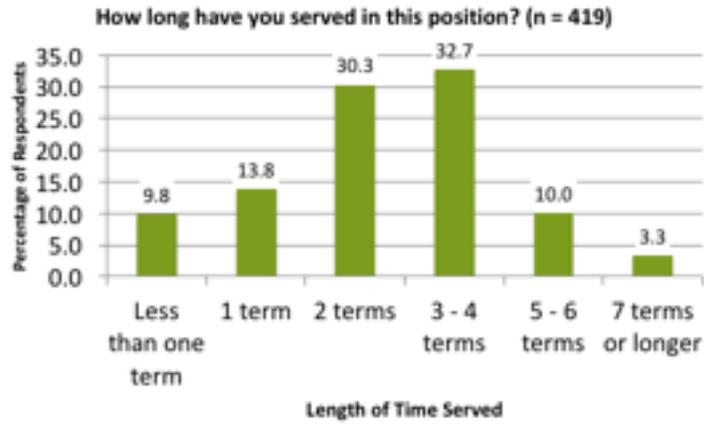
Peer Leader Experience	Freq.	%
Housing and Residential Life	54	12.9
Student government	53	12.6
Academic: Peer educator	47	11.2
Student wellness or wellbeing	45	10.7
High School Outreach	44	10.5
International student office	30	7.2
Other (please specify)	29	6.9
Multicultural affairs	27	6.4
Intramural athletics	26	6.2
Counseling or mental health	22	5.3
Study abroad or exchange	21	5.0
Club Sports	18	4.3
Outdoor or recreational sports	16	3.8
Religious	14	3.3
Inter-university sports	13	3.1
Student productions or media	13	3.1
Physical health	11	2.6
Judicial affairs or student conduct	6	1.4
Greek life (i.e., social fraternity or sorority)	6	1.4
Financial literacy	2	0.5

**Types of Peer Leader Experiences:  
Experience with longest service (n = 419)**

Peer Leader Experience	Freq.	%
Academic: Peer mentor	124	29.6
Student clubs, societies or social organisations	51	12.2
Academic: Peer tutor	47	11.2
Academic: Other (e.g., teaching assistant, lab assistant) (please specify)	24	5.7
Housing and Residential Life	24	5.7
Student government	21	5.0
Other (please specify)	17	4.1
Academic: Peer educator	14	3.3
Orientation (e.g., new student, extended, or summer orientation)	13	3.1
Campus activities	12	2.9



## Types of Peer Leader Experiences: Experience with longest service (n = 419)



7



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**Evidence of Engagement:  
Highest number of PL positions at one time (n = 410)**

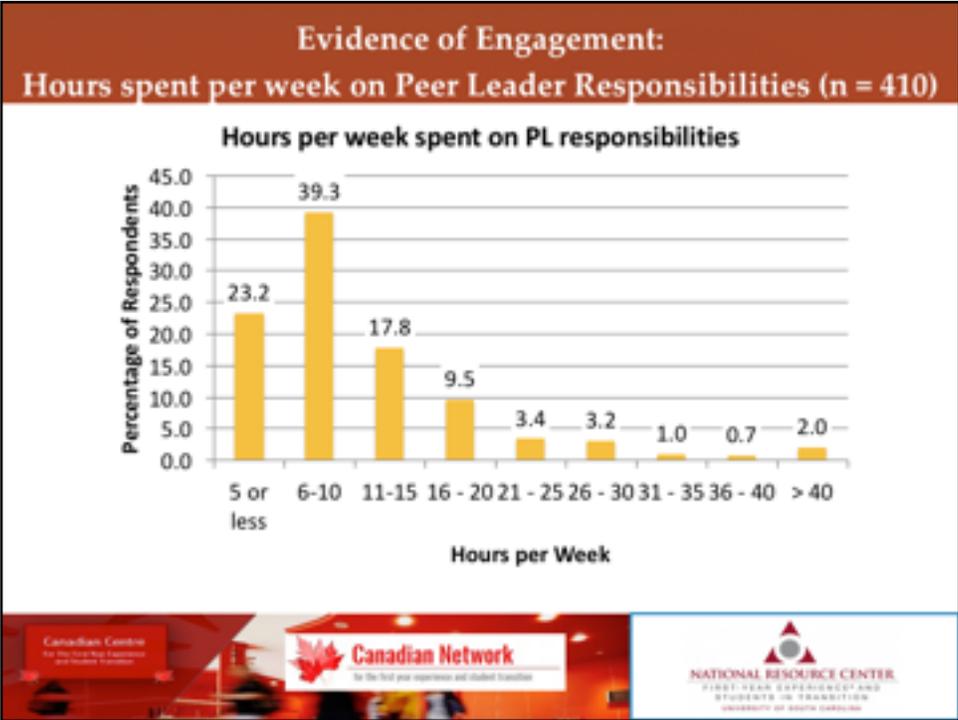


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## Investment of Time and Energy – Benefits and Balance

### Evidence of Engagement

- 2/3 of all peer leaders have held 1-2 PL positions at one time
- 7 in 10 peer leaders have held 1-3 total PL positions
- More than 60% of all peer leaders spend 10 hours or less per week on PL duties

### Over-Engagement?

- 1 in 10 have held 8 or more PL positions
- 10% reported spending 20 hours or more per week.
- Slightly less than 4% spend 30 or more hours per week.



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## Investment of Time and Energy – Benefits and Balance

**“I don't know if its related, but since I've started working as a Residence Life Staff, my average grades have increased by up to 10% depending on the course. Now this might just be a coincidence, and I've just enrolled in courses I find more interesting this semester. But my theory is that because I spend so much time working as a leader, it forces me to manage my time best and procrastinate less (i.e. "I'm planning to do leadership stuff later, therefore I NEED to get this done now while I still have time!")”**



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## Investment of Time and Energy – Benefits and Balance

**“Being a peer leader has definitely pushes me to be more focused and time-effective when working on a task. It has shown me that there are various ways in which academics can be tackled, as well as the numerous resources available at my fingertips (should I need them). Overall, it's been more beneficial than harmful”**



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## Investment of Time and Energy – Benefits and Balance

**“I tend to get involved in too many extra-curricular activities and peer leadership experiences, on top of school. Although it has affected my academic performance in the sense that I spend less time doing school work, it is a choice that I make because I feel more compelled to engage in these leadership experiences than my studies. I value my leadership experiences because I have learned so much through them that I would not have necessarily learned in a classroom.”**



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## High Expectations - Training

### Communicating Expectations through Training

- 92% of peer leaders received some training for their peer leader positions
- 4.5 in 10 reported training for one or more PL experience lasted one week or longer

### Expectations Unclear – Little or no Training

- 7.5% of peer leaders did not receive formal training for their positions
- 73% reported training for one or more PL experience was 2 days or shorter



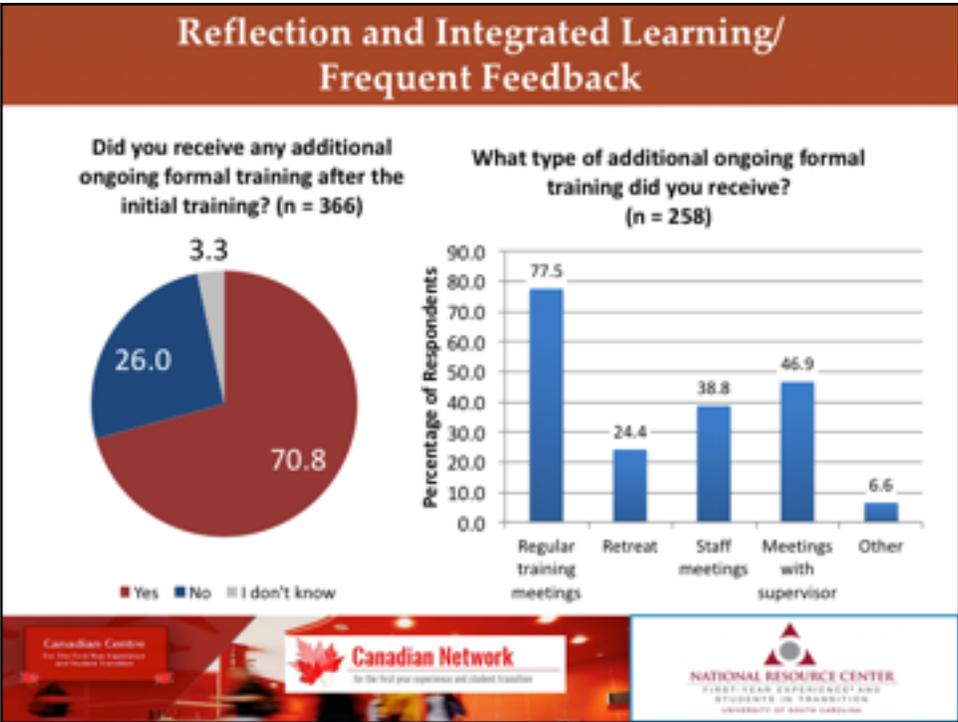
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## High Expectations - Training

**“Being a peer leader has affected how I interpret information from lectures. Having been trained on creating lesson plans and how to organize structures I am more able to recognize how professors structure their lectures and what I should attend my focus on.”**



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Based on the information just shown,  
what do we learn about how we can  
better improve structures of Peer  
Leadership Experiences?



# Outcomes of Peer Leader Experiences



The largest proportion -63%- almost 2/3 - of Peer Leaders served in their longest tenured position for the equivalent of two academic years.



Over 80%

of Peer Leaders reported increased:

- Knowledge of
- Understanding of
- Interaction with

people from backgrounds different from their own

Exposure to Diverse Perspectives

## Exposure to Diverse Perspectives

**“Being a peer leader has connected me with my peers, my faculty, and, in general, my school. In an ever more disconnected world, being a peer leader has helped me create lasting relationships with many people that I will know and appreciate for years to come.**



The largest proportion -63%- almost 2/3 - of Peer Leaders served in their longest tenured position for the equivalent of two academic years.



Over 80%

of Peer Leaders reported  
**increased** skills in:

- Adaptability
- Decision making
- Problem solving
- Interpersonal Communication
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Project management
- Organization
- Time management
- Critical thinking



Real-World Application



Over **80%**

of Peer Leaders reported **increased** employability outcomes:

- Building professional relationships
- Applying knowledge to a real-world setting
- Bringing together information
- Analyzing a problem from new perspectives
- Creating innovative approaches
- Providing direction



Real-World Application

# Reconsidering Peer Leadership: Theoretical Considerations



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## What does this all mean?

- Data from Canadian Survey of Peer Leaders
- Theoretical framework
  - Social Web – Concentric Circles - Simmel
  - Community – Durkheim & Blau
  - Cross-cultural thinking – Kegan
- How does this understanding extend the theory?



# Connecting Theory to Research to Practice



The largest proportion -63%- almost 2/3 - of Peer Leaders served in their longest tenured position for the equivalent of two academic years.

**How can we structure Peer Leadership experiences that facilitate the underlying factors that lead to improvement in Peer Leader development?**

- Selection
  - Early opportunity to set the stage for experience
  - Consider who is and who is not receiving opportunity for experience
- Training
  - Emphasize the expectations that the peer leadership experience is more than just a transactional experience
  - Provide training on skills and competencies with an eye beyond accomplishing tasks at hand



**How can we structure Peer Leadership experiences that facilitate the underlying factors that lead to improvement in Peer Leader development?**

- Supervision
  - Opportunities to reflect (developing and reinforcing metacognition)
  - Feedback
  - Ask yourself: “How can I create experiences for this PL to help set up future opportunities?”
- Assessment and evaluation
  - Include measures of success of “job tasks”
  - Also include measures of broader skill development

