Findings from the 2009 National Survey of Peer Leaders

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A Look to the Literature: Peers

Peers play a large role in college student success & can positively affect:

- Students' transition to college (*Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Crissman Ishler, 2002; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Paul & Brier, 2001; Schlossberg, 1981*)

- Satisfaction with college (*Astin, 1993; Coffman & Gilligan, 2002*)

- Learning & academic performance (*Astin, 1993; Donahue, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996*)

- Persistence & retention (*Braxton, 2002; Potts, Schultz & Foust, 2003-4; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1993*)

"The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years"

(*Astin, 1993, p. 398*)

"Students' interactions with their peers also 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"

(*Pascarella and Terenzini ,1991, pp. 620-621*)

Literature on Peer Leadership

- Ender & Kay (2001) meta-analysis of research on peer leadership
  - First emerged in residential life and orientation & remain most prominent in these settings
  - Growing range of uses
  - Least utilized but growing area: Academics
- Peer leaders are empowered to exert influence in a less intimidating way than staff or faculty (Cuseo, 1991; Hart, 1995)
- Peers are an efficient and effective resource, particularly at large institutions

How are peer leaders being utilized on your campuses?

Current Study

- Limitations of past work on peer leaders
  - o Most were institution-specific studies
  - o Few focused on the experiences of the peer leaders

- Research questions for the current study
  - o What are the characteristics of peer leadership programs in higher education?
  - o What are the perceived outcomes of this experience for the peer leaders?

Data Source

- Peer Leadership Survey sponsored by NRC
- Administered in Spring, 2009 to 3,733 institutional reps asking them to forward to student peer leaders
- Online survey containing items on:
  - Student demographics
  - Experiences with peer leadership
  - Characteristics of peer leader roles & programs
  - Self-rated change related to PL experience
  - Open-ended items
- 1,972 survey respondents

Sample

- Skewed toward:
  - Female students (74% of respondents were women)
  - High academic performers (80% reported GPA $\geq$ 3.0)
  - Students engaged in peer leadership
- Adequate representation by:
  - Race/ethnicity
  - Class standing
  - In-state vs. out-of-state students
  - Residential vs. commuter students
- Not nationally representative but comprehensive
- First national portrait of peer leader experiences

Peer Leadership Defined

A peer leader is "an undergraduate student who has been selected to serve as a mentor or peer educator to other students through a position with a school-run organization."

Results: Peer Leadership

- 90% of respondents report being peer leaders

- 44% of respondents report holding more than one peer leader position "currently"

- 8% hold four or more peer leader positions "currently"

- Held several peer leader positions throughout their college career (Mean = 2.67)

- 98% would recommend being a peer leader to other students

Most Common Sponsors of Peer Leadership Experiences

Campus-Based Organization	Percent
Academic*	58.6
Orientation	31.6
Residence Halls	29.6
Community Service	25.2
Other**	14.8
Student Government	11.6

*Titles for Academic Peer Leader Roles

- First-year seminar peer leader
- Tutor
- Academic mentor
- Peer advisor
- Teaching assistant

**Other Sponsors of Peer Leadership Experiences

- First-year experience
- Greek life
- Leadership programs
- Admissions
- Student media

Less Common Sponsors of Peer Leadership Experiences

Campus-Based Organization	Percent
Athletics	8.6
Religious Organizations	8.2
Multicultural Organizations	7.4
Counseling or Mental Health	7.0
Student Productions	4.6
Physical Health	3.4
Judicial	3.0
Study Abroad	2.5

Peer Leader Training

83.6% of survey respondents reported receiving training for their peer leadership role

Duration of Training	Percent
Half a day or less	13.8
One day	12.9
Two days	15.3
Three days	9.6
Four days	6.5
One week	24.8
Other (almost uniformly <u>longer</u>)	36.6

Peer Leader Compensation

Form of Compensation	Percent
Financial compensation	65.1
Volunteer (no compensation)	50.5
Course credit	21.9
Other (Housing)	5.8

Self-Rated Change in Skills

Skill	% Reporting "Stronger" or "Much Stronger"
Interpersonal communication	93.8
Organization	80.7
Time management	79.5
Presentation	79.2
Written communication	60.7
Academic	51.2

Self-Rated Impact on Undergraduate Experience

Experience	% "Increased"
Knowledge of campus resources	91.1
Meaningful interaction with peers	89.1
Meaningful interaction with staff	85.6
Meaningful interaction with faculty	82.8
Feeling of belonging at institution	80.7
Understanding of diverse people	78.5
Interaction with diverse people	78.1
Desire to persist at institution	70.7

Self-Rated Impact on Academic Performance
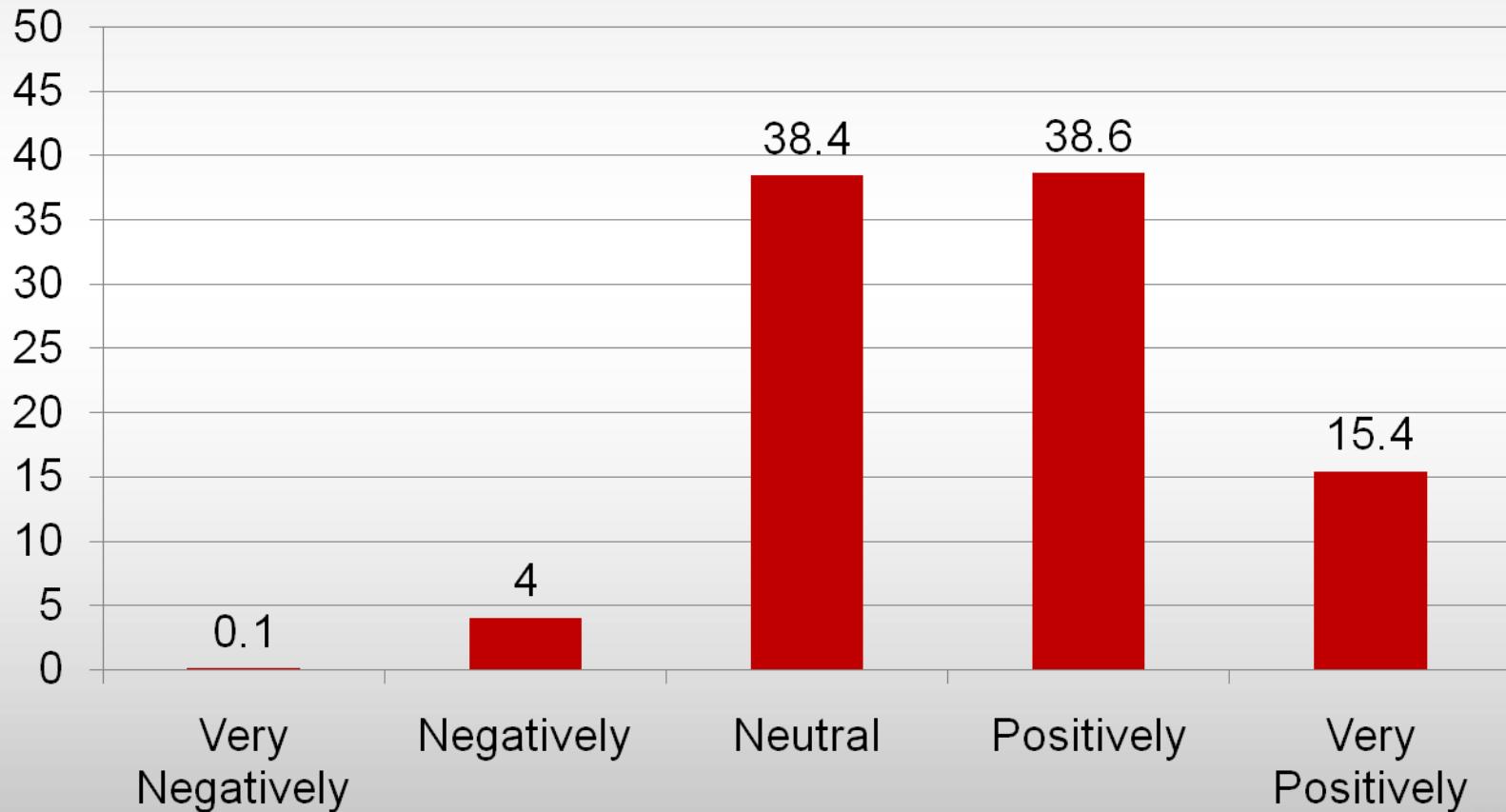
Qualitative Data - Academics

- **Respondent Prompt**: Please describe how being a peer leader has affected your academic performance.

- 1,344 responses were recorded for this prompt.

Qualitative Findings - Academics

Themes emerging from student responses when probed about the influence of the PL experience on academics:

- o **Transition Into "U."**: How the PL experience impacted student transition to the University.
- o **Transition of Relationships**: How the PL experience impacted social relationships
- o **Transitions to the Future**: How the PL experience impacted post-graduation plans and preparation

Theme #1:Transition Into "U"

- **Skill Improvement**: Respondents reported improved time management skills, increased confidence, and added content-related knowledge, enabling them to better transition to the university setting.

- Memorable Quote: *The responsibilities of peer leadership helped me to learn more about organization, time management, as well as teamwork and cooperation. All of these skills have transferred to my studies as well.*

Theme #1: Transition Into "U"

- **Balancing Act**: Respondents reported challenges in navigating the work/play/study balance. At times, PL duties took priority over academics, negatively impacting academic success and behaviors.

- Memorable Quote: *Commitments with my peer leader positions have interfered with the amount of free time that I have to study for exams, complete assignments, and become further involved with my coursework.*

Theme # 2: Transition of Relationships

- **Role Model**: Peer leaders recognized their new positions put them in a position to be a positive example to others, positively impacting their academic success and behaviors.

Theme #2: Transition of Relationships

- Memorable Quotes, Role Model:
  - *I have focused more on my studies because I know that people look up to me. There are more eyes on me now than before I was a peer leader.*
  - *I encourage students to succeed in college and give them tips that I then feel I must do myself. I feel a greater sense of belonging and am no longer afraid to ask for help.*

Theme #2: Transition of Relationships

- **Positive Peer Pressure**: Peer leaders acknowledged the positive influence their fellow peer leaders had on academic success

- Memorable Quote: *Being a peer leader has affected my academic performance by surrounding me with other peers who work hard both as peer leaders and academically. Their example has inspired and strengthened my academic work*

Theme #3: Transitioning to the Future

- **Improved Academic Foundation**: Peer leaders whose duties were aligned with major/academic area reported a strengthening of their academic foundation and preparedness for future classes as a result of the PL experience.

Theme #3: Transitioning to the Future

- Memorable Quote, Improved Academic Foundation:

  o *As a Biology major, tutoring in chemistry and biology courses keeps the information fresh in my head. As I take higher level courses that requires me to remember basic concepts, I already know them thoroughly and I am able to grasp new concepts better.*

Theme #3: Transition to the Future

- **Post-Graduation Preparation**: Respondents reported positive impacts looking forward. The PL experience helped focus future plans.

- Memorable Quote: *Tutoring in the writing center made me more interested in pursing a career related to assisting students with writing, especially ESL students*

Theme # 3: Transitioning to the Future

o Memorable Quote, Integration of Academic Foundation and Post-Graduation Prep:

  o *Because of my leadership experience, I finally figured out what I want to do with my life after I graduate. I am much more motivated now than I was when I was a freshman to complete my courses with decent grades. I am very motivated to learn the content of my courses as opposed to just getting a grade.*

Qualitative Data – Additional Information

- **Respondent Prompt:** Please include anything else you would like to tell us about your peer leadership experience.

- 588 responses were recorded for this prompt

Qualitative Findings – Additional Information

- Of the positive responses, several prevalent themes emerged at roughly equal rates:

  o Students found PLE to be both intrinsically motivating and intrinsically fulfilling

  o Students reported making connections with both their peers and members of the faculty and administration as a result of PLE

  o Students reported personal growth and betterment as a result of PLE

Theme #1: Intrinsic Motivation

- Common adjectives to describe PLE were "fulfilling" and "rewarding"

- Intrinsic motivators for being a peer leader were described much more often than extrinsic motivators, such as earning money or course credit

Theme #1: Intrinsic Motivation

- Memorable quotes:

  o *Being a leader gives you the chance to serve as a positive role model for others, and hopefully inspire them to want to become successful too! There is no more rewarding feeling then [sic] to know that you were the one who helped make things possible.*

  o *It can be frustrating when you're trying to help people who don't even want to listen to you, but it's a good feeling when the messages get across to some people and make a difference in their lives.*

Theme #2: Social Connections

- Increased networking opportunities as a result of PLE led to

  o Camaraderie among fellow peer leaders

  o Relationships formed with the students they led

  o Relationships formed with faculty/staff

Theme #2: Social Connections

- Many respondents also developed a greater appreciation of diversity as a result of working with students from a wide range of backgrounds.

- Memorable quote: *[Being a peer leader] allows me to interact with people of different races, ethnicities, religions/spiritual traditions, and socio-economic classes different from me.*

Theme #2: Social Connections

- PLE made many respondents more comfortable approaching and interacting with members of the faculty, staff, and administration at their institutions and developing close relationships with them.

- Memorable quote: *[Being a peer leader] has made it easier for me to talk to people that work for the university. It's made me able to ask questions instead of being afraid of what they would say.*

Theme #3: Personal Growth

- Respondents described how being a peer leader had bolstered their confidence in public speaking and/or their overall leadership ability.

- Memorable quote: *Peer leadership increases your communication skills dramatically… I just feel strongly about peer leadership because it boosts your confidence.*

Integration of Themes

- Memorable quote:

  o *When I first got the job I was shy and unsure of myself a lot of the times but over the past almost two years I have grown and become more confident. I have learned to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds. I have also had the opportunity to become close to faculty and staff that I work with. I feel more connected to campus and have enjoyed being there for freshmen students that are struggling with the college transition.*

Conclusions

- PLEs and Academics

  - Growth in the utilization of PLEs in academic roles

  - PLEs reported the lowest levels of gains in academic development

  - Those PLEs whose jobs were linked to major noted positive academic impact more often than those with jobs not linked to major

  - PLEs in residence life positions most often reported time management difficulties negatively impacting academics

Conclusions

- PLEs reported impact on students they led, but also the impact of relationships with other PLEs as well as with faculty & staff

- Emerging areas for PLE involvement

- Provides some national context for the structure of the PLE

  o Compensation

  o Training

Conclusions

- Peer leaders perceive that the PLE has positive outcomes
    - o Self-rated development in skills
    - o Enhanced undergraduate experience
    - o Feeling "more connected to campus"
    - o Persistence/retention

Implications

- Peer leadership is a valuable tool for:
  - Skill development in many areas
  - Leadership
  - Intercultural maturity
  - Faculty-student interaction
- Structure PLEs to :
  - Build upon positive networks among peer leaders
  - Integration of academic/career interest and PLE
- Retention/student success committees may be interested in studying how PLE encourage students to connect with/stay at their institutions

Other Implications for Your Campus?

Questions?

For More Information

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