RESEARCH BRIEFS

Is This What I Signed up for?: A Case Study on Peer Advising during a Pandemic and Presidential Election

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Summary

Peer advisors at various colleges and universities could not have anticipated that their role welcoming and supporting incoming students would take place virtually due to a pandemic in combination with a polarizing presidential election in 2020. Our intrinsic case study on peer advisors who facilitated a voter initiative event with incoming first-year and transfer students found that the environment and location had a significant impact on their own political learning and engagement with others. As peer advisors navigated political learning with their students and themselves, several strategies to support this development emerged. With the increasing importance of political learning, we recommend that this becomes a core component of curriculum and training of these student leaders.

Background

Postsecondary educators and the media alike noted that many institutions were not prepared to support and address the concerns of students after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Fast forward to 2020 and preparations were being made well in advance as the polarizing presidential election neared. Then, unexpectedly, the world was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and preparations had to accommodate this new virtual reality colleges and universities were navigating. In addition to the election and pandemic, the nation grappled with continued racial unrest stemming from systemic racism and White supremacy, often being depicted on social media and perpetrated by state-sanctioned actors. This context framed and influenced the experience of undergraduate peer advisors who were balancing being students, processing democratic engagement, and serving in

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roles that assisted with the transition of incoming students who were doing the same.

Peers influence the undergraduate experience through intellectual development, academic engagement, moral development, clarification of political and social values, interpersonal skills, critical thinking skills and positive gains in writing and reading comprehension (Greenfield et. al, 2013; Mayhew et. al, 2016; Skipper, 2005). Although the role and title of a peer leader differs depending on the institution, department, or setting (i.e., peer advisor, peer mentor, peer counselor), Newton and Ender (2010) defined peer educators, an all-encompassing term, as, "students who have been selected, trained and designated by a campus authority to offer educational services to their peers" (p. 6). Peer educators are not only beneficial to students as they share their experiences and connect them to campus resources, but they strengthen the relationship between the students and the institution and/or faculty and staff (Keup & Martin, 2016).

Understanding peer leaders' political identity development is important because of their direct contact and influence with incoming students. Peer influence is meaningful in the college setting and as peer leaders promote or engage campus events pertaining to the election process or civic engagement this has impact on the students they work with directly. The facilitation of political learning is critical to help students navigate the realities of an ever-evolving sociopolitical landscape and realize the democratic potential of a college education (Hoffman et al., 2018; Morgan & Davis, 2019; Thomas, 2015). Political learning is the process of "developing knowledge and skills related to government, systems, decision making, and public problem solving" (Brower & Benenson, 2015). Through the process of political learning, students develop their own political identity that influences their relationships, interests, and their civic engagement (Morgan, 2021).

Methods

To better understand the political identity development of peer advisors tasked with supporting incoming first-year and transfer students during the 2020 presidential election and amid a pandemic, the following research question guided our study:

- What are the individual and collective values, attitudes, and beliefs of peer advisors responsible for cultivating the political engagement of students in transition during a pandemic and a polarizing presidential election?

This intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995) was conducted at a large private university in the Midwest in the fall of 2020 after an Institutional Review Board approved the project. The institution the case study took place is located in a metropolitan city that has a history with political engagement and has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study included three steps. First, the initial boundary of the case was set in the fall of 2020 when the researchers facilitated two

trainings with more than 40 peer advisors on a voter initiative (i.e., BallotParty) designed to engage students transitioning into the institution amid the 2020 election. Researchers took notes throughout the engagement and debriefed the trainings to help craft an interview protocol for the next steps in the process. After the voter initiative event for students in transition, a group of five peer advisors were interviewed individually to better understand their political identity and learning and their experience facilitating a voter initiative with first-year and transfer students. After the election, a follow up focus group was held with the peer advisors and further elaborated on the topics covered in individual interviews.

Data collected during this phase was audio-recorded and digitally transcribed. In the third phase, transcriptions were reviewed through a two-cycle values coding process to reflect the participants values, attitudes, and beliefs to allow the researchers to better grasp their worldview and perspectives that cultivate their political identity development (Saldaña, 2016). An additional interview with an administrator who has sustained engagement with the peer advisors was conducted to provide more context of the setting. Lastly, the collective positionality and perspectives of the research team, which included a faculty member who is engaged with research on political learning and development, a current graduate student, and a current peer advisor who participated in the voter initiative event, contributed to the how data were analyzed, understood, and further expanded our understanding of peer advisors within the case.

Findings

Our findings indicate that peer advisors are experiencing political learning in their roles, whether this is centered in their training or not. The different environment and locations in which they interact impact how the peer advisors understand their own identity and views and has an influence on their interactions with others. Individually, they navigated strategies that helped them in tackling 'tough' conversations with students, though many of these strategies were being shared by other peer advisors.

Environment and Location

Different environments, including the general campus space and/or specific locations, influenced how participants understood and negotiated their political identity. For instance, Ila, an exercise science major, reflecting on the impact of participating in a program where she worked to facilitate the political engagement of first-year students explained,

> So I think at least for me, I think [the facilitation experience] not only has it pushed me, but it's also allowed me to be more comfortable talking about topics because I am someone that was raised in a household where you don't like you don't talk about politics... Um, so I think that in terms of just being

able to work with other peer advisors, it's like giving me a space to actually be okay with, well, actually I think this, um, and like grow in that way, which I didn't have before.

This quote begins to highlight the multifaceted outcomes for peer advisors tasked with cultivating the political engagement of other students. The peer advisors both felt "pushed" to grow in their comfort talking about politics for the purposes of being strong facilitators while also navigating the opportunity to reflect on their socialization experiences that have informed their current familiarity and comfort engaging in political dialogue.

Peer advisors also discussed how environment and location were significant by exposing them to more people, different views or issues which often expanded their understanding of political learning. MJ, a nursing major, explained,

Um, so I definitely for me like going [to the institution], it was like different.... There's literally just so many people here. Um, compared to like my small high school, there's just there's um, so many racial, ethnic groups...it played like a part in like how I, like, view the world.

MJ would go on to add:

I feel like for me as a peer leader, my political identity, I guess. So, I don't know. Um, I wouldn't say I, like, I impose it on any of my students or anything, but I feel like it plays like a role in a lot of .. it plays a role in like the values. Like I, I guess I like present, present in [first year course] I guess like in terms of like the way I act and the person I am. Um, and even in like simple like lesson plans, um, … And then just like in terms of like social justice and my role in like what I, and what I offer to students, like in terms of like events or something, I try to choose. Like, I mean, I don't want to be like mean, but like I just, I feel like I choose, I prioritize events that we have that are like social justice related. Um, just cause I feel like that's important and I feel that's important. I like, students to know about it. So, I feel like my that's how my political views like played a role in like in terms of me and my stance.

Consistent with much of the literature on the importance of diverse interactions inside and outside the classrooms (Denson et al, 2017; Mayhew et al, 2016), the peer advisors appreciated the fact that the facilitation experience prompted them to take account of their views, political and otherwise, relative to others. Yet, it is also apparent that when specifically thinking about their political identity, there is a thoughtful negotiation around their role and how their politics can shape the experiences of others.

Peer Advisor Strategies

As the last quote in the previous section began to highlight, our experiences within the case and subsequent interviews revealed a mutually reinforcing dynamic between the peer advisors navigating their own political learning and facilitating political learning with others. The ways that peer advisors navigated these synergistic but also competing goals were nuanced. For instance, whereas MJ felt values-aligned in foregrounding their political beliefs when working with students, Diane, an education major, shared, "And so there was constantly things in [facilitation experience] it's like, this is how I go about this discussion and make them think, um, and really kind of start to figure out themselves in that way without shoving something down their throat."

Hence, we identified and highlight below strategies in the data that yielded synergistic outcomes for both individual and collective political learning within the peer advisor role. These strategies can be thought of as a toolkit for the peer leaders and included:

Beliefs (such as):
- Need to find/have common ground
- Be non-confrontational

Values (such as):
- Respecting differences
- Social Awareness
- Communication

Their attitudes, that bridged their beliefs and values, centered around tolerating or negotiating political spaces that are out of alignment with their values and beliefs. Maria, a political science major, explained,

I definitely think that a lot of students were really kind of caught up in the polarization of this last election. Um, and I really tried my best to be like, let's keep it very objective. Let's not, we don't need to make this argumentative, this needs to be an open objective conversation.

Maria, like other peer advisors interviewed, valued communication as a tool to support political learning and believed that cultivating a non-confrontational space was beneficial in her interactions with others to best support continued learning.

Related to communicating in ways that might be received well by peers, during the focus group, Diana, an education major, noted:

After the election I sent my [first year course] students kind of like a text just about like, Hey, or like this was like during the election, like time, like, and I did have like a [weekly check-in space]. [The text] was more like, if anyone like wants to talk about anything and I had a few students like pop on, it was like more individual though. Um, and it was more just about

kind of what we were just talking about, like their anchors with like, why is this like happening? Why is like the country so divided right now? Um, why like, can we get like straight forward answers on like the way the system works?

Notably, the just in time (i.e., after the election) communication via a medium (i.e., texting) that is approachable to students provided them a space to ask questions without fear of judgement for not knowing.

Another effective facilitation strategy was shared by Ila, who noted that "at first it was hard to facilitate cause nobody wanted to like say what they thought" – yet, after encouraging students to go through the planned political research activity and share what stood out to them, Ila continued by sharing:

> People were more willing to be like, Oh, like I agree with this policy. So people were more willing to talk about policies than they were individuals. So I thought that was easier. Like if we wanted to bring up a topic, people were okay talking about that. But if we brought up a candidate, people were less likely to, like, say who they were like aligned with.

This strategy highlights a commitment to understanding that the outcome of the experience was tied to helping the students interact across their political ideology and becoming prepared to be an informed voter. By shifting to policies and not candidates, the peer advisors were able to still achieve the goal of interaction and learning without stifling conversation because of worries about perceptions tied to supporting particular candidates.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on insights from our findings we conclude with specific recommendations for peer advisors and educators that work with peer advisors who interface with students in transition. There is a high likelihood that racial and political dynamics in the U.S. will remain as an inescapable component of new students' experiences. Therefore, a focus on political learning must become an explicit component of the type of training peer leaders participate in, similar to efforts to enhance peer advisor's capacity for diversity, equity, and inclusion or leadership development. In particular, there is an overlap in cultivating facilitation skills that encourage peer advisors to understand how their own political sensemaking and that of the students with whom they interact create opportunities for learning, support, and reflection.

In preparation for a training with peer leaders, we devised an acronym (V.O.T.E.S.) that builds on important components of effective facilitation and augments them into the political realm for peer leaders:

- **V** is for vulnerability, or the idea that peer advisors must model political vulnerability and encourage their community to be vulnerable in order to get past reductionist labels or perceptions of politics based on geography or visible identities.

- **O** is for outcomes, which is a reminder for peer leaders to be as clear and intentional as possible with setting outcomes when they are facilitating formal political learning experiences.

- **T** is for transition, which helps peer leaders remember that if tricky situations present themselves that are not in service of their outcomes, they should be prepared to deploy a range of strategies that help them transition to topics or exercises that keep the community on task.

- **E** is for equity and the necessary knowledge that peer advisors must possess to understand that the political arena does not position everyone within it in similar ways. Being cognizant of who is and is not speaking and devising ways to promote equitable participation is important.

- Finally, **S** is for speculate and a prompt to be mindful of how a peer leader is speculating about dimensions within their political facilitation exercise.

We suggest that the ability to facilitate political learning experiences for others in this or a similar manner be identified as one of the core outcomes of any onboarding or peer leader training curriculum. In addition, educators working with peer leaders should take advantage of the community building and personal development that can flow from centering political facilitation by noting how peer leaders own student political identity development evolves over the course of their experience (Morgan, 2021).

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