

Preparing Peer Leaders for Encounters with Student Mental Health Concerns

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A Brief Overview

College and university mental health professionals and administrators have observed that there is an increased demand for psychological services on campuses throughout the United States (Watkins, Hunt & Eisenberg, 2011). Researchers debate whether or not this trend signifies an increase in pathology among college students or simply an increase in help-seeking behavior. Nevertheless, according to several nationwide surveys, college students (first-year students in particular) appear to be reporting psychological distress at increasing numbers (ACHA-NCHA-II, 2012). Additionally, college and university personnel have also observed an increase in the severity of student distress (National Survey of Counseling Center Directors, 2008).

There is also some evidence that first-year students present to counseling centers with a common set of issues and concerns that may be somewhat unique (see poster). While there is some debate regarding the reason for this increase, the reality is that the demand for services has increased and the severity of psychological distress appears to be increasing as well.

Watkins (2011) and her colleagues effectively argue that the college experience provides individuals with a unique opportunity and environment to address psychological concerns. For many first-year students the traditional campus provides a focused, almost encapsulated environment where a broad range of interventions and programs might be initiated.

Very little scholarly research exists on the impact of growing mental health concerns on orientation activities or first-year and peer leader programming. Peer leaders and mentors have and will continue to encounter students with significant mental health issues. A NAMI study (2012) provided evidence that students with mental health concerns are pointed to appropriate resources by peers nearly as much as through other “official” venues and that discussing mental health concerns at orientation and through peer lead programs are listed as effective by students experiencing psychological distress.

Fiscal challenges coupled with the acknowledgment that orientation and first year peer leader programs are effective have led campuses to increasingly utilize peer leaders/mentors in a variety of ways. Due to their general visibility, outreach and their ability to connect with students, peer leaders may often become aware of a student’s mental health challenges well before other campus personnel.

Although peer leaders are not, nor should they be required to act as mental health professionals, they are, nevertheless, well positioned to assist first-year students and others in distress. The very nature of the peer leader/student relationship as well as peer leader access to individual students may precipitate the need for training that is more comprehensive in nature than might be currently provided.

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