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Student Transitions

2009 National Survey of Peer Leaders

In spring 2009, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted the National Survey of Peer Leaders. The purpose of this survey was to gather information on the characteristics of peer leadership programs and the perceived outcomes of the peer leadership experience for students.

A total of 3,733 institutional representatives were emailed with an invitation to forward the survey to their student peer leaders.

- » 3,733 invitations to surveys distributed
- » 1,972 surveys completed from 145 institutions
- » 1,748 respondents reported holding at least one student peer leader position (89.5% of respondents)

Characteristics of Peer Leader Roles and Programs

The sponsorship of peer leadership programs varied throughout the 1,748 respondents that reported holding at least one peer leader position. The six most common sponsors of peer leadership programs were academic (58.6%), orientation (31.6%), residence halls (29.6%), community service (25.2%), other (14.8%), and student government (11.6%).

Training was present for 83.6% of peer leaders responding.

<i>Duration of Training for Peer Leaders (n = 1,526)</i>	
	Percentage
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 longer)	36.6

Compensation for peer leaders varied also. Financial compensation ranked the highest (65.1%), course credit composed 21.9% of respondents, and other compensation (e.g., housing, career development, leadership development, graduate school preparation) was marked by 5.8% of respondents. Over half (50.5%) of peer leaders marked that their peer leadership position was volunteer-based (with no compensation).

Self-Rated Change as a Result of Peer Leader Experiences

Respondents reported gains in skills as a result of their peer leader experience. Out of respondents who marked “stronger” or “much stronger”, the six skills marked with the most change were interpersonal communication (93.8%), organization (80.7%), time management (79.5%), presentation (79.2%), written communication (60.7%), and academic skills (51.2%).

Over one third of peer leaders marked academic gains from their peer leader experience as positive (38.6%) and 15.4% marked very positive, while 38.4% marked neutral gains, and only 4% ranked negative impacts.

Self-Rated Impact on Undergraduate Experience (n = 1,654)

	Percentage
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
Interactions with diverse people	78.1
Desire to persist at institution	70.7

Students' Perceptions of Peer Leader Experience

When students were asked about the influence of their peer leader experience on academics, the following themes emerged:

- 1. How the PL experience impacted student *transition to the University*: Respondents reported improved time management skills, increased confidence, and added content-related knowledge, enabling them to better transition to the university setting. Respondents also reported challenges in navigating the work/play/study balance. At times, PL duties took priority over academics, negatively impacting academic success and behaviors.
- 2. How the PL experience impacted *social relationships*: 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. Peer leaders acknowledged the positive influence their fellow peer leaders had on academic success
- 3. How the PL experience impacted *post-graduation plans and preparation*: 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. Respondents also reported positive impacts looking forward. The PL experience helped focus future plans.

When asked about other aspects of the peer leader experience, several themes emerged including students reporting that the PL experience helped them *make connections* with their peers, faculty, and administration; how the PL experience helped expose them to *diversity*; and how the PL experience contributed to *personal growth and development*.

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