

# Exploring the Impact of Peer Leadership Experiences on Academic Development

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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*)
- Social and emotional development (*Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Guon, 1988; Harmon, 2006*)
- Leadership & career skills development (*Astin, 1993; Astin & Kent, Gardner, 2010; 1983; Pascarella, Ethington, & Smart, 1988; Schuh & Laverty, 1983*)



# A Look to the Literature: Peers

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

- 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 (*Bean, 1985; 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)*



# Peer Leadership: A Definition

Students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers. These services are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals, Students performing in [*these*] paraprofessional roles are usually compensated in some manner for their services and are supervised by qualified professionals.

*(Ender & Newton, 2000, 2010)*



# What should we call them?

*(Cuseo, 2010)*

- Peer Educator
  - Teaching functions
  - Academic development
- Mentor
  - Personal support
  - Guidance beyond academic development; more intensive
  - Occurs over a period of time
- Leader
  - Most comprehensive term
  - Promoting positive & ethical change among peers



# Typology of Peer Leader Roles

(Cuseo, 2010)

- Role model
- Personal support agent
- Resource-and-referral agent
- Academic-success or learning coach
- College success or life success coach



# Literature on Peer Leadership

- 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
- 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





# Discussion Questions

- How are peer leaders being used on your campus?
- Are peer leadership opportunities connected to the academic domain?
- How are peer leadership experiences in the co-curriculum framed to be academically purposeful activities?



- Limitations of past work on peer leaders
  - Most were institution-specific studies
  - Few focused on the experiences of the peer leaders
  - Not as focused on connection to academic development
- Research questions for the current study
  - What is the relationship between involvement in a peer leadership experience and students' perceptions of their academic development?
  - What specific characteristics of the peer leadership experience help or hinder students' self-rated academic development?



# 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 from 142 institutions



# 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



# Survey Definition of Peer Leadership

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.”



# General Results

- 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

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



## **\*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

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



# PLE: Self-Rated Change in Skills

<b>Skill</b>	<b>% Reporting “Stronger” or “Much Stronger”</b>
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	<b>93.8</b>
<b>Organization</b>	<b>80.7</b>
<b>Time management</b>	<b>79.5</b>
<b>Presentation</b>	<b>79.2</b>
<b>Written communication</b>	<b>60.7</b>
<b>Academic</b>	<b>51.2</b>



# PLE: Self-Rated Impact on Undergraduate Experience

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



# Exploring the Relationships

	Write	Present	Acad Skills	Fac Int	Persist
Athletics	.05*		.05*	.05*	.05*
Academic	.08***	.07**	.15***	.11***	.05*
Community service	.13***	.07**	.07**	.05*	.09**
Multicultural	.05*				
Orientation		.07**		.11***	.11***
Religious				-.06*	
Residence hall	.06*	-.05*	-.06*	-.10***	
Student productions	.06*				.07**
Study abroad	.07**		.08**		

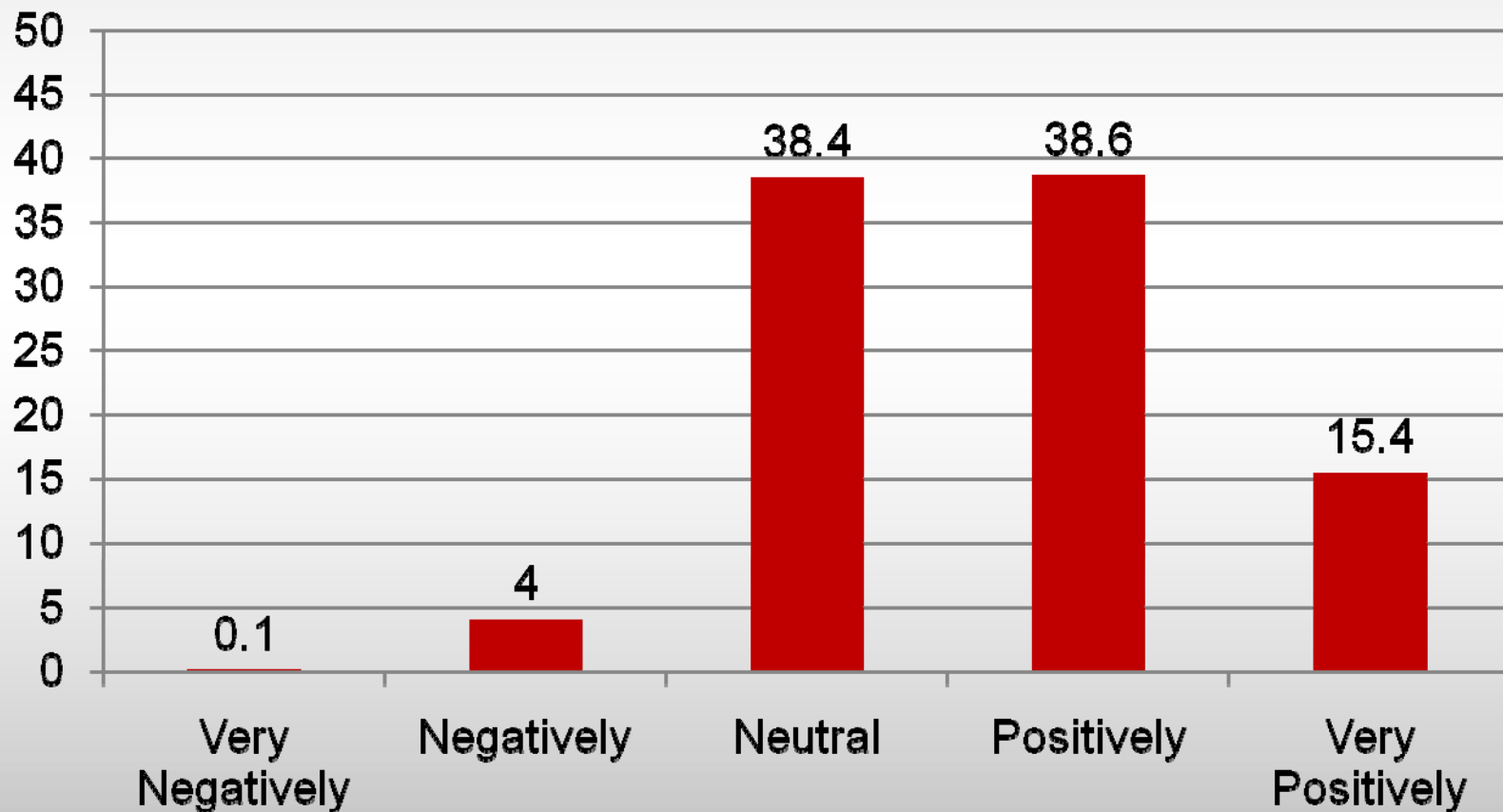


# Regression Analysis

- Dependent variable: “How has your peer leadership experience affected your academic performance?”
- Independent variables
  - Personal characteristics
  - Academic characteristics
  - Types of peer leadership experiences
  - Characteristics of peer leadership experiences
    - Training
    - Compensation



# DV: Self-Rated Impact on Academic Performance



# Regression Results

Variable	Beta
Non-Residential Student	-.07*
Housing: Off-Campus	.07*
PLE: Residence Hall	-.09**
PLE: Study Abroad	.06*
# of Current PLE	.08*
PLE Compensation: Credit	.08**



# Qualitative Data

- **Respondent Prompt:** Please describe how being a peer leader has affected your academic performance.
- 1,344 responses were recorded for this prompt.





# Theme #1: Transition

- **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. This was especially true in residential life positions.
- 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.*



# Qualitative Findings

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

- How the PL experience impacted student **transition to the institution**
- How the PL experience impacted **social relationships**
- How the PL experience impacted **post-graduation plans and preparation**



# Theme #1: Transition

- **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 # 2: 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: 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: 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: Future Focus

- Memorable Quote, Improved Academic Foundation:
  - *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: Future Focus

- **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 pursuing a career related to assisting students with writing, especially ESL students*





# Theme # 3: Future Focus

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



# Theme #3: Future Focus

- **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.



# Limitations

- Sample is not representative
  - “Snowball” sampling
- Limited measures of environmental/institutional factors
- Reliance upon self-rated measures of performance and skill development



# Conclusions

- Growth in the use of PLEs in academic roles
- PLEs reported the lowest levels of gains in academic development
- Peer leaders perceive that the PLE has positive outcomes
  - Self-rated development in skills
  - Enhanced undergraduate experience
  - Feeling “more connected to campus”
  - Persistence/retention



# Conclusions

- Specific PLEs seem to be associated with academic skills and performance
  - Academic
  - Service
  - Orientation
- Some underutilized PLEs show promise
  - Study abroad
  - Student productions
- PLEs in residential life show evidence of lesser or negative impact



# Conclusions

- PLEs reported impact on students they led, but also the impact of relationships with other PLEs as well as with faculty & staff
- PLEs in residence life positions most often reported time management difficulties negatively impacting academics
- Those PLEs whose jobs were linked to major/career noted positive academic impact more often than those with PLEs not linked to major/career



# Implications

- Peer leadership may be a valuable tool to support academic skill development
- Structure PLEs to :
  - Build upon positive networks among peer leaders
  - Integration of academic/career interest and PLE
  - Capitalize on credit as a compensation model for academic impact
- Examine PLEs in residential life to help students:
  - See transferable skills to major/career
  - Opportunities for academic development
  - Time management



# Discussion Questions

- How do these results fit with your understanding of PLEs on your own campus? Was anything surprising?
- Do your students see PLEs as a job or as a high-impact practice?
- How is/could your campus structuring PLEs as educationally-purposeful activities?





# **Other Implications for Your Campus?**

## **Questions?**



# For More Information

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