

Findings From a National Survey of Peer Leadership Experiences and Outcomes

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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
 - Most were institution-specific studies
 - Few focused on the experiences of the peer leaders
- Research questions for the current study
 - What are the characteristics of peer leadership programs in higher education?
 - What are the perceived outcomes of this experience for the peer leaders?



Data Source

- Peer Leadership Survey sponsored by NRC
- Administered in Spring, 2009
 - Sent 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 Sponsor 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 Common Peer Leader Roles**

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



Less Common Sponsor 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

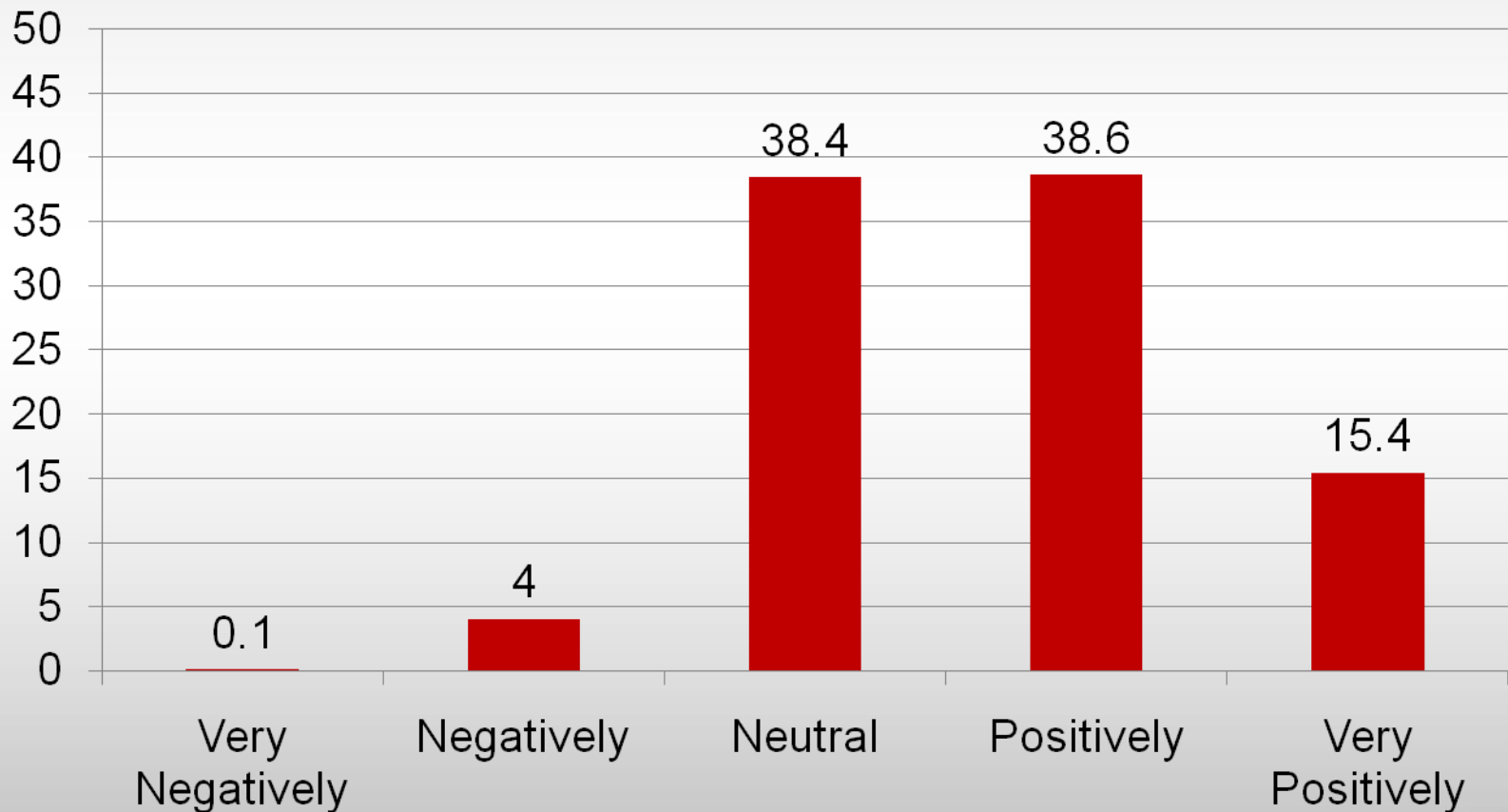


Self-Rated Impact on Undergraduate Experience

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

- “Please include anything else you would like to tell us about your peer leadership experience.”
- Of the total respondents, 588 students (almost 30%) chose to answer this open-ended question about their peer leadership experience(s) (PLE)



Qualitative Findings

- Responses were overwhelmingly positive
 - 535 responses (91%) were coded as positive
 - 29 students described both positive and negative aspects of PLE
 - 14 students described only negative aspects of PLE
 - 10 responses were coded as neutral



Qualitative Findings

- Of the positive responses, several prevalent themes emerged:
 - 133 students found PLE to be both intrinsically motivating and intrinsically fulfilling
 - 117 students reported making connections with both their peers and members of the faculty and administration as a result of PLE
 - 114 students reported personal growth and betterment as a result of PLE



Theme #1: Intrinsic Motivation

- 133 responses in this theme
- Memorable quote:
 - **“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.”**



Theme #1: Intrinsic Motivation

- Memorable quote:
 - **“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 #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
 - Only 43 responses (7%) contained references to extrinsic motivators to be a peer leader



Theme #2: Social Connections

- 117 respondents described having more networking opportunities as a result of PLE, including:
 - Camaraderie developed among fellow peer leaders
 - Relationships formed with the students they led
 - 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

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



Theme #2: Social Connections

- 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

- 114 responses in this theme
- Memorable quotes:
 - **“I am very glad that I chose to participate in leadership at my school. It has helped to shape me into the person I am today.”**
 - **“Whatever leadership role you are involved in, it really teaches you things you can’t learn in textbooks.”**



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:
 - “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 & Implications

- PLEs and Academics
 - Growth in the utilization of PLEs in academic roles
 - Academic development is the lowest for PLEs
- Emerging areas for PLE involvement
- Provides some national context for the structure of the PLE
 - Compensation
 - Training



Conclusions & Implications

- Peer leaders perceive that the PLE has positive outcomes
 - Self-rated development in skills
 - Enhanced undergraduate experience
 - Feeling “more connected to campus”
 - Persistence/retention
- Retention/Student Success task forces and committees may be interested in studying how PLE encourage students to connect with and stay at their institutions



Questions?

Thank you.

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