Why Utilize Peer Educators

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College and university administrators have long believed that peers can play a uniquely effective role in encouraging their peers to consider, talk honestly about, and develop responsible attitudes and lifestyles regarding a number of topics from alcohol to multiculturalism. The strength of peer influence has several benefits on the outcomes of student learning, attitudes, and behaviors. In fact, peers play the most significant role in an undergraduates growth and development during college (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Despite the fact that a large percentage of colleges and universities in the United States have invested in peer education, little is known about the outcomes that peer education has on being a peer educator. Some researchers have examined the effects of participating in peer education training on peer educators themselves, but most of the information gathered about the outcomes of being a peer educator has been anecdotal.

The unique impact that college peers have on each other is widely acknowledged and cited in the higher education literature (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). College undergraduate peers have such an important impact on each other; they are the single most potent source of influence on undergraduate student affective and cognitive growth and development during college (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999). Furthermore, the frequency and quality of students' interactions with peers extends to a positive association with college student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

College and university administrators recognized the important effect that peers have on one another and as a result look to these students to play a pivotal role in enhancing students’ undergraduate education. Peers serve in a variety of leadership and mentoring capacities (e.g., health peer educators, resident assistants) and present numerous programs to enhance the development of college and university students. Many programs are designed to change perceptions, behavior, and tolerance regarding issues such as alcohol and other drugs, smoking, unsafe sex, sexual assault, racism, and homophobia. The implementation of these programs by peers made the role that peer educators play on the campus community an important part of students’ undergraduate experiences and development.

Peer education programs gained popularity on college campuses (Gould & Lomax, 1993) because peer educators can communicate with other students in ways that faculty and administrators cannot. Peer education programs continue to grow exponentially because college-age students often feel more comfortable talking with peers when it comes to sensitive issues such as sexuality and drug use (Sawyer, Pinciaro, & Bedwell, 1997). In addition to how peers assist other students, peer educational programs are economical and provide leadership opportunities for students (Nichols & Lumley, 1999). Consequently, peer educators quickly become valued and respected student leaders on many college campuses.

References