

Chapter 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO PEER ADVISING

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Abstract

For a number of reasons, formal peer-advising programs for undergraduates are being implemented increasingly in higher education. A peer advising program is viewed as an important way to extend advising services to students and to enrich the student experience by engaging them in a paraprofessional role on campus. In this chapter, emphasis is placed on developing a framework through which to conceptualize and define peer advising and understand the myriad ways in which peer advisors are utilized to support the student experience. This discussion sets the stage for this monograph, which has been authored to explicate the critical elements of successful peer-advising programs.

This monograph was intentionally designed to introduce readers to the key ingredients of successful peer-advising programs, and the contributors have used examples determined by NACADA to be Exemplary Practices to highlight the concepts being framed within each chapter. Also interspersed throughout the monograph are Student Voices. These passages capture the peer advising experience as witnessed by peer advisors.

Learning Outcomes for Chapter 1

- Develop an understanding of the myriad paraprofessional roles that students play in colleges and universities.
- Develop a framework through which to conceptualize and define peer advising and peer advisors.
- Understand the enrichment that peer advising brings to the campus and student experience.
- Understand where and how peer advisors are utilized in higher education.
- Understand the format and topical emphases of this monograph.

Students in Paraprofessional Roles

In *Students Helping Students*, Ender and Newton (2000) acknowledge the myriad paraprofessional roles in which students have been and are engaged in colleges and universities across North America. The paraprofessional duties cover the range of student and academic affairs activities and include work as tutors, residence hall and orientation pro-

gram assistants, and health educators. In their book, Ender and Newton distinguished between students who assist with service and those who support student engagement and success in learning. Their term of preference is “paraprofessional peer educator,” which captures multifarious roles and activities.

Paraprofessional peer educators are students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers. The services have been intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals (Ender & Newton, 2000, p. 3).

Ender and Newton’s (2000) use of the terms *educator* and *paraprofessional* is particularly significant and relevant to this monograph. The peer educator assists others in the learning process; the paraprofessional has a specialized role for which training is required. In addition, the paraprofessional has a professional parallel. This relatively broad conception of a paraprofessional educator is well worth considering because academic advising is, rightfully, becom-

ing increasingly aligned with teaching. While not totally synonymous with teaching, academic advising is considered to be a process that is grounded in principles of teaching and learning and one that has expected outcomes (National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], 2004h). Thus, academic advising is an educational process, and those who work in academic advising may rightfully claim in their portfolios to be educators.

In addition, the importance of academic advising to student success has been well documented over the years, and as a result, campus efforts to improve the experience of all students, and in particular first-year students, often begin with changes to academic advising (Gardner, Barefoot, & Swing, 2001). Parallel to the increased emphasis on academic advising, the number of higher education faculty and staff members who have academic advisor as part of their formal duties or titles has also increased; this expanded recognition of advising functions has contributed to the professionalization of academic advising practice and to academic advising research as a field of study.

Peer Advising

Formal peer-advising programs are being implemented increasingly in higher education at the undergraduate level. In the sixth national ACT survey on the status of academic advising, Habley (2004, pp. 28–29) traced the evolution of peer advisors by undergraduate type from 1998 through 2003. The percentage of 4-year public and private institutions that do not use any form of peer advising has decreased by 6% from 1998 to 2003. Therefore, the percentage of 4-year public and private institutions that do use peers as advisors in some or all of their academic departments has increased. Four-year public colleges utilize peer advisors most intensively. Habley reported that 42% of the 4-year public colleges surveyed use peer advisors in at least some of their departments. A summer 2004 Google search on the key terms *peer advising higher education* produced over 200,000 entries, many of them describing peer advising programs at a variety of colleges and universities. Yet despite the growth in peer advising programs, little systematic research has been conducted on the effectiveness of peer advising programs. The contributors to this monograph address this paucity of information by presenting chapters about various aspects of peer advising and showcasing

“Like a dedicated coach, my advisor told me of the importance of commitment, cheered me on when I needed motivation and lifted my morale when I was at an all time low.”

*Peer Advisor
Borough of
Manhattan
Community
College*

programs, from a variety of institutional types, that meet the NACADA criteria of an Exemplary Practice.

Although formal peer-advising programs began proliferating in the 1970s, informal peer advising has probably existed since the first institution of higher education opened its doors. Students have always relied on other students for information about campus policies and procedures, majors, professors, and courses. Many students consider their fellow students to be more accurate sources of academic information than faculty and staff. Moffat (1989, p. 286), an anthropologist who described student life at Rutgers University in the 1980s, wrote:

Almost all the students believed that the general advisers available in one of the dean’s offices knew very little about the real nitty-gritty of the curriculum; they believed they could learn of it much more reliably from their peers.

However, faculty members and administrators are aware that informal peer advising offered through the campus grapevine can be incomplete and unreliable as well as deter students from taking advantage of the services of knowledgeable, trained advisors. Through peer advising programs, undergraduates are trained to serve as advising paraprofessionals, giving complete and reliable academic information to their peers while providing a personal connection.

Developing a Shared Understanding of Peer Advising

As one reviews the literature and the Exemplary Practices featured in this monograph, he or she will find a litany of names emerging for academic advising programs that engage students in paraprofessional academic-advising roles. *Peer assistants, peer mentors, student advisors, peer advisors, and student ambassadors* are all names that have been used in juxtaposition with peer advising. In much the same way that a shared understanding of the elements that constitute academic advising is more important than a uniform organizational structure and delivery system for the same, having a shared understanding of the characteristics of peer advising is more important than having a uniform nomenclature. Drawing from Ender and Newton’s (2000) notion of paraprofessional peer educator, in this monograph the contributors have defined peer advis-

ing, and in turn, peer advisors, simply and broadly:

Peer advising is an educational process in which students are intentionally connected with other students to support learning and success.

Peer advisors are students who have been selected and trained to offer academic advising services to their peers. These services are intentionally designed to assist in student adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence toward attainment of their educational goals.

What specific roles do peer advisors play? Peer advisors generally serve six purposes. They

- help new students transition to and through the institution or a specific school or department within the institution by offering a friendly peer contact.
- help advisees master basic academic processes such as scheduling classes or declaring majors.
- teach and reinforce student skills for success, such as time management or study skills, either in individual conferences or in workshops and group advising sessions.
- act as referral sources for their advisees.
- enrich faculty or staff advising by offering a different but complementary point of view from faculty or staff advisors' perspectives and by providing advising at alternative times (evening or weekend) and in alternative venues (residence halls or student-center lounge areas).
- are role models for successful students.

In addition to serving in a variety of roles, peer advisors also work with a variety of populations. Many, if not most, peer advising programs target first-year students as a primary population. Some models target subsets within the first-year cohort; others may target specific peers or offer differentiated programs through which advisors work with subsets of first-year students. For instance, some peer-advising programs have offerings designed

“This experience has improved my communication skills, given me the opportunity to network with both faculty and students, and increased my sense of belonging in a place where it is easy to get lost. . . . Peer advising has been my most valuable experience as an undergraduate. It has enriched my academic career and has better prepared me for the future.”

*Peer Advisor
Indiana
University–
Purdue
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Indianapolis*

especially for adult, at-risk, or minority students. Swarthmore College designates specific peer advisors for students with disabilities. A smaller number of programs have been designed for continuing students. For instance, the University of Central Florida (UCF) has programs devoted to business and psychology majors.

Does Peer Advising Make a Positive Difference?

Although not much research has been devoted to the topic, the existent scholarship shows that peer advising has a positive impact on students. Frisz and Lane (1987) found that advisees at several institutions view peer advisors as helpful both with transitional problems and with issues relating to educational development. Nelson and Fonzi (1995, p. 42) found that more than 80% of students who used the services of a departmentally based peer-advising program expressed satisfaction with such advising functions as availability, advising for educational and career issues, and referrals. Assessment conducted for programs cited as Exemplary Practices in this monograph shows that students continue to be highly satisfied with peer advising. Contacts with peer advisors can lead to increased involvement with the institution, academic success, and retention at the institution as well as satisfaction with the process. Russel and Skinkle (1990) found that students who interact with peer advisors demonstrate greater involvement in campus activities. Davis and Ballard (1985) found that 2 semesters of peer advising can have a significant, positive effect on the grade-point averages (GPAs) of at-risk students, and Vanderpool and Brown (1994) discovered that programs utilizing peer advising have a higher retention rate than those in which peer advisors are not used.

Peer advising programs have positive impact on peer advisors as well as on advisees. Typically peer advisors receive leadership training that may involve communication and mediation skills as well as diversity training. Frisz (1999) noted that peer advisors who had received training in multicultural sensitivity found that the training helped them in situations beyond their peer advising role. Because they encourage their advisees to reflect on their academic development, peer advisors become more self-reflective

(Romer, 1992). In "Identifying the Merits of Sophomore Involvement in New Student Orientation," Branch, Taylor, and Douglas (2003, p. 19) pointed out that peer advisors' and mentors' satisfaction, retention, and academic success can increase because of their sense that they matter to their institution. Peer advisors from Lynchburg College, University of Southern Maine (USM), and other institutions report that they plan to choose careers in higher education or continue with postgraduate study as a result of their experiences as peer advisors. Other advantages for students who work as peer advisors are expressed by the Student Voices featured in this monograph.

Peer advising programs have positive impact on the faculty and professional staff members who work with the student paraprofessionals as do the departments of which the programs are a part. In their review of a newly implemented peer-advising program, Diambra and Cole-Zakrzewski (2002, p. 62) identified four programmatic benefits that were shared by both peer advisors and the faculty advisors who supervised them:

1. A shared perspective inherent in a student-student relationship allows for a unique and personal advising relationship.
2. Advising accessibility increases spontaneous advising and was especially noted around shared classes among peer advisors and advisees.
3. Peer advisor responses to student curriculum- and academic-related questions benefit faculty members.
4. Major events . . . increase program visibility and camaraderie among faculty members and students.

Peer Advising Program Types

What are the most common types of peer advising programs? Four types predominate: friendly contact programs, programs that pair peer advisors and faculty or professional staff advisors, peer advisors as paraprofessionals within a centralized advising center, and peer advisors as paraprofessionals within residence halls.

Friendly contact is the least intensive type of peer advising program and is characterized by a primary focus on transition and referral. For instance, a pro-

"My decision to become a peer advisor was influenced from the desire to help first year students adjust to life in college and also from my own experiences with my peer advisor. I remember how amazed, not to mention relieved, I was by all of the assistance Notre Dame provided to first year students in order to make the transition to college as smooth as possible."

*Peer Advisor
University of
Notre Dame*

gram at Oregon State University described in a 1994 article by Vanderpool and Brown had peers making three telephone contacts per term to adult learners, offering general advice and making referrals. The Oregon State University program is fairly typical of the friendly contact type in which peers intentionally connect with new students during the course of the first critical semester of attendance.

Programs that pair peer advisors and faculty or professional staff advisors are common, especially at smaller colleges and universities. The ways in which pairs are made varies among campuses. At the University of Notre Dame, four peer advisors are paired with one professional staff advisor to work with a student cohort. At both Franklin Pierce College and Linfield College, peer and faculty advisors co-advise a cohort of freshman advisees within the context of an extended orientation course.

Colleges and universities with centralized advising structures may have peer advisors who work as paraprofessionals within the center or at satellite centers in residence halls. The Borough of Manhattan Community College and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa offer Exemplary Practices in this common program type.

Some peer advising programs have a formal residence-hall component. For instance, the University of Michigan, which offers several Exemplary Practices in peer advising, has specially designated peer advisors who live in the residence halls.

However, many peer-advising programs, particularly those at colleges with decentralized organizational models of advising, are hybrids incorporating more than one of the four types. For example,

USM has primarily a split organizational model of academic advising, with a central advising office to serve the needs of a subset (undeclared and provisionally admitted) of its student body. Because USM is composed of three campuses in different geographic locations, the need for more than one centralized advising center is clear. USM has a satellite advising center that is housed within a residence hall allowing residents who desire it easy on-site access to peer advising services. In the Department of Environmental Science and Policy, peer advisors are paired with faculty advisors and assist students in identifying courses as well as in obtaining referrals

to needed academic and personal support; in the Psychology Department peer advisors are utilized as friendly contacts for newly admitted psychology majors.

Contents of the Peer Advising Monograph

When developing this monograph, we wanted to ensure that the topics we thought important are consistent with topics thought most important to the monograph's intended audience. A survey of peer advising was developed and administered to the NACADA membership. Sixty-nine people, representing 45 institutions, completed the survey. The colleges and universities represented by the respondents ranged in size from under 2,000 to over 40,000 undergraduate students and included associate's colleges, baccalaureate colleges, master's colleges and universities, and doctorate-granting institutions. The major issues and questions that these respondents expressed with regard to peer advising confirmed our own thoughts about the contents most appropriate for this monograph. The following are among the significant topics identified:

1. Recruitment and selection of peer advisors
2. Training and developing peer advisors
3. Organization and delivery models
4. Finance issues
5. Promoting peer advising
6. Supervision and evaluation of peer advisors
7. Assessment and evaluation of peer advising programs
8. Legal and ethical issues

This monograph is organized as a guide to the development of peer advising programs. In Chapter 1, we set the stage for topics the reader can expect to encounter throughout this monograph. We began with a discussion of the roles that peer advisors play in colleges and universities and present a definitional lens through which to view peer advising. We briefly reviewed the positive impact peer advising programs have had on campuses and identified four ways in which the peer advising role is enacted. Readers of this monograph will be quick to note that many of the subsequent chapters begin with a review of the nature and growth of peer advising, and in some cases, the positive elements of peer advising programs. This overlap of topics and content areas is intentional, for each of the authors, in her remarks, extends the literature and research review of advising and thus provides readers of this monograph a more extensive bibliography of resources about peer advising than is contained in any single chapter.

In Chapter 2, Choosing a Model and Mode of Delivery, Victoria McGillin and Harmony Hayes reinforce the need to be clear about one's purpose in designing a peer advising program and then extend the discussion to a consideration of issues involved in selecting a model and making structural and delivery decisions about the program. In this comprehensive chapter, McGillin and Hayes guide readers through the difficult process of selecting a model that is responsive and reflective of campus culture. They use, as a guide, Habley's (1983, 2000) works on organizational models for academic advising as they would apply to peer advising programs as described in Pardee's chapter in *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive Handbook* (Gordon & Habley, 2000).

In Chapter 3, From Theory to Practice: Designing a Peer Advising Program, Kathleen Murphy and Barbara Mellix use their own experiences at the University of Pittsburgh to focus on identifying objectives or outcomes for peer advising programs. They emphasize the importance of this critical stage in designing a program in which one addresses the needs of the advising unit, and more important, the students served. This emphasis is reflected in their discussion of how goals and objectives for peer advising programs must emanate from and be reflected in the missions, goals, objectives, and outcomes for the advising unit and the institution.

Deborah Johnson and Kim-Marie Martin Jenkins, in Chapter 4, Recruiting, Selecting, and Developing Peer Advisors, continue a discussion of program planning by focusing on the details of building a peer advising initiative. Drawing on their own experiences at USM, as well as from the experiences detailed in the Exemplary Practice programs cited in this monograph, they explore multiple models of recruiting and selecting peer advisors. They then extend their work to affirm the importance of providing comprehensive and appropriate peer-advisor training and development to maximize the experience for peer advisors and ensure consistent, quality work with students.

In Chapter 5, Administrative Issues: Supervision, Evaluation, Budget, Funding, and Legal Issues, Mari Normyle directly addresses critical underpinnings for any successful peer-advising program. In her discussion, she clearly defines roles, duties, and responsibilities for peer advisors. She identifies the need for a professional staff or faculty member to be designated as the coordinator or supervisor of the peer advising program, an effective process for evaluating both the individual performances of the peer advisors and the program itself, and a commitment of sufficient resources for the program to meet stated

goals. She continues by considering legal and ethical issues about which program developers ought to be concerned and encourages incorporation of these issues into training programs for peer advisors.

Throughout this monograph, readers will find examples drawn from the Exemplary Practice institutions that were selected for inclusion. These practices are intended to highlight the topics discussed within the chapter and to help the reader think about how to incorporate the important elements into their own campus cultures. In addition, because peer advising programs should also be designed as opportunities for student development for the students selected as advisors, sections called Student Voices are interwoven throughout this monograph. They capture the importance of ensuring that as peer advising programs are considered, the student experience, and in particular, the student learning experience, remains at the forefront of the program design.