

WHITE PAPER SERIES

# Peer leadership:

Harnessing its power at every stage of the student lifecycle

**Jennifer A. Latino, Ed.D.**, Principal Strategic Consultant, Ellucian®

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The power of peer influence on human development is well documented. And higher education has been harnessing this power to improve student success for decades.

Yet many peer leadership programs are geared toward first year students or are limited in scope. To realize the full potential for peer influence to improve outcomes, institutions need holistic, well-managed systems that integrate peer leaders at every stage of the student lifecycle.

## Why make the investment?

For as long as children have been claiming that, “Everyone else is doing it,” parents have been replying, “If Johnny jumped off a bridge, would you follow him?” The fact is, many of us would. Peer pressure is a powerful enabler.

There is a distinct difference between childhood Johnny who urged you to make poor choices and the peer leaders you’ll find on college campuses. The latter are defined as “students selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers that are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals.”<sup>1</sup> They are also referred to as peer educators and peer mentors.

Decades of research supports the notion that peers are an influential aspect of the college experience. As early as 1968, the Committee

on the Student in Higher Education noted that the most effective teachers on campus were other students.<sup>2</sup> Then in 1993, noted scholar Alexander Astin concluded that “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the influence of peers on personal development, higher education theory and research have also shown that they play a large role in student success. They positively impact students’ transition to college, satisfaction levels, learning and academic performance, and persistence and retention.

Further validation and support for these findings continues to grow as evidenced by the increased use of peers in the academic and social aspects of undergraduate life.

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1 Newton, F.B. & Ender, S.C., (2010), *Students helping students: A guide for peer educators on college campuses*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

2 The Hazen Foundation, (1968), “*The Student in Higher Education*,” *Report of the Committee on the Student in Higher Education*, New Haven, CT

3 Astin, A.W., (1993), *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

A peer leadership program also benefits the peers themselves, as well as the institution.

Peers develop marketable skills that help them succeed after graduation [see sidebar on page

## What roles do peer leaders play?

While the most common use of peers over the past several decades has been to assist with residential life and orientation programs, they are now used in a wide range of roles:

- **Providing individual support** as role models, resource and referral agents, and academic success or learning coaches.
- **In leadership positions** at placement, religious, and counseling centers; advising and career development programs; judicial affairs; and campus clubs and activities.
- **As educators and ambassadors**, including community service leaders, health and wellness educators, and transfer support agents.

Regardless of the roles that make most sense for your institution, a comprehensive peer leadership strategy is critical to driving early and ongoing engagement and increasing student success at every point in the higher education lifecycle.

## What does a good peer leadership program look like?

Taking a comprehensive, holistic approach to peer leadership is critical to success. That means designing strategies and tactics for using peers to engage students from the recruiting phase through to alumni status. In doing so, you will create

8]. And institutions increase retention and graduation, while deepening their relationship with high performing students who will also become successful alumni.

## Peer leadership at Delta State University

“Nothing quite enriches a student’s own experience like a well-trained and caring peer mentor. At Delta State, we’ve seen Peer Mentors not only working in the classroom with students, but outside as well. Peer Mentors guide students (sometimes literally) through campus. They advocate for their mentees with professors and staff that they’ve already established rapport with. They relish the opportunity to have input on activities, and they appreciate the trust placed in them. In doing all of this, the institution gets a double win—an incoming student with an excellent support network and an upperclassman with unique leadership and guidance skills.”

### JONATHAN E. WESTFALL, PH.D.,

Assistant Professor of Psychology, Coordinator of First Year Seminar, Coordinator of Okra Scholars, Division of Student Success Center, Delta State University

a culture of peer support and increase the impact of high performing students on your institution.

It's also vital to invest in systems, both technological and managerial, that enable faculty and staff to administer an integrated peer leadership program.

What follows is a look at best practices for using peer leaders to enhance student success at various stages of the college experience.

## Using peer leaders to improve recruiting

Many institutions use peers as tour guides for prospective students and as ambassadors at recruiting events. But social media has opened up a whole new avenue for peers to engage with prospects and to enrich the information at their disposal as they decide whether to apply or enroll.

How? Any good marketer will tell you that people respond more positively to content that comes from an actual person sharing a compelling story. Social media is defined by first-person stories and opinions, as well as peer-to-peer referrals and recommendations. And social media is where your prospective students spend a great deal of their time. So have peers meet them there.

Authentic first-person stories from peers will help prospects get a better sense of whether your school is right for them. Peer stories about lessons learned can also help prospects improve their applications or better prepare for their first year once enrolled.

The key is to connect peers and prospects directly, as opposed to carefully curating stories to fit a specific marketing message. A few ideas:

- Encourage peers to post videos about campus life on your YouTube channel.
- Create a Facebook forum or Twitter event where prospective students can ask questions of current students.
- Have different students contribute to an ongoing “day-in-the-life” blog, presenting the campus experience from a variety of perspectives.
- Invite students who are studying abroad or participating in other unique activities to guest blog or post videos in order to demonstrate the range of opportunities your institution offers.
- Turn over your school's Instagram account to a student for a day and ask him or her to post photos that bring your campus to life.

The key is to make sure that—as you are evaluating prospective students—they have the richest insights possible as they evaluate you.

## Using peers to engage new, first-year, and transitioning students

We most often see the use of peers to support first-year and transitioning students. Upper-division students serve as admissions ambassadors, orientation leaders, and first-year seminar mentors. These proactive early engagement strategies provide new students with a feeling of connection to campus resources and culture.

First-year students relate well to upper-class students and often take their cues from

experienced peers.”<sup>4</sup> That’s why it’s important to select peers with high academic achievement and extensive leadership involvement on campus—giving new students regular interaction with those who demonstrate successful behavior. Applying this positive peer pressure as new students are first establishing their academic and social habits is key.

The first-year seminar is a particularly important venue for peer impact. Identified as a “High Impact Practice,”<sup>5</sup> these courses are designed to provide new students with a strong foundation and a space where they can interact with and learn from one another. Coupling a peer with a faculty member to co-facilitate these seminars provides new students with a richer, more balanced introduction to their new community.

## Using peers in retention and student success

### Early alerts and interventions

An early alert system is critical to student success at every stage of the education lifecycle. Early alerts are a systematic effort to identify and support students at risk—before they fail a class, drop out, face inordinate social or emotional struggles, or experience other negative outcomes.

There is a significant opportunity for peer leaders to enhance the effectiveness of the early alert system. But all too often their engagement begins and ends with first-year students. By taking advantage of the unique interactions shared only among peers, institutions can

improve their ability to identify issues and deliver support.

### The traditional early alert system

Early alerts are comprised of two key components—the alert and the intervention. The alert is a formal, feedback mechanism through which student-support agents are alerted to “red flags” regarding student success. The intervention is the systematic outreach implemented to positively respond to an alert to provide intrusive and individualized support to students in need.

Too often, early alerts are reactive, developed in response to students displaying at-risk behavior (ex. low test scores, class absences) who have been reported by a concerned faculty member. Staff typically respond to these alerts by meeting with the student of concern, discussing the barriers to their success, and developing a plan for getting back on track—emphasizing the use of campus resources and programs (ex. tutoring services, academic coaching, counseling services). Proactive support from peers can greatly enhance these efforts.

### How do peers support early alerts and interventions?

Unlike faculty or staff who keep regular office hours, peer leaders can interact with students at all hours of the day, allowing for a broader reach. In a strong peer leadership program, students can find peers everywhere from residence halls to health services, first-year seminars to academic advising, and in unstructured casual settings across campus.

4 Latino, J.A. & Unite, C., (2012), “Providing academic support through peer education,” In Keup, J. Peer education, *New Directions for Higher Education*  
5 Kuh, George D., (2008), “High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter,” *Association of American Colleges & Universities*

Students will often share things more willingly with peers than with a faculty or staff member. Once they do, the peer educator can make an appropriate referral for assistance. The peer can also use communication vehicles that are more comfortable for students and that encourage greater candor—such as email, text, and social media.<sup>6</sup>

## Top 10 transferable skills of peer leaders

When hiring recent college graduates, employers are looking for more than just a degree. Many of the skills they view as most important are developed through leadership experiences like peer education. These include:

1. Verbal communication skills
2. Strong work ethic
3. Ability to work in a team
4. Analytical skills
5. Initiative
6. Problem solving skills
7. Written communication skills
8. Interpersonal skills
9. Computer skills
10. Flexibility/adaptability

*Source: Job Outlook, National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2011*

When engaging peers in the early alert process, issues of confidentiality need to be considered. Since peer educators are intentionally selected and trained for the role, they often have experience with privacy issues, confidentiality, and appropriate referral practices. However, early alert coordinators should revisit these issues regularly in both training and ongoing development.

## Using peers in academic support

Using peers in academic settings is not a new concept. Peers providing support for one another dates back to the colonial period of American higher education, when students served as tutors for one another. The role of the peer has evolved, but the tradition of students helping students has been a consistent component of the college learning experience.

A key to proactive engagement is introducing students to academic support resources early in their education and then continuing to encourage their use. Many new students are intimidated to walk into the campus counseling center, tutoring center, financial aid office, or any other office with which they are unfamiliar.<sup>7</sup> Peer involvement can alleviate anxiety and make students more receptive to help.

A good example of peer involvement in academic support is the Supplemental Instruction (SI) program. Founded at the University of Missouri at Kansas City in 1973, SI targets historically difficult courses, identifies students who have done well in the past, and

<sup>6</sup> Cuseo, J., (2010), "Peer power: Empirical evidence for the positive impact of peer interaction, support and leadership," E-Source, 7(4), 4-6.

<sup>7</sup> Latino, J. A. & Ashcraft, M. L., (2012), "The first-year seminar: Designing, implementing, and assessing courses to support student learning and success," Vol. 4. *Using peers in the classroom*, University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, Columbia, SC

# My personal experience with peer leadership

Before joining Ellucian, I was an Assistant Vice President for Student Success at a mid-sized, faith-based institution. I regularly engaged peers in the early alert outreach and response effort. One example in particular drives home the power of peer leadership:

I received an early alert on a freshman student-athlete. I contacted him and asked that he schedule a meeting with me to discuss his experience on campus thus far. I copied his coach on the email to ensure the right stakeholders were engaged in the intervention. The student was sufficiently motivated to schedule a meeting within the week. During our conversation, it became apparent that this student did not lack the cognitive ability to succeed at the college level but did lack some of the academic behaviors most often displayed by successful students. He was struggling with organizational and time management skills. His study items—class notes, textbook notes, self-testing tools, etc.—were not completed at a high enough quality. And he had never taken advantage of an academic success resource on campus.

I recommended this student meet with an Academic Coach—a peer educator selected and trained to assist students with cross-disciplinary success behaviors and habits. He reluctantly agreed to at least an initial one-hour session.

After the first meeting, the Academic Coach reported that the student's self-assessment showed the highest level of need in the areas of Time Management, Testing Strategies, and Using Academic Resources. The student agreed to meet with the Academic Coach once a week, focusing on specific short-term goals around each of these scales.

I reviewed the weekly coaching sessions, noting the progression of the coach's comments. The student demonstrated significant progress, thanks to some tangible and immediately applicable strategies demonstrated by the Academic Coach and then practiced by the student—e.g. textbook reading strategies; using flashcards to aid in memorization; and integrating reading and in-class notes to create a study guide. Their weekly sessions included short, completable, weekly academic strategies. And accountability—the act of checking in each week and demonstrating proficiency in a new success habit—was an effective motivator.

Our intervention kept this student from incurring non-satisfactory academic progress. Armed with effective study strategies, he had a successful semester academically, and, he learned how to successfully tap into the resources and support available in his campus community.



engages them to lead out-of-class, supplemental instructional sessions. The peer educators use these sessions to revisit course material using engaging and innovative teaching methods designed to improve performance.

## Benefits to peers

Peer education also benefits the peers themselves. Research shows that students who prepare to teach material to other students gain a greater understanding of the concepts.<sup>8</sup> Peers are also afforded the unique opportunity to interact with faculty members outside of class. This type of substantive interaction between students and faculty is imperative to student engagement.<sup>9</sup>

In the 2009 National Survey of Peer Leaders, students indicated an improvement in their own skills as a result of involvement in peer leadership. Specifically, students noted gains in the following skills: interpersonal communication; organization; time management; written communication; and general academic skills. Additionally, 70% of respondents indicated that their role as a peer leader positively impacted their “desire to persist” at their institution.<sup>10</sup>

## Other roles for peer leaders

### Academic advising

The advising experience is one of the most influential on a student's perception of their college experience.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is important

that it be fulfilling and sustained. However, given their varied and competing responsibilities, faculty can't always provide the depth of support required.

While peers shouldn't serve as primary academic advisors, they can effectively complement a faculty advising program.<sup>12</sup> For example, by offering pre-registration education for new students—demonstrating how to navigate the system and course catalog—peer leaders free faculty to spend more time on meaningful advising and mentoring.

The National Academic Advising Association found that over 65% of institutions responding to a 2004 survey use peers in the academic advisement process.<sup>13</sup>

### Academic coaching

Academic coaching is a peer-led intervention that can be both proactive and reactive in the engagement cycle. Coaches can support early identified at-risk students as they adjust to the academic rigor of college. They can also be a referral resource when a student has been identified as displaying concerning academic habits. Unlike tutors or SI leaders, academic coaches are not specific to one discipline, but rather, they help students develop skills that are applicable to their overall study habits and academic success.

Peer coaches can help students develop skills needed both within and outside of the classroom. A common tactic used in academic

8 Whitman, N.A., (1988), “Peer Teaching: To Teach is to Learn Twice,” *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 4.*, Association for the Study in Higher Education, Washington, DC

9 Kuh, G. D., (2003), “What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE,” *Change*, 35, 24-32

10 2009 National Survey of Peer Leaders, National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina

11 Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., & Whitt, E.J., (2005), *Student Success in College*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

12 Clason, M. & Beck, J., (2001), “Creative Peer Leadership: Beyond the Classroom,” In S.L. Hamid (Ed.), *Peer Leadership: A Primer on Program Essentials* (Monograph No. 32), National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina

13 Koring, H., (2005), “Peer advising: A win-win initiative,” *Academic Advising Today*, 28(2). Retrieved from [www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Peer-Advising-A-Win-Win-Initiative](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Peer-Advising-A-Win-Win-Initiative)

coaching is goal setting. Coaches help students set goals, as well as develop the steps needed to achieve them. Following up and following through with goal setting improves accountability and is unique to the coach role—mostly due to the one-on-one connection between coach and coachee.

### Innovations in peer leadership

Looking forward, we see great opportunities for innovation in the area of peer leadership. Higher education institutions are getting more data than ever before, as well as new tools for integrating and sharing information campus wide. Applying these new capabilities to peer leadership holds exciting possibilities. Identifying at-risk students earlier, creating more tailored matches between student and peer, tracking outcomes and improving strategies over time, and developing and scaling best practices—can all lead to greater student success and retention.

Social media—and the connection-oriented culture in which students live today—are also

poised to enable greater peer impact on student success. Students are already accustomed to seeking help through apps and Web sites to manage and improve their lives—as well as to share and discuss life's challenges more openly. Institutions should proactively create social channels that connect peer leaders with new or at-risk students in order to take advantage of these new norms.

In many cases, students are already using social media at school to find study partners, form Facebook groups for specific classes or majors, locate help, or share concerns. You can build on this activity by using their communications and interactions to learn more about student needs and adjust your own strategies accordingly. It's also becoming imperative that student resources be easily accessible on mobile devices.

Regardless of how, when, and where you connect students who need help with high performing peers, it's important to build a culture of support and tie peer leadership directly to your institution's goals for student and institutional success.



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Headquarters: 4375 Fair Lakes Ct, Fairfax, Virginia 22033, USA  
Phone: +1 800.223.7036

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