Benefits of Peer Pressure: The Positive Impact of Peer Leaders in Learning Communities

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Overview

• NIU
• TLC program
• What is a Peer Leader
• Peer Leader program:
  – Recruiting
  – Training
  – Curriculum
  – Roles
• MAP-Works
• Assessing
Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) at NIU

- Implemented in 2010
- 2-4 linked courses taken by students, all of which examine a certain theme (e.g. Business Ethics)
- At least one general education course in the bundle
- Peer Leader
Why Utilize Peer Leaders?

• Teaching and learning can occur between students inside and out of the classroom
• Growing trend toward student leaders/mentors as student populations rise
• Mentoring encourages growth of both the mentee and mentor
• Easier access to students than faculty/staff

Colvin & Ashman (2010)
Self-Authorship stresses the importance of learning partnerships, emphasizing the importance of student/educator collaboration (Baxter-Magolda, 2001).

Students who are more engaged/involved in their institution will be more likely to succeed and matriculate (Astin, 1984).

Peer Leader position provides challenges to students in leadership while supporting them through the experience (Sanford, 1967).
Definition of a Peer Leader

- Upper-classman student who assists students and faculty with their TLC
- Have been academically successful in the courses included in the TLC bundle, and often are pursuing a career related to the TLC theme
- Peer Leaders:
  - host weekly study sessions
  - attend at least one TLC course
  - host social events to build community
How OSEEL Recruits Peer Leaders

• TLC faculty recommend students
• Campus Advertisements (e.g., chalking, TV screen slides)
• Website Advertisement
• Application online and via email
• Peer Leaders fill out application
• Interviews are held spring & summer
Compensating Peer Leaders

- 5-7 hours per week
- Minimum wage ($8.25/hour) paid through HR as student employee

While compensation helps, NIU’s first-year experience course (UNIV 101) does not compensate Peer Instructors. Peer Instructors for UNIV 101 are volunteers, often interested in teaching and education or helping others, and do FANTASTIC work.
Peer Leader Duties

- Attend at least one TLC class a week
- Communicate weekly with TLC faculty
- Attend weekly Peer Leader Meeting
- Host at least one study session per week
- Host regular social events
- Meet one on one with TLC administration throughout semester
- Check in with struggling students

Total Contact Hours of Peer Leaders Fall 2012

- Training: 16.5
- Attended TLC Class: 33.25
- Faculty Meetings: 14
- OSEEL Staff Meetings: 45
- Study Sessions: 102.75
- Field Trips: 106.5
- Student Check-Ups: 20
- Events: 11
- Misc.: 14

Total: 214.25 hours
Peer Leader Training

• Mandatory training in August
• Joint training with other OSEEL Peer Leaders
• 9:00 AM – 3:00 PM
Peer Leader Training

Topics Covered:
• Peer Leader Expectations
• First-Year Challenges
• Campus Resources
• Individual Concerns
• Collaborating with Faculty
• Professionalism
• Facilitating Study Sessions
• Additional Responsibilities
• Important Dates
• Questions & Evaluation

Logistics handled:
• Fill out HR Paperwork
• Take Pictures
• Give T-shirts/Gear
TLC Weekly Meetings

• Peer Leaders required to attend weekly meeting
• TLC Graduate Assistant developed weekly meeting agenda, topics, and activities
• Topics covered regularly: Individual and TLC check-in; MAP-Works updates
Weekly Topics:
• TLC 101
• Communication Styles
• Hosting a Study Session and Utilizing Learning Styles
• Understanding Leadership Styles
• Understanding Emotional Intelligence
• Working with Unresponsive Students
• Keeping Students Motivated the Internal & External
• Caring for you: Health and Wellness
• Resume Writing
• Using Open Questions
• Working with Multicultural Students
• Support Through Finals
• Final Wrap-Up and Reflection

Strategies Utilized:
• Role Playing
• Student Scenarios
• YouTube Videos
• Writing Reflection
• Icebreakers
• Drawing
• Group Discussion
First-year academic challenges include:

- Development of study skills
- Motivation to learn
- Unrealistic expectations of workload
- Unprepared for college level study
- Wrong choice of degree program/uncertainty

Bowles, Dobson, Fisher, & McPhail (2011)
Colvin & Ashman (2010)
Peer Leaders provide:

- extra one on one tutoring
- role model for how to study and balance school and social life
- at least one study session a week
- support for struggling students (e.g. skipping class, failing to turn in homework, poor participation)
Peer Leaders and Social Transition

First-year student social challenges include:
• Isolation/difficulty fitting in
• Financial difficulty
• Difficulty becoming independent/autonomous
• Difficulty with sudden amount of freedom
• Homesickness
• Managing relationships with other students
• Family pressures/responsibilities
• Other life roles/responsibilities

Bowles, Dobson, Fisher, & McPhail (2011)
Peer Leaders and Social Transition

• Host social events (e.g. football games, attending an art exhibit)
• Assist students in becoming acquainted with campus resources (financial aid, diversity centers, department events).
• Continued friendships and mentorship
MAP-Works

- MAP-Works: early alert tool with three surveys that provide insight into students’ strengths and weaknesses
- Peer Leaders are provided with a general idea of what to check-in about by OSEEL staff based on students’ MAP-Works response
Assessment of TLC Students

First-year Students
- Mid-semester survey
- End of semester
- GPA & retention
- MAP-Works

Peer Leaders
- Mid-semester survey
- End of semester
Assessment of Peer Leaders

- Beginning semester: identify goals
- Mid-semester assessment form
- End of semester assessment form & reflect of beginning goals
- 3 Individual check-in meetings
Benefits

• Impact First-Year Students
• Benefits for Peer Leaders
• Faculty support
• University-wide mentoring initiative
What did you like best:

“Peer leader, many opportunities for success, can ask so many people questions”

“...working one-on-one with a peer leader”

“having multiple peer leaders that are helping ease the transition into college”
Student Development and Benefit of Peer Leaders

• After completing a semester as a Peer Leader students felt:
  – Through teaching others gained a deeper understanding of subject matter
  – Developed time management and organization skills
  – Improved teamwork/leadership skills
  – Improved communication skills
Benefits

• Peer Leaders forge connections with faculty which leads to development of:
  – Leadership
  – Networking & connections
  – Career goal consideration
Student Development and Benefit of Peer Leaders

• Peer Leaders gain opportunities to:
  – Train new Peer Leaders
  – Attend professional development events (conferences, leadership summits)
  – Participate in internships
  – Seek other leadership opportunities on campus
Other Utilization of Peer Leaders in LC’s at other institutions?

• Does your institution utilize PLs?
• If so, how?
• If not, why not?
Other Benefits?

• What other benefits to first-year students do you see PLs providing? Are there other benefits for PLs?
• Benefits for institution?
References


Thank You For Listening