

Peer Mentoring

Tags: Degree attainment, developmental/remedial education, student services, improving achievement, mentoring.

Description of Strategy

Two community colleges in Massachusetts have implemented “Peer Leaders” to support students who may come to college underprepared for college-level work. Peer Leader strategies employ current community college students to support their fellow students academically and socially. In Massachusetts, Northern Essex Community College recruits supplemental instruction (SI) leaders and Bunker Hill Community College recruits peer mentors, together referred to as “Peer Leaders,” to bolster learning and course completion of their fellow students in developmental and gatekeeper courses. Peer Leaders at both institutions attend all class periods and help students integrate study skills with understanding of content material.

Northern Essex mainly focuses its SI program on math courses; students who have performed well in these courses or demonstrated mastery of the material work with other students and the course instructors. SI leaders at Northern Essex also hold additional study sessions outside of the regular course schedule. Bunker Hill’s peer mentoring program is a component of the college’s seminar courses for first-year students, most of whom enroll in at least one developmental course. Bunker Hill peer mentors serve as part of a support system for students navigating the community college system. Peer mentors often-times facilitate discussions and group activities during class and work individually with students outside of class.

Recruitment and Training

Northern Essex and Bunker Hill train Peer Leaders to engage students who may need additional assistance in the hope that the program will promote the success of students who may feel lost or have difficulty navigating college. The typical recruitment approach at Northern Essex has been for faculty members and current SI leaders to encourage students who have previously performed well in the course to apply as SI leaders the following semester. Peer mentors at Bunker Hill are recruited through teacher recommendations, word of mouth from current mentors, and referrals from student services staff. These different methods all help to identify potential peer mentors with strong academic habits and personal characteristics.

Both colleges implement trainings with Peer Leaders prior to the start of the semester. At Northern Essex, SI leaders attend an orientation session where they go through a SI “Leader’s Guide” and discuss different scenarios that might arise during SI sessions. Bunker Hill’s two-day training covers how to handle situations in the classroom and touches on the different ways that peer mentors should assist students and faculty partners. During the semester, both colleges meet with their Peer Leaders regularly to discuss their progress and any issues they may face.

Program Structure

Peer Leaders attend each class period to which they are assigned. SI leaders attend class to observe first-hand the course material the instructor is covering. During the Supplemental Instruction session, the SI leader knows to focus on areas where students experience difficulty or confusion. These sessions also provide an environment for students to ask specific questions that they may not feel comfortable raising during regular class time. Bunker Hill's peer mentors' roles may range from individual tutoring to listening to students' accounts of their personal struggles to contacting students to remind them about upcoming assignment deadlines or exams. While some peer mentors regularly work with students in small groups and walk around during class to help where needed, others co-facilitate larger class discussions about the topic related to the course lecture.

Key Findings

MDRC conducted research into the implementation of Peer Leader strategies and reviewed the colleges' data comparing outcomes of students who received supplemental instruction or peer mentoring to those who did not. Data collection efforts derive from multiple interviews and focus groups with key program administrators, and evaluation data collected from the colleges. Unlike many MDRC studies, however, the evaluation did not involve a random assignment design. This means that the two groups of students may differ in ways that the researchers could not detect, such as motivation levels or previous educational experiences. The results should be interpreted as suggestive only, and not clear evidence of the program's impact.

Findings from the implementation study suggest that students felt they benefited from the extra support provided by having Peer Leaders in class. Northern Essex students explained that when they found it difficult to keep up with lectures involving new algebraic terms and formulas, they could turn to their SI leader, who would explain the material. Bunker Hill students felt that their peer mentors were generous with their time and demonstrated a willingness to help them understand course material or expand on what had been discussed in class. Students also described instances where peer mentors helped with personal struggles or family problems and referred them to appropriate campus resources or services. Although Peer Leaders' level of interaction with students varied, most seemed prepared to lead discussions or facilitate small group discussions about key points in the instructor's lecture.

Findings from the outcomes analysis conducted by the two colleges were encouraging. When Northern Essex examined how well students in SI courses fared compared with students in similar courses without SI leaders, it discovered that pass rates were higher for math classes with SI leaders. Similarly, Bunker Hill's analysis revealed that students in a peer mentored course returned to school at a higher rate when compared to the overall student population. Furthermore, when specifically comparing students in seminar courses with peer mentors to those in seminar courses without peer mentors, students in peer mentored seminar courses had higher rates of persistence in the following semester. At both colleges, the differences were modest; outcome data on more cohorts are being collected to see whether the trends hold up over time. Again, these results are not based on a random assignment design and should be interpreted with caution, since students who received peer mentoring may be different from students in the comparison group.

Program Costs

Both colleges currently view these programs as cost-effective, but as the programs continue to expand, the colleges will have to make important decisions about where to allocate resources. Northern Essex administrators and program leaders estimate that the approximate cost-per-student was under 200 dollars. The estimated cost-per-student of running the Bunker Hill peer mentoring program was around 120 dollars. The costs associated with these Peer Leader programs primarily consist of trainings, program supplies, staff salary support, and compensation for the Peer Leaders. Administrators recognize the need to continue and expand these programs thoughtfully so that they remain sustainable and cost-effective for the college, while still addressing students' needs.

Implementation Lessons

Although the peer mentoring program at Bunker Hill is distinct from the SI leader strategy at Northern Essex, the two programs face many challenges in the areas of implementation and expansion. Students, faculty and Peer Leaders all reported instances where the Peer Leaders seemed underused. Balancing the instructors' academic freedom with the orchestration of Peer Leaders means that the program must walk a fine line. Another similar challenge between the programs is that the instances when the Peer Leaders seemed to flourish were the instances when they were given the opportunity to do so; those with less opportunity struggled to find their place. At Northern Essex specifically, garnering attendance for the SI sessions sometimes proved challenging, thus making SI leaders feel underutilized.

Furthermore, providing a platform for instructors to come together and discuss the peer mentoring strategies is important; some instructors felt lost or unsure about how to best utilize their Peer Leaders inside the classroom. Meeting that challenge may help to promote the overall incorporation of the peer mentors into the life of the classrooms to which they are assigned. Recruiting qualified students is another ongoing challenge. It is crucial that the right type of student be paired with the right type of responsibilities. Once strong candidates are recruited, providing comprehensive and ongoing training is crucial to ensure Peer Leaders and faculty members understand expectations. It may be beneficial for those new to their roles to observe experienced Peer Leaders as they interact with the instructor and work with students. Since the role of the Peer Leader is not always clearly defined, providing training opportunities may help new Peer Leaders and instructors define responsibilities that are beneficial to the students, instructors, and Peer Leaders themselves.

For more information, see Cerna, Oscar and Caitlin Platania with Kelley Fong. 2011. *Leading by Example: A Case Study of Peer Leader Programs at Two Achieving the Dream Colleges*. New York: MDRC. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/617/full.pdf>.

Program Contact: Oscar Cerna, Project Director, oscar.cerna@mdrc.org