

An Effective Peer Advising Program in a Large Psychology Department

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The authors—one the program's coordinator and the other a former peer advisor—explain procedures for recruiting, selecting, training, and organizing peer advisors.

Peer advising programs have received attention as effective ways to augment advising systems (Halgin & Halgin, 1982; Lunneborg, 1989; Winston, Miller, Ender, Grites, & Associates, 1984). Lunneborg cited the use of paid, trained peer advisors as a delivery system in meeting student needs. More research on the use of peer advising yielded specific criteria for selection and training, as well as support for the "assumption that peer advising can be as effective as that provided by professionals and faculty in many advising situations" (Winston et al., p. 47).

In the fall of 1991 the Peer Advising Program in the Department of Psychology at James Madison University was initiated, based on departmental assessments and the growing credibility of peer advising programs. Peer advisors supplement faculty, who advise assigned students during office hours and by appointment. The peer advising office is a preliminary resource for students and offers basic information about majors, careers, field opportunities, and graduate schools. Students with more sensitive or complex problems are referred to faculty members or student services personnel.

Currently 20 trained peer advisors provide services for the department, which serves approximately 900 majors. Peer advisors receive training on (a) academic regulations, (b) university policies, (c) registration procedures, (d) campus referral services, (e) advising skills and helping behaviors, (f) career choice, and (g) careers and graduate schools.

Recruitment and Selection

Each semester peer advisor applications are made available by the faculty coordinator. The

application requests demographic information and a one-page essay describing the applicant's interest in peer advising, career objectives, and related experience. The minimum criteria for applicants are (a) rising junior class standing, (b) 3.0 grade point average, and (c) major or minor in psychology. The faculty coordinator selects 10-15 applicants for peer advising training. Upon acceptance, peer advisors are enrolled in a program that carries two credit hours for each semester of participation. Grades reflect keeping office hours; attending training sessions, weekly meetings, and other activities; demonstrating proficiency in helping behaviors; knowing departmental and university policies and procedures; and submitting a written journal. The grade is lowered one letter grade for each unexcused absence.

Training

Peer advisor training consists of seven one-hour class sessions in which students discuss issues and policies relating to peer advising and the department. Developmental academic advising is emphasized throughout. The *Department of Psychology Peer Advising Manual*, required reading for the trainees, supplements class sessions and covers expectations of advisors, ethics, confidentiality, listening skills, degree and major/minor requirements, registration procedures, university policies, and referral sources. Trainees are given a summary of the fields within psychology, psychology-related careers, and the process of applying to graduate school. In-depth information on these topics is available in the peer advising office, and trainees are expected to research the areas independently.

To prepare for class, trainees read materials and view videotapes in the peer advising office that coincide with topics to be discussed. They are also required to interact with trained peer advisors in the office and become familiar with the office's resources and services.

The remainder of the semester is devoted to in-office training. Trainees continue to meet weekly to discuss issues that have arisen. At the end of the semester, each trainee submits a written journal detailing time spent in the office and offering comments and suggestions.

Peer Advisor Responsibilities and Organization

Each subsequent semester trained advisors meet weekly with the faculty coordinator. They maintain office hours Monday through Friday in the advising office for the entire semester, putting in three hours each per week. During these hours, advisors are available to students of all levels and majors and typically provide information on such topics as the psychology major, course scheduling, disciplines within psychology, and research and applied opportunities. Office time, program comments, and suggestions are recorded in student journals.

To ensure equal distribution of tasks as well as task completion, we established three committees: (a) promotion, (b) resources, and (c) projects. Each peer advisor is required to serve on a committee. A chair, elected by the members, organizes the committee and oversees completion of assignments.

The promotion committee sends welcome letters to new psychology majors, advertising services available through the peer advising office. Members also call new majors to discuss available services. This committee also creates and distributes publicity concerning peer advising or presentations of interest to psychology majors (e.g., career symposia).

The resources committee obtains current applications and catalogs from colleges and universities nationwide for graduate programs in psychology and related fields. Materials pertaining to advising are also obtained. The committee revises and updates these resources periodically.

The duties of the projects committee vary from semester to semester. One ongoing responsibility, however, is organizing career symposia sponsored by the department. The committee schedules symposia and coordinates topics with speakers from the university and professional community. Symposia often present three to four psychologists who describe the training required for their fields, provide job descriptions, outline career opportunities, and answer questions. Other symposia topics have included preparation for the

Graduate Record Examinations, application to graduate school, and employment opportunities for psychology majors. Peer advisors and the faculty coordinator select topics based on perceived need and expressed interest. The projects committee has also been in charge of organizing an advising open house for faculty and students and producing a 12-minute video for prospective majors.

The Peer Advising Office

The Peer Advising Office is open Monday through Friday and is equipped with a videocassette player, a typewriter, and a computer and printer. Applications and catalogs from over 200 graduate programs are available, as are videotapes of over 30 career symposia. Handbooks with study tips and guidelines for the American Psychological Association's writing style are also available.

Conclusion

The Peer Advising Program is a direct outgrowth of departmental assessments that called for improved advising services. Senior Exit Surveys completed in 1993 and 1994 view peer advising positively (over 80% *satisfied* or *very satisfied* responses from students who used the office) in the areas of (a) knowledge of policies, processes, and requirements; (b) availability; (c) advising on academic and vocational concerns; (d) campus/referral services; and (e) helping behaviors.

Several factors contribute to the success of the Peer Advising Program. A skilled and dedicated faculty coordinator is critical, as is support from the department faculty. Our selection standards have insured high quality, enthusiastic peer advisors. There is general agreement within the department and the administration that peer advisors make a substantial contribution. Peer advisors allow faculty members more time for in-depth advising and mentoring, including fostering research and applied experiences. Other departments at the university are using this program as a model to implement peer advising programs of their own.

References

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A Myth of Higher Education?—You Be the Judge

Students file into a large lecture hall at Harvard to take their final exam in Introduction to Philosophy. The blue books are passed out, and the distinguished professor walks into the room. He puts his briefcase on the lecture table and walks to the chalkboard. On the board he writes "Why?"

Heads go down; pens furiously scrawl across pages. In the midst of this frenetic activity one student sits calmly. After only a moment and a briefly scribbled phrase, the student hands in the blue book. This student's response—"Why not?"—earns the only grade of A in the class.

A Myth of Higher Education?—You Be the Judge

Students file into a large lecture hall at Stanford to take their final exam in Introduction to Epistemology. The blue books are passed out, and the distinguished professor walks into the room. She takes a chair and puts it on top of the lecture table. On the board she writes "Prove the existence of this chair."

Heads go down; pens furiously scrawl across pages. In the midst of this frenetic activity one student sits calmly. After only a moment and a briefly scribbled phrase, the student hands in the blue book. This student's response—"What chair?"—earns the only grade of A in the class.