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Peer Advisors: Agents of Change for High-Risk Students

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Entering freshmen often find it difficult to adjust to the new and sometimes impersonal environment of a large university. They may be overwhelmed by the size, and by the number of options facing them. They may also feel lonely, isolated, frightened, and homesick. Peer advisors, who are specially trained undergraduates, often can help these students adjust by serving as experienced guides, advisors, confidants, or friends, to whom the new students can easily relate. This paper describes the Peer Advising Program at Iowa State University and discusses its effectiveness, especially with freshmen in academic difficulty.

SELECTION OF PEER ADVISORS

Peer advisors are selected from a pool of upperclass students (Cyclone Aides) who are trained to work during summer orientation of new freshmen. Selection takes place at the close of summer orientation and is based on performance as a Cyclone Aide and on criteria important to individual counseling. These criteria include:

1. Well developed communications skills,
2. Experience in working with people,
3. Scholarship,
4. Involvement in relevant extracurricular activities, and
5. Acceptance of varied life styles, and empathy for student concerns.

When selecting peer advisors, an effort is made to maintain a broad representation of majors, interests, backgrounds, and living conditions.

TRAINING

Peer advisors who have participated in the intensive Cyclone Aide training program are required to serve as Cyclone Aides during summer orientation. The training, provided by the Office of Student Life, is designed to provide information about campus life; e.g. course scheduling; financial aid; housing options; the Honors Program; health services; alcohol and drug education; and administration and funding of the University. Participants spend approximately 100 hours in the program.

In September, peer advisors, old and new, attend an all-day workshop. The morning session involves training in two areas: interpersonal communications skills and working with students on time management and study skills. Staff from the Student Counseling Service

are responsible for this portion of the workshop. The afternoon session is devoted to team building and various communications activities such as role playing responses to simulated student concerns.

Throughout the year, peer advisors meet weekly for in-service training, which includes reviewing information on university rules, regulations, and procedures; services available to students; and career planning resources. Also, exercises are developed to help peer advisors sharpen their listening and communications skills. Finally, time is allotted in the meeting for discussion of problems that the peer advisors are facing. Peer advisors describe their interactions with students and indicate areas in which they need assistance. The coordinator and senior peer advisors offer suggestions and help plan strategies to cope with these problems.

COMPENSATION

During the first year of the Program, peer advisors were given one academic credit for their services. Evaluation of the Program disclosed important reasons for monetary rather than credit remuneration:

1. Peer advisors are providing a para-professional service;
2. Peer advisors are involved in many activities and must give up some of these to perform duties of peer advisor;
3. Credit is an unreasonable reward. Peer advisors are providing a service; they are not achieving in academics;
4. Monetary reward is one of the best incentives in attracting outstanding students during these times of budget constraint.

A proposal, based on these reasons, was submitted to the Parents' Association in May, 1980 requesting financial support of \$100 per quarter for each peer advisor. The proposal was approved. After a change was made to the semester system, the sum paid to peer advisors was increased to \$150 per semester.

Obviously, the monetary reward is not the only factor motivating students to become peer advisors. These students believe that they will grow personally as a result of their assistance to other students; they are interested in gaining and practicing the communications skills which are part of such a program; and they enjoy being a part of a closely knit team with similar goals and directions.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

State's Peer Advising Program was initiated during the 1979-80 academic year. During the past two years, the program has been evaluated, modified, and refined to provide the most effective assistance to the students it is designed to serve.

In the first year, the strategy was to establish a peer advising office in the Open Option Advising Center (a center for advising students without majors) of the College of Sciences and Humanities, and have the peer advisors available in the office during periods of peak student traffic in the Center. To increase the visibility of peer advising service, a pamphlet was produced outlining the Program; advertisements were placed in the student newspaper; and contacts were established with residence halls, the Greek system, and departmental clubs. Despite these efforts, few students made use of the service during that first year. To remedy

this situation, it was decided that the roles of the peer advisors should be expanded and they should take their services to the students rather than waiting for the students to come to them.

In the second year (1980-81), peer advisors

- 1) assisted in teaching a career planning course for open option students (students without majors);
- 2) planned and organized programs for the Open Option Club;
- 3) worked with the Office of Student Life to prepare a pamphlet on "Social Life at Iowa State," to be given to prospective students; and
- 4) spoke to these prospective students during Cyclone Days (special days for high school students to visit the campus).

Peer advisors also worked with academic advisors preparing freshmen for preregistration for spring semester classes. While these students waited to see their academic advisors, peer advisors demonstrated the use of *Schedule of Classes* and answered questions about specific courses and requirements. By assisting with the mechanical aspects of preregistration, the peer advisors freed academic advisors to spend time getting to know their advisees, and provide in-depth advising on academic matters. While assuming these new responsibilities, the peer advisors continued to maintain regular office hours in the Open Option Center.

In the fall of 1981, the peer advisors expressed a desire to approach new freshmen on an individual basis. To accomplish this they met with all freshmen open option students who were participating in an orientation course. They explained the peer advising services that were available and invited these students to sign up for peer advisors. Ninety (90) students did so. Each was assigned to one of the ten peer advisors who worked with the student throughout the fall semester. The individualized system was very successful. Evaluations completed by the advisees included such comments as: "I wouldn't have remained at Iowa State if it hadn't been for my peer advisor"; "She was always there, ready to listen and help"; "My peer advisor helped me through the rough times with my roommates"; and "I was homesick, and my peer advisor understood and became a good friend." These evaluations reinforced the belief that peer advisors are most effective if they reach out to students and are available to them when needed.

PEER ADVISORS AND THE HIGH-RISK STUDENT

Studies of student progress have shown that freshmen who perform poorly their first semester in college may become high-risk in terms of future academic success and have a tendency to drop out of school, compared with students who do well in their first semester. In the spring of 1982, a study was made of the impact of peer advisors on high-risk students.

PROCEDURE

A list of freshmen, who had declared majors and received a fall semester grade point average of less than 2.00, was obtained from the College of Sciences and Humanities. From the list of 280 students, 50 were randomly selected as a treatment group, and 50 were randomly selected as a control group. Students in the treatment group were assigned to ten peer advisors, five per advisor. The peer advisors sent each of their students the following letter:

April 1985

Dear Mary Smith,

I am a peer advisor. Part of my job is to help other students with whatever concerns and questions they might have while at Iowa State University. Also, I have had many hours of training in rules, regulations and policies of the University; academic support services; career planning information; and study skills techniques. I am prepared to help you in these areas.

I understand the difficulties in adjusting to a large university, because I had to do it, too. I would like the opportunity to work with you in whatever way needed — even just being a friend who knows the ropes and is there to listen.

If you would like to meet with me, please call 294-8300 and leave your name with the secretary. I will return your call. In order that I may give all the time necessary to each person, it is important that I limit the number of students with whom I work.

I hope to hear from you by Friday, January 22nd.

Sincerely,

Peer advisors were given their students' spring semester schedules, so they could determine times when they could meet with their students. Since student schedules are considered confidential information, confidentiality statements were filed for each peer advisor.

One week after the letters were mailed, peer advisors began to call their students. For students who had not yet responded to the letter, the following script was used:

"Hello. My name is _____, and I'm a peer advisor. The Dean suggested that I call and make an appointment to meet with you to see if I can be of any assistance during your second semester at State. I have your schedule, and it looks as if _____ at _____ would be a good time to get together. Would that work for you? Good. I'll look forward to seeing you on _____ at _____ in room 201 _____."

Of course, this script was modified when calls were made to students who *had* responded to the letter.

Out of the 50 students in the treatment group, 40 were contacted; six were removed from the sample because they had withdrawn from school; three didn't have telephones and failed to respond to the letter; and one had his grade point adjusted to above 2.00 as a result of a grade change. The number in the control group was reduced to 43, because seven students had withdrawn from school at the end of fall semester.

The students contacted (N = 40) met at least once with their peer advisors. The number of meetings with each advisee ranged from one to 12, the mean being 4.20. The number of meetings may be broken down as follows:

Featured Articles

Number of Meetings

1
2
3
4
5
7
8
10
12

Number of Students

8
6
4
7
6
2
4
2
1

At their initial meeting with each advisee, the peer advisors recorded the factors identified by the advisees as having contributed to their poor academic performance. Factors mentioned most frequently were:

Causes of Poor Performance

Adjustment to college life
Poor study habits
Lack of motivation
Poor time management
Roommate conflicts/Bad living conditions
Partying/Social adjustment
Athletics
Work
Anxiety

% of Students Answering

38%
35%
30%
28%
18%
13%
10%
10%
8%

REFERRALS

Referred to . . .

Academic advisors
Faculty members in specific majors
Tutoring services
Student Counseling Service

% of Advisees Referred

25%
23%
18%
15%

RESOURCES USED WITH OR RECOMMENDED TO ADVISEES

Resources Used

Time Management Book
Study skills information
Programs at the Student Counseling Service
Career Resource Library
Interest inventories
Catalog
Goal-setting exercises

% of Advisees

70%
53%
15%
13%
10%
8%
5%

After each meeting, peer advisors filled out advisee contact sheets noting the following:

1. Major concerns discussed,
2. Recommendations made,
3. Areas to be explored further,
4. Plans for helping the student at the next meeting.

These points were discussed at the weekly peer advisor meetings. At the end of the study, a final summary sheet was compiled for each advisee. It recorded the history of the peer advisor-advisee relationship and noted all referrals and recommendations made by the peer advisor. These sheets revealed the following:

SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE, ACTIONS, or RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY PEER ADVISORS

Assistance, Action or Recommendation	% of Advisees
Improve study skills	50%
General encouragement	33%
Improve time management	33%
Being a friend and listener	23%
Encouraged to become more involved in the University	23%
Assisted with career exploration	23%
Helped to prioritize activities	20%
Develop goal-setting skills	18%
Help raise the level of motivation	15%
Improvement of self-image and raising self confidence	13%
Consider transferring to a smaller school	8%
Discussed values	8%
Make more of an effort to communicate with instructors	8%

Also mentioned were spelling and reading labs, math help sessions, and the library.

RESULTS

The mean grade point averages in the fall semester for the control and treatment groups were 1.30 (SD = 0.52) and 1.45 (SD = 0.53) respectively. The difference between these values was not significant at the 0.05 level ($P = .196$), indicating that our two sample groups were indeed random and equal.

During the spring semester, five students in the control group withdrew from school. A recalculation of the fall semester mean GPA for this smaller control group revealed that it had increased to 1.34 (SD = 0.53), i.e. the two groups were closer to being equal. No students in the treatment group withdrew from school during the study.

At the end of the spring semester, the grade point averages of the two groups were again compared. The mean GPA of the control group had increased to 1.63 (SD = .075), but that of the treatment group had risen to 1.99 (SD = 0.60). The difference between these two values was significant at the 0.05 level ($P = .022$). This indicates that peer advising can have a significant positive impact on the grade point averages of students in academic difficulty. Retention of students in the two groups was compared by determining how many in each group were dropped from the University at the end of the spring semester because of poor grades or decided themselves not to return to school in the fall of 1982. The results were as follows:

	Treatment (N = 40)	Control (N = 43)
Deciding not to return	5 (13%)	12 (28%)
Dropped from the University	6 (15%)	6 (14%)
Totals	11 (28%)	18 (42%)

Two of the five students in the control group who withdrew from school during the spring semester returned in the fall and are, therefore, not included in the 12 who did not return. It is likely that these two students would have been dropped from the University at the end of spring semester had they not withdrawn on their own. Their grade point averages for fall semester were 0.46 and 1.28. Had these two students remained in school through the spring semester and then been dropped, the number dropped from the control group would have been 8 instead of 6, and our final results would have been:

	Treatment (N = 40)	Control (N = 43)
Students being dropped or not returning	11 (28%)	20 (47%)

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study carried out during the spring of 1982 indicate that peer advisors can increase retention and improve the academic progress of high-risk students. Further, the use of peer advisors is an effective and economical way to assist freshmen in their adjustment to the university environment.

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