In this issue:

Using Peer Supervisors in Counselor Education Training: Research Findings

Multicultural Education and Empowerment through Faculty Support Programs

Away from the Margins: Peer Counselors and Students of Color

Perceived Benefits of Human Sexuality Peer Facilitators
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine satisfaction with supervision and development of a working alliance in a peer group supervision model. Thirteen peer supervisors provided feedback to 31 trainees in the laboratory component of counseling skills classes. Trainees completed the Supervision Satisfaction Questionnaire (SSQ) (Ladany, Hill, Corbett, & Nutt, 1996) and the Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory-Trainee (SWAI-Trainee) (Efstation, Patton, & Kardash, 1990). Peer supervisors completed the SWAI-Supervisor. Results from both groups indicated satisfaction with the quality of supervision and development of a working alliance. Implications for counselor education and a detailed description of the peer supervision process are provided.

Using Peer Supervisors in Counselor Education Training: Research Findings

Peer supervision is a process by which counselors and counselor trainees use their relationship and professional skills with each other to become more effective and skillful helpers (Benshoff & Paisley, 1996; Wagner & Smith, 1979). It is a popular means of providing clinical supervision to both counselors and counselor trainees (Benshoff & Paisley; Borders, 1991; Remley, Benshoff, & Mowbray, 1987). Peer supervision was conceived as a training component to encourage greater interdependence among peers by offering opportunities to discuss, brainstorm, evaluate, and plan treatment modalities for clients (Benshoff, 1990; Powell, 1996; Wagner & Smith). It also has been proposed as a potentially effective way to increase the frequency and/or quality of supervision available to a counselor trainee (Benshoff, 1994). The basic premise underlying peer supervision is that individuals trained in basic helping skills can use those skills to assist others to function more effectively in their professional roles (Benshoff, 1994).

Peer supervision appears to provide counselor trainees with a variety of benefits. A qualitative research study by Starling and Baker (2000) identified the emergence of four general themes from the peer group supervision process: a decrease in confusion and anxiety, goal clarification, increased confidence, and enhancement of supervision based on peer feedback. However, the study was not without methodological limitations. Thus, these conclusions were based on only four of eight supervisees and included no perceptions from peer supervisors. Additionally, the supervisees were receiving individual supervision concurrently making it impossible to attribute the benefits solely to the peer group supervision. However, the findings of the Starling and Baker study were validated in a qualitative study of peer group supervision process conducted by Christensen and Kline (2001). Their study indicated that “if conducted within a supportive environment, peer group supervision offers enhanced learning opportunities, decreases in anxiety, confidence development, and experiences that can lead to awareness of interpersonal behaviors that influence counselor effectiveness” (Christensen & Kline, p. 97).

Benshoff and Paisley (1994) cited several benefits of a peer supervision-consultation model based upon their review of the counseling literature. These benefits included decreased dependency on experts, greater interdependence of colleagues, increased responsibility for the assessment of one’s own skills as well as the skills of others, development of consultation and supervision skills, the ability to use peers as models, the lack of an evaluative component, and increased self-confidence, self-direction, and independence. Peer supervision provided a supportive environment and
reassurance that others were experiencing similar feelings and concerns (Benshoff, 1990; Benshoff & Paisley, 1996; Blocher, 1983; Fraleigh & Buchheimer, 1969; Kendall, 1972).

A research study on peer supervision in schools by Agnew, Vaught, Getz, and Fortune (2000) also suggested several benefits. Study participants reported peer group clinical supervision to be a worthwhile and valuable component of their personal and professional development. They viewed the peer group supervision as meeting their clinical supervision needs and improving their counseling relationships.

Effective peer supervision requires the formation of collaborative working relationships and the ability to use these relationships for development (Powell, 1996; Wagner & Smith, 1979). A collegial, rather than a hierarchical, environment is essential to the formation of this working relationship. The counselor trainee who believes that he or she is working with, instead of under, a supervisor is more likely to be forthcoming about mistakes and concerns of inadequacy (Presbury, Echterling, & McKee, 1999). Although counselor educators have more extensive training and experience, peer supervisors may be able to connect with the counselor trainee more rapidly. Hillerbrand (1989) suggested that novices may be able to communicate more effectively with their peers and be better at understanding the nonverbal cues of other novices. Peer supervisors may more readily identify with their supervisee’s needs and interests since they’ve had recent experience within their own training.

There is also the issue of role conflict in the traditional faculty-student model of supervision. Faculty members have a position of power and are responsible for the assignment of grades in skills courses. This role conflicts with the developmental role of a supervisor. Trainees may be hesitant to reveal areas of weakness to faculty supervisors because of the evaluative aspect of the relationship. They may be more comfortable sharing their concerns with their peers because concerns regarding grades are non-existent in the peer relationship (Benshoff, 1990). The lack of an evaluative component and the egalitarian, nonhierarchical relationship that is created in peer supervision offers a different kind of experience than that in a traditional faculty-student supervisory relationship (Benshoff, 1990, 1994; Hughes & Stanard, 1998).

This non-threatening environment facilitates self-disclosure and may enhance the formation of a working alliance. The working alliance has long been recognized as playing an important part in the learning process of counselor trainees (Bordin, 1983; Eftation et al., 1990; Ekstein & Wallerstein, 1972; Holloway, 1992; Mueller & Kell, 1972). It has been posited as potentially one of the most important common factors in the change process of supervision and has been empirically related to many constructs including trainee satisfaction with supervision (Ladany, Brittan-Powell, & Pannu, 1997; Ladany, Ellis, & Friedlander, 1999; Ladany & Friedlander, 1995).

While the counseling literature touts the advantages of peer supervision, few peer or peer group models of supervision have been evaluated for their effectiveness. This study was designed to evaluate two important components of effective supervision, the development of a supervisory working alliance and supervisee satisfaction with supervision. Both have been investigated in various models of supervision, however to date no such investigation has been conducted using a peer model of supervision. The research questions addressed are:

1. To what degree, if any, will counselor trainees be satisfied with supervision provided by their peers?, and
2. To what degree, if any, will the use of a peer supervision model result in the formation of a strong working alliance between trainees and peer supervisors?

The model used in this study was one in which advanced counseling students provided feedback to novice counseling students in the laboratory component of a beginning counseling skills class and is described below in detail.
Method

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of school and community counseling students enrolled in a master’s level school or community counseling program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and counseling students enrolled in an educational specialist degree school or community counseling program during the summer and fall semesters at a small Southeastern university. Participants were classified into one of two groups (trainees or supervisors) based upon their enrollment in specific classes.

Trainees consisted of a total of 31 master’s level graduate students (26 females and 5 males) enrolled in beginning counseling skills classes (14 in summer and 17 in fall). The majority of the trainees (84%) were under the age of 35. There were 26 Caucasians, 4 African-Americans, and 1 race unspecified.

There were 13 supervisors (12 females and 1 male) during the two semesters. The 8 supervisors in the summer semester were students enrolled in an advanced counseling methods class. The 5 supervisors in the fall semester consisted of 2 master’s level graduate students enrolled in an internship placement and 3 educational specialist level graduate students enrolled in an independent supervision practicum. None of the supervisors had any experience as clinical supervisors. The majority of the supervisors (62%) were over the age of 30. There were 12 Caucasians and 1 African-American.

The faculty member teaching both the beginning counseling skills courses and the supervision practicum provided training and group supervision to the peer supervisors. The faculty member had extensive experience both as a supervisor in clinical settings and as a counselor educator. The triadic skill building sessions and group feedback sessions were monitored by the faculty member remotely via television. The faculty member did not participate in the group feedback sessions of the beginning counselor trainees but did provide group supervision to peer supervisors immediately upon conclusion of their feedback sessions with trainees. During group supervision, peer supervisors reported on the performance of their supervisees and received feedback regarding their supervision skills.

Instruments

Supervision outcomes were assessed using the Supervision Satisfaction Questionnaire (SSQ) (Ladany, Hill, et al., 1996) and the Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory (SWAI), which has two versions, the Trainee form and the Supervisor form (Efstation et al., 1990). Trainees completed the SSQ and the SWAI-Trainee forms. Supervisors completed the SWAI-Supervisor form.

Supervision Satisfaction Questionnaire (SSQ).

The Supervision Satisfaction Questionnaire (SSQ), an 8-item Likert scale instrument, is a modified version of the widely used Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, & Nguyen, 1979). The SSQ is designed to rate the supervisee’s satisfaction with supervision. It uses a 4-point scale, ranging from low (1) to high (4), with higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction in supervision. Questions address such issues as the quality and kind of supervision, the extent to which supervision met supervisee needs, the effectiveness of the supervision, and overall satisfaction. Internal consistency coefficient estimates range from .84 to .93 (Nguyen, Attkisson, & Stegner, 1983). Internal consistency coefficients for the current sample were .94.

Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory (SWAI).
The Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory (SWAI) consists of two versions, a supervisor form and a trainee form. The supervisor form contains 23 questions, and the trainee form contains 19 questions. Both forms use a 7-point Likert scale ranging from almost never (1) to almost always (7) to describe the frequency of specific behaviors characteristic of the supervision relationship.

Factor analysis of the SWAI-Supervisor form indicates the presence of three factors. The first nine items measure "Client Focus," defined as the emphasis placed by supervisors on promoting the trainees' understanding of the client. The next seven items measure "Rapport," defined as the supervisors' efforts to build rapport with the trainees' by supporting and encouraging them. The final seven items measure "Identification," representing the supervisors' perception of the trainees' identification with the supervisor (Efstation et al., 1990). Previous studies cited by Efstation, Patton, and Kardash indicated that the internal consistency coefficients were .71 for Client Focus, .73 for Rapport, and .77 for Identification. Internal consistency coefficients for the current sample were .88 for Client Focus, .85 for Rapport, and .87 for Identification.

The SWAI-Trainee form contains two factors. The first 12 items represent the trainee's perception of support from the supervisor or "Rapport." The remaining 7 items represent "Client Focus," the trainee's perception of the emphasis that the supervisor placed on understanding the client (Efstation et al., 1990). Internal consistency coefficients for the two scales were .90 for Rapport and .77 for Client Focus (Efstation et al.). Internal consistency coefficients for the current sample were .98 for Rapport and .86 for Client Focus.

The adequacy of correlations between the SWAI and the SSQ scales provided evidence for the convergent and divergent validity of the SWAI. The instrument also provided significant predictive validity of self-efficacy as measured by the Self-Efficacy Inventory (Efstation et al., 1990).

**Procedure**

At the beginning of the academic term, trainees and peer supervisors were instructed in the basic concepts of supervision and feedback and gave informed consent. The faculty supervisor met with peer supervisors prior to the beginning of classes and explained the feedback process. Peer supervisors were provided with a syllabus that outlined the specific counseling skills taught each week and were instructed to focus on the particular skills that were the focus of instruction for the week. The faculty supervisor reviewed basic supervision and communication skills with the peer supervisors including suggestions like focusing on strengths, modeling appropriate skills, and offering concrete suggestions for improvement. Counselor trainees were introduced to their supervisor in the first class session. They were told that their supervisor was an advanced counseling student who would be providing them feedback on their practice sessions throughout the semester. It was made clear that the supervisors were not in an evaluative capacity with respect to the trainees' grade.

Trainees participated in triadic peer counseling relationships in the counseling labs. During each lab session, each trainee had the opportunity within their triad to function in all three roles (counselor, client, and observer). Trainees functioning in the role of counselor were instructed to work on the particular skills (attending, reflecting, etc.) that were the current focus of classroom instruction. Trainees functioning in the role of client were instructed to discuss a real life difficulty with their peer counselor. Trainees functioning in the role of observer were instructed to observe sessions, paying particular attention to the skills that were the focus of training, and to provide feedback on the use of those skills to their peers during supervision. Each triad was assigned an advanced counseling student to function as a peer supervisor. Practice counseling sessions were 20-30 minutes long and conducted once a week during the 7-week summer semester and every other week during the 15-week fall semester. All sessions were videotaped and observed via one-way glass by the peer supervisor.
supervisor and the trainee serving as observer in the triadic relationship. Faculty observed the sessions via a television monitor.

Peer supervisors provided feedback to trainees in a one-hour group session immediately following the completion of the counseling sessions by all three participants in the triad. Peer supervisors provided feedback to the trainees on their performance as “counselor” as well as soliciting feedback from the trainee serving as observer of the session. All supervision sessions were videotaped. Faculty observed supervision sessions via a television monitor and provided feedback in group supervision to the peer supervisors immediately following their sessions.

At the end of the academic term, each trainee and peer supervisor completed the appropriate assessment instruments. Identification numbers were used to cross-reference the multiple instruments completed by the participants, consent forms were separated from the instruments, and data were entered into a statistical package by a graduate research assistant to ensure anonymity.

Results

Data were analyzed for each cohort (summer and fall) and compared. Data for the two groups combined were analyzed as well. Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed and analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. T-tests and analyses of variance were performed to determine significant differences between means.

Comparison of Summer and Fall Data

Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences between the SSQ means of the summer (3.241) and fall (3.331) participants. There were also no significant differences between the two groups in the SWAI total score or in the subscale scores. See Table 1 (Appendix).

Satisfaction with Peer Supervision

Results suggest that trainees were satisfied with their peer supervision. The overall SSQ mean was 3.293. Trainees indicated that they were satisfied with the quality of the supervision they received (3.42) and that it helped them to perform more effectively in their role as a counselor (3.55). See Table 2 (Appendix) for question means and standard deviations.

Supervisor Working Alliance

There were no statistically significant differences found between the trainee and supervisor Client Focus and Rapport subscales suggesting that the two groups perceived the supervisory relationship in a similar manner. See Table 3 (Appendix).

Trainees perceived that their supervisors placed a high priority on understanding the client’s perspective and encouraged the trainees to take the time to understand what the client was saying and doing. This finding is congruent with results of the SWAI-S "Client Focus" subscale, which suggested that supervisors perceived that they encouraged their supervisees to understand the client. Trainees also perceived their supervisors to be supportive. Supervisors also perceived that they had a supportive, positive relationship with their trainees.

Results of the “Identification” sub-scale suggest that supervisors perceived that their trainees understood clients in a manner similar to their own.

Discussion
Results of the study indicate that trainees in both summer and fall semesters were satisfied with the peer supervision. This finding is consistent with results from previous studies in which trainees indicated a high level of satisfaction with peer supervision (Benshoff, 1994; Ladany et al., 1999). They rated peer supervision as being very helpful to them in skill development and deepening their understanding of general counseling concepts. The aspects of peer supervision that were cited as being particularly helpful were feedback regarding counseling approach and technique and peer support and encouragement.

The question of the relationship between satisfaction with supervision and development of skills is one that still needs to be addressed. Satisfaction with supervision cannot be assumed to correlate with growth in skill development. Research suggests that peer supervision may have a greater impact on self-confidence and comfort level than on actual counseling effectiveness (Benshoff, 1994). However it has also been suggested that trainees who are more satisfied with supervision will more likely continue to be supervised after they graduate which makes satisfaction with supervision an important aspect of counselor education (Ladany et al., 1999).

Trainees and peer supervisors shared positive perceptions of the working alliance formed in the supervision process. This finding is consistent with the high level of satisfaction reported by trainees in this study. A study by Ladany, Ellis, and Friedlander (1999) also demonstrated a relationship between a strong working alliance and satisfaction with supervision. The ability of the peer supervisors to form a strong working alliance with counselor trainees may well be predicated on the lack of an evaluative component in the relationship.

Implications for Counselor Education

A peer supervision model has important implications for school and community counselor training. The model of peer supervision used in this research is easily reproducible in most counselor education programs. A typical format for skills training is the triadic model described in this study. The peer supervision model adds an advanced student to the milieu. It is practical to use even in the absence of a doctoral students to provide supervision. Master’s level practicum and internship students may serve, as was the case for the majority of the peer supervisors in this research study, in the role of peer supervisor in the absence of education specialist or doctoral students.

The model also incorporated many of the guidelines for organizing and conducting supervision recommended by Borders (1991). Students in the beginning skills classes were instructed to focus on the specific skill taught in class that week and feedback provided by peer supervisors was focused on the development of those individual skills. The skills are the basic skills required for both school and community counseling students. Supervision was provided within a specific defined framework that was simple enough to be implemented by a novice supervisor. Modeling by the peer supervisor provided an approach that hopefully the counselor trainee could internalize for self-monitoring as well as serve as a model for appropriate delivery of feedback for the counseling student serving in the role of observer. This experience of peer supervision as a part of their training can serve as a model for students when they enter the field in school and community settings.

Peer supervision offers a number of benefits to counselor education programs. First the use of peer supervisors in the model described in this study allows trainees to get immediate feedback each time they practice new skills in the counseling labs. A single faculty supervisor cannot possibly provide feedback to every student in a skills class each laboratory session. Therefore feedback from faculty occurs much less frequently, is limited, delayed, and based on the faculty supervisor’s review of a video or audiotape. The value of immediate feedback in skill acquisition has long been recognized in education (Carlson, 1974; Christoff, 1978; Tentoni & Robb, 1976).
Peer supervision also teaches counselors in training about the various roles involved in supervision. It teaches them the importance of supervision and the role that they play in making supervision effective. This understanding will benefit them during the clinical component of training and in postgraduate supervision. The lack of an evaluative component inherent in peer supervision increases the likelihood that supervisees will be more willing to bring difficult issues to supervision, thus enhancing their skills and ultimately benefiting their clients.

While not the focus of this research, peer supervision appears to also have benefits for the peer supervisor. During the course of the research, peer supervisors reported perceived increases in their counseling skills as a result of the peer supervision process (Stanard & Painter, 1999). A follow-up study identified not only a perception of enhanced counseling skills in the peer supervisor as a result of the peer supervision process, but also an increase in their self-confidence (Stanard & Painter). This is a win-win situation for trainees, peer supervisors, counselor educators, future employers, and ultimately clients.

There is also a potential benefit to the profession. There is a dearth of trained clinical supervisors in the field. For example, a national survey of school counselor supervision revealed that only 13% of participants received individual clinical supervision and 11% received group clinical supervision with 29% of that number receiving peer group supervision (Page, Pietrzak, & Sutton, 2001). This is despite the fact that 67% of those surveyed wanted to receive clinical supervision, and 70% described the most desirable supervisor as another school counselor trained in supervision. The training of peer supervisors may be one step in increasing the number of future qualified supervisors.

The model is not without inherent problems. An area of concern is the ethical issue of dual relationships when students participate in the training process. In triadic relationships in laboratory settings, students are called upon to play multiple roles, i.e. counselor, client, observer and, in this model, peer supervisor. The process must be monitored so that there are no adverse consequences for trainees or peer supervisors as a result of the supervisory relationship. The careful monitoring of the triadic counseling relationships and the peer supervision processes as they occur and the opportunity for discussion of relationship concerns is an important component of the faculty oversight of trainees and peer supervisors.

Another concern with a peer supervision model and a limitation of this study is the relative inexperience of the peer supervisors. However research suggests that there is no evidence to support that supervision by seasoned supervisors is better than that provided by less experienced supervisors (Benshoff, 1990; Worthington, 1984). Research also suggests that peer supervisors are effective in improving the performance of counselor trainees in the core dimensions of empathy, respect, genuineness, and concreteness (Seligman, 1978).

Limitations

In addition to the inexperience of the peer supervisors discussed previously, another important limitation is the limited scope of the supervision provided in this study. Supervision in this study was limited to feedback focused specifically on a defined, discrete skill set being taught to beginning counseling students. Clinical supervision is a much more complex process than that used in this research and care must be taken in generalizing the results of this research to a clinical setting. And while important, satisfaction with supervision and the development of a working alliance, do not necessarily translate into enhanced skill development.

The sample includes only students from one university which limits the ability to generalize the results. The study should be replicated by researchers in other counselor education programs. Another limitation is the small sample size. Although this study was conducted over the course of
two semesters the number of participants is relatively small. The sample is also primarily female and white which does not allow for consideration of the confounding variables of sex and race.

Despite these limitations, this research adds to the current body of peer supervision research that supports its value in training counselors. Further research is required to address the limitations inherent in this study. Further research should also investigate the impact of peer supervision on skill acquisition and compare the results of the model with other models of counselor supervision.

References


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## Appendix

**Table 1**

Comparison of SSQ and SWAI by Academic Term

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Term</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>η²</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SSQ Trainee</td>
<td>Summer</td>
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<td>3.24</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>5.996</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.005</td>
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<td>SWAI-T Total</td>
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<td>5.97</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.035</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>.013</td>
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<td>Fall</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fall</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>.613</td>
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### Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for the Supervision Satisfaction Questionnaire

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<th>Question</th>
<th>M</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. How would you rate the quality of supervision received?</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did you get the kind of supervision you wanted?</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To what extent has this supervision fit your needs?</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Would you recommend this supervisor to a friend?</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How satisfied are you with the amount of supervision you received?</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Has the supervision you received helped you to deal more effectively in your role as a counselor?</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In an overall, general sense, how satisfied are you with the supervision you received</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. If you were to seek supervision again, would you come back to this supervisor?</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>.86</td>
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### Table 3
Comparison of SWAI-T and SWAI-S Subscales

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<td>Client Focus</td>
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</table>
Abstract

The thrust of the multicultural movement has been aimed at teaching students to become culturally responsive in their interactions with peers. Less attention has been focused on information needed by educators who attempt to promote positive intercultural exchanges in the classroom. This article describes a faculty supported pilot seminar aimed at helping teacher educators and administrators explore and integrate multicultural strategies into teaching and learning contexts.

Multicultural Education and Empowerment through Faculty Support Programs

For more than 40 years, educators have been increasingly challenged to examine their positions on the concerns of ethnic minority students. This has been brought about by an explosion of multiculturally oriented literature, as well as a cultural shift in student demographics at K-12 and post secondary levels across the nation (Choy, 2002; Dilworth & Ardila-Rey, 2003; The College Board, 2002). Educators now find themselves dealing with issues that have come about as a result of teaching in culturally plural classrooms. Despite the strides that have been made in the teaching of diverse students, many educators continue to be ill-prepared (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005-2006; Lue, 2003). In the absence of knowledge and preparation, many educators allow misconceptions, cultural myths, and personal biases to guide them as they respond to culturally diverse students (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005; Banks, 2004; Benjamin, 1996). This practice reduces their impact, reduces the value of their contribution, and creates an unhealthy climate for the culturally diverse student. The purpose of this article is to evaluate a faculty support seminar designed to aid teacher educators and administrators in their exploration and integration of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skill sets into the teaching and supervision process.

Multicultural Education in Context

The multicultural education movement emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as an outgrowth of the Civil Rights movement; it has as its main premise the emphasis on both cultural pluralism and equal opportunity (Banks, 2004; Grant & Sleeter, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Multicultural education involves a sum of interlocking concepts. Banks (2006) places multicultural education into a five dimensional framework that includes content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture. Content integration speaks to the extent to which educators infuse examples of culture into the curriculum. The manner in which educators then assist students in the interpretation of individual and group perspectives constitutes knowledge construction. Prejudice reduction focuses on the strategies used to promote inclusive student beliefs, values, and behaviors. Equity pedagogy emphasizes the approaches used by educators that facilitate the academic achievement of marginalized students. The fifth dimension, empowering school culture, focuses on the school as an organization. This last variable has been defined as institutionalized school reform and serves as the basis for educational equity and empowerment for students from diverse backgrounds (Banks, 2006).
Teacher Education and Ethnic Minority Student Marginalization

Several barriers to reform have been attributed to a traditional educational system that has had much difficulty addressing oppression as related to ethnic minority populations (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One such barrier involves teaching the teacher about issues of multiculturalism. Gallos, Ramsey, and Associates (1997) and Ukpokodu (2003) highlight the lack of consistent and adequate preparation for those involved in diversity education. In many cases, diversity components in teacher preparation programs are often encapsulated in one required, isolated, stand-alone course, or they are added to an existing course (Hauerwas, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These formats give the impression that the content is not an important part of the curriculum, and many students enter and exit with unchanged perceptions that reinforce their existing beliefs and views (Brown, 2004).

Educators do not leave their cultures outside of their classroom doors. The Chronicle of Higher Education: The 2006-7 Almanac (Profile, 2006), reveals its most recent racial and ethnic statistics for full-time instructional faculty at all institutions of higher education to be 80.8% White, non-Hispanic; 5.5% Black, non-Hispanic; 8.1% Asian; 3.5% Hispanic; and 2.1% Other. Moreover, men constitute 61.9% of this group, while women represent the remaining 38.1% (Profile).

As such, educators may hold assumptions about certain groups of students that might serve to limit academic opportunities. These assumptions may stem from their own learned experiences as members of their respective groups (Genor & Schulte, 2002; McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Because our society is not value free, Ayers (1997) admonishes educators to “take responsibility for our connections and affiliations, even those that are not of our own choosing or making” (p.136). Indeed, teacher educators and administrators are adult learners who can acquire and refine multicultural skills within professional and developmental contexts.

The Conceptual Framework for the Seminar Model

According to Lieb (1991), adult learning is a field of study pioneered by the work of Malcom Knowles. Several characteristics of adult learners have emerged in the literature:

1. Adult learners are interested in practical applications of knowledge.
2. Adult learners must understand the reason for learning.
3. Adult learners are self-directed and need freedom to explore.
4. Adult learners bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the learning process.
5. Adult learners are motivated by social relationships, personal advancement, and demands to fulfill external requirements.
6. Adult learners need non-threatening, experiential, problem-centered environments where they have the locus of control and their individual learning style, stage of development, and learning goal are considered (Butler, 1992; Lawler & King, 2000; Smith, 2002).

Research trends in adult learning include transformative learning, adult learning theory and technology, collaborative learning, practitioner-based action inquiry, reciprocal interaction, apprenticeships, and communities of practice (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Imel, 1999; Yorks, 2005). Transformative learning has as its core rational discourse, experience, and reflection. Jack Mezirow first introduced it in 1978. Transformative learning allows adult learners to reflect on their experiences and use this reflection to alter perspectives. Perspectives are altered when adult learners explore new roles, perform critical assessments, recognize the needs of others, gain self-confidence, or experience major crises that provoke change and action (Imel, 1998).

Technology has pervasively affected the landscape of education at all levels. Technology has allowed a paradigm shift from rigid, walled classrooms to flexible, wireless learning contexts that are
inquiry-based, student-centered, problem-intensive, and hands-on (Hughes, Kerr, & Ooms, 2005). In adult learning, technology is used to provide instructional content to wider audiences covering greater distances (Imel, 1999). Synchronous and asynchronous learning and sharing through e-mail, discussion groups, chats, and VTEL as well as the proliferation of the WWW allow adult learners to gain technical proficiency, increase skill and knowledge, and collaborate in experiential and real-time settings.

Collaborative learning is another emerging area in the field of adult education. Group collaboration has as its focus group processing, sharing, and accomplishing collective goals. Information and resources are shared as participants advance collective, rather than individual, knowledge or skill.

Transfer of learning is a goal of education that can take two forms. Near transfer occurs when individuals apply knowledge and skills learned in one area to a similar or identical area. The cross-disciplinary application of a problem-solving strategy using different tools and variables in a totally different context is an example of far transfer. Both near and far transfer allow teachers and administrators to transfer new knowledge, reflect, research, improve instruction, and increase student learning (Cooley & Johnston, 2001; Guskey, 2000; Joyce & Showers, 1995).

Lawler and King (2000) describe the Adult Learning Model for Faculty Development as one structure from which to build effective programs. The model has four basic phases encompassing preplanning to determine organizational needs; planning to determine relevant activities; selection of delivery mechanisms to promote programming; and follow-up evaluations. Program implementation requires that educators determine the cultural needs (e.g. language, religion) of their respective classrooms, plan activities that highlight diversity, select appropriate delivery mechanisms, and solicit feedback from students as a measure of their effectiveness.

**The Seminar Model**

**Program Design**

In the fall of 1999, an 8-hour pilot seminar took place on a university campus in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex. The seminar was designed by faculty for faculty and administrators from a variety of disciplines within the College of Education (COE) to foster a multicultural atmosphere in their classrooms and supervisory capacities. This endeavor was funded primarily by a grant and also received financial assistance from the university’s COE, a university committee, and a departmental program area. The campus bookstore provided support with a related book display.

The program was designed as a seminar due to the practical benefits associated with this teaching model, including flexibility, interaction, activity, and cost-effectiveness (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999). A seminar may be defined as “any organized, group learning experience with a high degree of participation and interactions within the group” (Munson, 1989, p. 3). The primary goal of a seminar is to provide information that is not readily available elsewhere, although participants are expected to possess some level of knowledge about the topic of discussion (Sork, 1984).

The pilot seminar combined both cognitive and experiential elements. It was philosophically based on a faculty education training model developed by Covert (1988) at the University of Virginia. Conceptualized as four interlocking circles of knowledge, the model posited: (a) awareness of personal bias; (b) understanding racism; (c) the multicultural classroom; and (d) a multiculturally infused curriculum. Programs such as this are theoretically grounded in adult learning theory; they have measurable purposes and goals, and they are implemented through a variety of structures and models (Cooley & Johnston, 2001; Guskey, 2000; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006).
Objectives of the Pilot Seminar

The objectives of the seminar were: (a) to assist educators in an awareness of how their biases might affect students who are different from themselves; (b) to assist educators in their knowledge of the cultural characteristics of ethnic minority students and how these characteristics might influence classroom interactions; and (c) to assist educators in analyzing the curricula and methods used to address multicultural educational goals. These goals were apparent to the participants; they were introduced and discussed in the keynote address, and they resonated through discussion group and participant activities. True to the theme of Adult Learning Theory, learners were made aware of the reason for learning. Their experiences and knowledge were solicited and used to explore the seminar’s objectives in a psychologically safe learning environment that provided experiential and problem-solving opportunities.

Adult participants were encouraged to explore the cultural characteristics of ethnic minority students and explore the ways these characteristics influenced their classroom interactions. This was a practical application of the seminar’s content; adult learners are typically interested in using what they have learned in order to make a difference, produce positive change, and expand their knowledge-base. Comments by participants illustrate this:

- “I wanted to learn methods or techniques to deal with the students in our program which are diverse in that they are low-income first-generation college students or have physical or learning disabilities. My expectations were exceeded.”
- “My expectations were somewhat met. In addition, questions were raised about the need for and the lack of enough multicultural acceptance reinforcing my commitment and dedication to this value and approach.”
- “[I wanted] to learn more about how to use multicultural issues in teaching for betterment of our students. Yes, I learned more about the issues and learned some techniques to use.”

Additionally, participants were encouraged to analyze their individual curricula and share examples that allowed them to use the strategies they learned in the seminar to foster a more culturally sensitive classroom. Participants had the following comments on their plans to use the content they gathered:

- “I will present to our staff in the Discovery Program – particularly to our tutors, who are students, dealing with a diverse student population in the Discovery Program.”
- “I will make several additional presentations with educators on multicultural strategies.
- “[I plan to] keep incorporating what I learn – renew commitment to stay open to new information.”

Following principles of transformative learning, adult participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and examine new roles as multicultural classroom facilitators. They were encouraged to give examples of ways they could recognize the needs of their students, help them gain self-confidence, and feel comfortable making contributions in the classroom setting.

Another principle emerging in the area of adult education, collaborative learning, was practiced in the seminar. A facilitated discussion and group discussions provided small intimate settings where two to three facilitators helped participants explore ways they could use the information from the seminar to enhance their personal interactions and facilitate collaboration with other educators and students.
Program Outline

The program was divided into two parts, each of which addressed one or more of the three objectives. The first part concentrated on issues facing educators as they teach in plural settings. The keynote presentation was entitled “Multicultural Education Paradigms and Pedagogy for the Twenty-First Century,” and it incorporated the knowledge objective of the program.

Following the keynote address were two discussants. The discussants had received the keynote presentation in advance and had been asked to reflect on the material according to their disciplines. An interactive period of active listening, questions and answers, led by a facilitator, then ensued between the main speaker, discussants, and participants.

Lunch was provided to the participants, rather than having them disperse to eat on their own. This helped sustain the momentum and cohesiveness of the group. A “devising theatre” production followed immediately after the meal. This type of production involves constructing theater with a purpose in mind to promote social change (L. Garcia, personal communication, June 25, 1999). As the result of cross-disciplinary collaborations between the first author and a noted faculty member in theatre arts, a play was commissioned especially for the program. Super Teacher (Garcia, 1999) was performed by its creator, four students, and audience volunteers. The themes of the production were inclusion, student and teacher self-esteem, issues, and experiences in the diverse classroom. This section of the program emphasized the awareness objective.

The video “The Eye of the Storm” (Peter & Peter, 1970) was shown after the luncheon. This film graphically depicts an “experiment” involving a teacher who separates her third-grade class according to eye color. Each group receives preferential treatment in efforts to demonstrate the impact of racial prejudice and discrimination. Two discussants reacted to the film in terms of how cultural characteristics can influence interactions in the classroom. A facilitated discussion followed.

The final portion of the program involved group discussions by the participants. Participants were divided into four small groups that were each led by two to three facilitators. The facilitators were equipped with pertinent handout materials. Participants discussed the ways in which they could use the information from the seminar to make personal changes. The ideas and strategies discussed by the small groups were recorded by the facilitators, who then highlighted the information to the reconvened larger group. The conclusion of this activity was followed by closing remarks and program assessments.

Seminar Participants

A total of 56 individuals participated in the pilot seminar. Of the 56 participants, 22 (39%) shared demographic information revealing their gender, race/ethnicity, and occupation. Thirteen of the attendees were female, while 9 were male. The racial/ethnic make-up included 4 (18%) Biracial, 8 (36%) African American, 1 (5 %) Hispanic, 3 (13%) Asian, 1 (5 %) Middle Eastern, 4 (18%) Caucasian and 1 (5%) person who chose not to disclose this information. Eight faculty members were present (36%). Five (23%) administrators, 6 (27%) individuals in other occupations, and 3 (14%) attendees chose not to disclose their occupation.

Assessment of the Pilot Seminar

Did a seminar on multicultural education and research supply additional knowledge of multicultural issues, encourage attendees to implement and use the seminar’s content, or produce positive attitudes toward inclusion and diversity? In an attempt to answer this research question, surveys were given to participants; their responses were tabulated and analyzed using measures of central
tendency and descriptive statistical measures. Participant comments and reflections were solicited, as well.

Participants returning surveys identified the following as their expectations of the seminar: (a) presenting successful strategies to use in multicultural classrooms; (b) examining multicultural issues; (c) sharing ideas; (d) gaining exposure through peer interaction; and (e) learning strategies to enhance diversity. Fifty percent of the respondents indicated that the seminar met (27%), exceeded (9%), or met to some degree (14%) their expectations, while 50% failed to respond to this question.

Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed rated the information provided by the presenters as excellent. Thirty-six percent rated presenter information with a designation of very good, while 5% indicated that the presenters and associated content were good. Contributing factors were knowledge of the subject matter, ability to maintain interest, communication and delivery skills, depth of presentation, and variety in the presentation style.

The content of the seminar was considered excellent by 50% of those responding. Forty-five percent of those surveyed indicated that the content was very good, and only 5% failed to respond to this question. According to participant responses, the knowledge of the keynote speaker and his ability to stimulate thought and vary the issues presented resonated. The positive interactions between attendees, a high energy level, and a high level of activity were mentioned by respondents who rated the seminar's content as excellent or very good.

Respondents indicated that they gained a variety of information from the seminar; 36% said they gained general information on multicultural issues. About 27% stated that they gained practical information and strategies for teaching in the multicultural classroom, and 15% revealed that they gained a combination of practical techniques, ideas, general strategies, and networking opportunities. Twenty-two percent of the returned responses had no data relative to this inquiry.

Respondents revealed several ways they planned to use what they learned. This included education of others through lectures and presentations, improving personal instructional materials by incorporating seminar information, refueling their personal commitment to diversity, and collaborating with others on diversity issues and projects.

When asked what the seminar lacked, respondents voiced the following concerns: practical application of materials; representation outside of the university community; and tips on dealing with the emotionality involved in diversity work. Respondents believed the seminar would have been improved with the inclusion of safe dialogue with White male administrators; advocacy strategies; increased breaks, discussion, and handouts; student experiences; and increased time for emotional processing.

Discussion and Recommendations

This pilot seminar was an effort to improve the multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills of participants; many indicated that their expectations for the seminar were met, and most provided positive feedback about their experiences. Attendees were specific as to how they would go about using the knowledge that they gained.

Two themes were voiced repeatedly by the participants. They wanted more applied material. They also wanted extended time for the seminar, to further learn about and process ideas. While no one seminar will speak to all concerns, these important considerations can be addressed. Practical suggestions for implementation can be collected from attendees; these could be compiled, shared,
and discussed in small groups. Increasing the number of pertinent handouts and requesting that speakers provide specific examples of the implementation of their work and ideas might also address attendee needs.

Extended time to process information can be accomplished with follow-up groups for those attendees who are interested. These groups could meet periodically to debrief. Technology could be utilized as a vehicle to promote continued networking and resource sharing (i.e., on-line chats, and videoconferencing). The spirit of the seminar could then be extended over a longer period of time, with fewer physical restrictions and scheduling constraints.

The multicultural seminar model for faculty is one effort toward fostering an atmosphere of inclusiveness in the college and university classroom. While long-term mindsets and opinions are rarely changed during a brief seminar experience, it is critical for teacher educators and administrators to have the opportunity to examine their views about diversity. It is also important for educators and administrators to challenge stereotypical notions and address points of contention, as they work toward fostering academic excellence.

The researchers suggest replication of this seminar and the collection of quantitative and qualitative data to determine whether or not this type of approach to multicultural education and inclusion produces a favorable long-term change in participant behavior. Another suggestion would be to look for trends in the literature and develop a paradigm for improving pre-service teacher education through multicultural awareness programs. In the absence of enough literature to perform a meta analysis, this approach might be useful. This work should be evaluated further with larger groups, longer participant exposure, and follow-up activities. This seminar model can provide organizers with information that can guide subsequent endeavors. In so doing, faculty, their students, and ultimately college and university communities can be better informed and prepared for culturally-rich learning environments.

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Away from the Margins: Peer Counselors and Students of Color

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Abstract

This article discusses how students of color on predominantly White campuses exhibit symptoms of racial battle fatigue as they are in daily contact with daily racial microaggressions on campus; often these symptoms can lead to low retention rates. Using the Peer Counseling program at Mississippi State University’s Holmes Cultural Diversity Center as a case study, this article highlights the creation of the peer counseling program and how peer counselors assist students of color in combating feelings of exhaustion, depression, and stress as the counselors work to create relationships that increase student retention and build connections to the institution.

Away From the Margins: Peer Counselors and Students of Color

Retention rates for students of color within US higher education institutions are of concern, as students of color are leaving institutions at higher rates than those of their White peers. For example, first-year retention rates for Native American students at public, 4-year institutions range between 28% and 35% and those rates are similar for African-American students at 4-year institutions whose first-year retention rates range from 30% to 41%; as compared to their White counterparts at 4-year institutions whose rates hover between 51% and 57% (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). These drifting retention rates beg the question as to why students of color are departing these institutions. Although researchers indicate a variety of reasons for this flight, Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano (2006) have identified one of the root causes as “racial battle fatigue” (p. 300).

Students of color attending predominantly White institutions often find themselves the only representative of their ethnic group. As such, these students may fear either what someone may ask them related to their race or how their race may be perceived by their peers (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; U.S. Department of the Army, 1994; Shay, 2002). Added to these concerns are the “racial microaggressions” which students of color address almost daily. These microaggressions may include contentious classrooms, racial slurs, or threats on one’s life -- exposure to which can make the surrounding environment, in this case the college or university, frustrating to the point of causing physical exhaustion (Kinzie, 2007; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). These feelings may be particularly heightened in African American students as race has a significant impact on their positive perception of self (Sellers & Shelton, 2003).

The constant coping with daily racial microaggressions forces African American students to live with their response systems always in the “on” position, causing great amounts of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion (Smith, 2004). This strain on the body has been termed “racial battle fatigue” as it can be related to combat stress syndrome or combat stress fatigue experienced by soldiers who must daily exist in hostile environments (Shay, 2002; Smith, Allen, Danley, 2007; U.S. Department of the Army, 1994). Further, researchers indicate that a variety of stress-induced diseases result from the fact that African Americans are in this constant state of “activated” response, which is usually reserved only for emergencies, but is in use as a constant coping mechanism for racial occurrences (Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). This day-to-day racial combat added to the regular challenges of college life make dealing with school difficult and may be one of the causes of student of color departure from higher education institutions (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006).

All is not lost as there are ways to assist students of color in feeling that they have comrades on campus, allowing these students to take a break from the front lines by finding ways to help them get
connected to their institutions. Shotton, Oosahwe and Cintron (2007) found that a number of higher education institutions are creating support mechanisms for students of color. Many of these programs contain a peer mentoring component as peer mentoring impacts students on both academic and social levels. Murguia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991) found that “if social integration can be achieved in an on-campus subunit population for similar ethnic minority students, the disintegrative effects of attending a large university can be eased” (p. 82).

**Peer Counseling for Students of Color**

Research indicates that involvement in the university is a key factor in student persistence (Astin, 1982; Tinto, 1987). Astin (1984) reported that the more students are involved on campus, the higher their likelihood to remain and have positive feelings about their campus experience. Further, Astin noted that the number one factor, which influences students to remain at their institution, is their peers. Peer mentoring, or peer counseling as it has come to be known, has been used as a way of increasing student retention (Brawer, 1996; Good, Haplin, & Haplin, 2000; Highsmith, Denes, & Pierre, 1998). The basic idea behind peer counseling is to help other students successfully adjust to the social and academic environment of an institution of higher learning. This concept involves training acclimated students to assist new students in making the transition from home, high school, or community college to a major university and their new found environment.

For students of color entering a predominantly White higher education institution can be difficult as these students often leave an environment in which they had many peers of similar backgrounds to enter an environment in which they may be the only minority or international student in a classroom. Freeman (1999) found that mentoring is important for students who find themselves in environments that are culturally unique from those they left. Further, Villalpando (2003) determined that for students of color peer groups are essential as “peer groups empower and nourish academic success and foster the development of a critical cultural consciousness by understanding the member’s condition as racialized students within the academy” (p. 633).

**Peer Counseling at Mississippi State University**

Good, Haplin, and Haplin (2000) indicate that many higher education institutions are using peer mentoring with students of color in order to facilitate the transition process from home to a university setting. This is the case with the peer counseling program at Mississippi State University's (MSU) Holmes Cultural Diversity Center (HCDC). The HCDC Peer Counselor program provides students of color and international students with a “big brother” or “big sister” figure to assist them in their transition to college. The objective of peer counseling is to present incoming students of color and international students with positive role models with whom they can identify and feel comfortable. The assumption is that if these incoming students of color and international students have positive role models who can offer candid advice and are integrated into the college environment, then the chances of academic and social success, as well as retention are higher than for those students of color who do not participate in the program.

Based upon this assumption, Mississippi State University's Peer Counseling Program was initiated in 1986 by the Office of Minority Affairs. Observational research conducted by the Office of Minority Affairs indicated that African American students were coming to Mississippi State University academically prepared but not socially prepared. These students were coming to the university from small rural towns and were having difficulty adjusting to a large university setting. The administration, namely the Director of the Office of Minority Affairs and the Vice President, recognized that this particular student population was not successfully navigating the “social” landscape and sought to increase the retention rates of this student population. It was determined that these students needed a support system that would aid them in successfully navigating the university system as a “whole.”
Originally, the students selected to serve as peer counselors were African-American, upper-class students who either held leadership positions on campus or who expressed an interest in the Peer Counseling Program. The students selected to be peer counselors represented a wide range of academic areas and backgrounds, as well as a cross-section of organizations and disciplines at MSU. During the first year of the Peer Counseling Program, 31 peer counselors were selected and each was assigned from three to six African American freshman students. These assignments were made from a partial list of incoming students of color based upon their resident hall room assignments. Peer counselors were required to make regular visits to freshman residence halls in order to become acquainted with their “little brothers and sisters.” When they visited the halls, the peer counselors assisted their students with problems or concerns; and when needed, they referred their students to the appropriate person or department when the problem was outside of the peer counselor’s knowledge.

In 1991, MSU’s Office of Minority Affairs was renamed the Holmes Cultural Diversity Center (HCDC). Under this new name and broader mission, the Peer Counselor program began to evolve into something bigger and better than it had been previously. Mississippi State University officials recognized the need for MSU, as a whole, to enhance their understanding of factors that facilitate or impede the effective participation of individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds in the mainstream of campus. Hence, the selection of students to be served by the HCDC was expanded to include all students of color, international freshman students, and transfer students. Further, the inclusion of all these students meant that those serving as peer counselors could no longer simply function in the role of “big brother” or “big sister.” There was now a greater need for the peer counselors to have a better understanding of the cultural background of all the students they serve.

This being the case, the peer counseling program created a constitution and formed a three-day orientation and training for peer counselors. The peer counselor constitution set guidelines by which the peer counselors were to govern themselves as they are a recognized student organization within the MSU Student Association. The constitution also formalized the way the peer counselors are chosen. The selection process for peer counselors includes grade point average, campus involvement, leadership ability, communication skills, and a genuine interest and enthusiasm for peer counseling. Peer counselors may also be of any race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. In order to apply to be a peer counselor, a student must have a minimum 2.50 grade point average, three letters of reference, and be willing submit to an interview process. The three-day orientation and training that was created consisted of workshops facilitated by professionals of expertise in their relative areas including topics such as “understanding cultural differences,” “interacting with international students,” and “developing your leadership style,” to name a few.

At present, peer counselors serve as mentors and university representatives to guide students of color and international freshman and transfer students in developing academic, extracurricular, and social skills at the university level. The students who are “counseled” or mentored are now referred to as “counselee” with each peer counselor being assigned anywhere between 40-45 students per year. Contact with counselees has also evolved from making resident hall visits to making contact via email, Facebook and via HCDC’s social programs.

Throughout the year, the peer counselors sponsor programs, which cater toward the counselees’ academic and social success. Many of these selected programs, academic and social, are based upon feedback received from survey instruments such as the Holmes Cultural Diversity Center (HCDC) Program Participant Survey and the Mississippi State University Withdrawal Survey. The HCDC Program Participant Survey instrument focuses on gathering information from program participants on what programs they believe would be beneficial for and to them in their matriculation here at Mississippi State University. The Mississippi State University Withdrawal Survey allows students to indicate their reason for withdrawing from college and how important these reasons were...
for their withdrawal from Mississippi State University. Based upon results from these assessment instruments, some of the programs presented include: a financial aid workshop taught by a financial aid counselor advising students of the recent changes in the financial aid application process and awards; “UMOJA,” literally “unity” in Swahili, which allows the counselees to interact with MSU’s on-campus minority and international organizations; “Real World College Life Rap Session,” which provides an opportunity for peer counselors to talk with their counselees openly and anonymously through submitted questions; and “Stress and You,” a program led by a licensed, professional counselor who instructs the counselees on how best to recognize and handle the stresses of college life.

Both the HCDC and MSU determined that the peer counselor position is vital to MSU, and as such the peer counselors are paid positions funded through the HCDC. The peer counselors have several accountability measures attached to their salary. For example, peer counselors are required to submit bi-weekly and monthly contact reports indicating the time and method of contact with their counselees. Peer counselors are required to make a minimum of five contacts with each counselee per month. The contacts with their counselees may be made in person, through electronic means, or via written correspondence.

The peer counselors also meet weekly so that HCDC peer counseling programs can be effectively implemented and any issues that arise can be addressed. The weekly meetings also allow the peer counselors to bond as a group. Once per month, the weekly peer counselor meeting gives way to professional development as professionals from the MSU and local community are invited to facilitate sessions on topics that are appropriate for peer counselors, such as “organizational communication,” and “leadership.” Peer counselors also participate in community service projects and attend professional conferences in order to serve the community and to grow as professionals. Their training is enhanced via a facilitative skills counseling class in order to promote and further develop their counseling skills. Any peer counselors who do not meet up to their obligations including attendance at social programs and meetings, or contacting their counselees are docked in pay. This is an impetus, which helps the peer counselors stay focused on their one-year commitment as an HCDC peer counselor.

**Support from Former Peer Counselors**

Since its inception, the peer counselor program has grown to be a recognized force on the MSU campus. Former counselees and counselors have mentioned the importance of the peer counseling program via emails and in conversations with the HCDC Administration. Paras, an African-American student who graduated from MSU in 1997, now a pharmaceutical sales representative, shared his experience as a counselee:

“My peer counselor reached out to me, aided me in my college life, and exposed me to various organizations, places, and relationships. By introducing me to these aspects of MSU Life, I was able to gain an insight on how to succeed in a university setting.”

Other students of color mentioned the importance of finding others at a large institution who could understand their concerns. Luther, an African-American student and 1998 graduate of MSU, who works as the Interim Director of Intercultural and Diversity Affairs at a higher education institution in the Southeast, recalled the importance of the peer counseling program as a student:

“The peer counselors provided programs that addressed being the only one [student] of color in your class, academic success, and career opportunities. I, like most freshmen, did not take advantage of all the programs, but the ones I did impacted me...
tremendously. The impact was so great that I decided to become a counselor the following year and have since chosen a career in student affairs, Multicultural Affairs to be exact. Programs like the mentor programs are essential to students of color success and satisfaction in their college experience. When I converse with alumni, we don't talk about that great Composition course. We share stories of meeting new people through the [Holmes Cultural Diversity] Center, having a great resident advisor or peer counselor.”

Tommy, an African-American student who graduated from MSU in 1999 and is currently Assistant Dean of Programs and Student Development at a higher education institution in the Southeast, stressed the importance of the peer counseling program for students of color making the transition to college:

“The Peer Counselor program was a great experience for me. Making the transition from high school to college was a major hurdle for a young man from a small town. I must admit that it was overwhelming at first, but the relationship and guidance I received from my peer counselor aided me in the process. I really benefited from the program and developed life-long friends during my time as a peer counselor.”

The individual comments made above are echoed in the hundreds of letters received at the HCDC each year regarding the peer counseling program. Clearly, the HCDC peer counseling program has had a great impact on students’ matriculation at Mississippi State University.

As US higher education institutions continue to become more diverse, partnering peer counseling programs with higher education institution campus diversity centers is a key step in addressing retention for students of color. As illustrated by MSU’s HCDC Peer Counseling program, peer counselors are beneficial for students of color as they provide a safe place for students to adjust to the daily combat of racial battle fatigue. As illustrated above, former counselees report finding academic success at their undergraduate institutions that lead them to their current jobs. Peer counselors report learning more about the world in which we live and becoming more culturally diverse. In the future, peer counseling programs will continue to evolve and serve students of color. Ideally, more institutions will take steps to partner with their on-campus communities to bring students of color away from the margins and back toward the center of the institution.

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Perceived Benefits of Human Sexuality Peer Facilitators

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Abstract

Peer education, facilitation, and counseling programs are commonly utilized in primary and secondary prevention programs within colleges and universities. In addition, peer-based human sexuality discussions have been used as an adjunct to traditional human sexuality pedagogic programs over the last 20 years. Whereas ample evidence suggests that peers can be successful in reaching target populations, few evaluations have assessed the perspective of the peer helper. This study qualitatively assessed the perceived benefits among human sexuality peer facilitators. Transcript analysis of focus group sessions revealed five categories of benefits associated with participation in the program: professional development, exposure to diversity, sexual attitude reassessment, relationship enhancement, and presentation/group facilitation/communication skills. These results have programmatic and practical implications for college health and peer helping professionals. The variety of perceived benefits associated with participation in the program can be used to recruit facilitators and provide a basis for funding peer-based pedagogic and prevention programs.

Introduction

Peer-based education strategies have been utilized on college campuses over the last 50 years (Helm, Knipmeyer, & Martin, 1972). Since then, peer helping has become a critical component of college health programming and pedagogic programs at many colleges and universities. Peer helping can best be viewed as an umbrella term covering a diverse range of different approaches used to empower others about relevant topics, scenarios, and life skills. The term “peer” has taken on several cultural constructions with regard to the collegiate population. Peers may exhibit a similarity in age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, lifestyle, social economic status, or other social ecological factor. Peers have been utilized in a variety of scenarios and situations and can be used to educate, facilitate, and counsel (Shiner, 1999).

The use of small group discussion, including sessions facilitated by peers, has been utilized in collegiate sex education settings to enhance the learning process since the 1980s (Barbour, 1989; DeLamater, Hyde, & Allgeier, 1994; Strouse, Krajewski, & Gilin, 1990). Peers also have been used as an effective outreach risk-reduction tool regarding sexuality-related topics. An investigation conducted by Richie and Getty (1994) discovered first-year college students who attended a peer-based sexuality program were more likely to have had an HIV-antibody test during the school year and use condoms during their sexual encounters. In addition, they were more likely to ask their sexual partners about previous sexual behaviors, request their partners be tested for HIV, cease sexual activity without the availability of a condom, and negotiate sexual monogamy.

Sexuality-related pedagogic programs in which peers are included as a fundamental programmatic asset have been implemented in adolescent populations (Evans, Rees, Okagbue, & Tripp, 1998; Strange, Forrest, & Oakley, 2002; Ebreo, Feist-Price, Siewe, & Zimmerman, 2002). In a study of peer educators, single session educational lectures, and a control group, peer education was found
to be an effective HIV/AIDS pedagogical tool and was found to elicit change in students’ knowledge and attitudes (Ergene, Cok, Turner, & Unal, 2005).

Strange and colleagues (2002) conducted a randomized controlled trial of peer-based human sexuality pedagogic programs in secondary schools located within the United Kingdom. Twenty-seven schools were selected for participation in the study. Fourteen schools were randomly assigned to include a peer-based pedagogic method and 13 were assigned traditional teacher-based teaching techniques. Pre- and post- data from 268 peers indicate statistically significant increases in knowledge related to female condoms, emergency contraception, cervical caps, and intrauterine devices. When assessing the change in the peers’ attitudes towards sexological issues, results indicate 19% \((n=51)\) of the participants adopted more positive attitudes towards men having sex with other men and 20% \((n=53)\) more positive attitudes towards women having sex with other women. When asked if participation in the program facilitated an increase in teaching and presentation-related confidence, statistically significant changes were observed in implemented classroom sessions, dealing with difficult behavior, alleviation of embarrassment, having adequate sexuality-related knowledge, and dealing with personal questions.

Data from 331 of the peers were procured in which the perceived impact of the program upon the peers’ sexual attitudes, confidence, and behavior was assessed.

Fifty-eight percent of the participants \((n=193)\) responded “very or quite likely” when asked if the program changed their opinion on sexual matters, 40% \((n=133)\) when asked if the program made them more confident about getting what you want from a relationship, and 35% \((n=115)\) when asked if the program influenced their sexual behavior.

Although ample investigations such as these and others have assessed the outcomes of peer-based programs, few studies have assessed the perspective of the peer. However, peer perspective studies are warranted as the peer’s viewpoint and experiences may provide valuable information regarding decisions to volunteer as a peer helper and the overall impact of the program upon the peer.

In a focus group study conducted by Klein and Sondag (1994), peer health educators’ motivations for participation in the program were assessed. Nineteen peers participated in five focus group sessions at a midsized university. Results indicate that participatory motivations were thematically based upon previous family experiences, personal experiences, previous observations of their peers in the program, perceived ability to help others or themselves, and the procurement of an experience that would enhance their public speaking and/or future career potential.

Participation in peer-based programs has been shown to be beneficial to the peer (Hamilton, 1992; HEA, 1993; Klepp, Halper, & Perry, 1986). Collegiate sexuality-related peer programs have been hypothesized to facilitate a change in self-esteem and reduction in high-risk sexual behavior. Sawyer, Pinciaro, and Bedwell (1997) recruited 65 participants from sexual health peer programs located within 10 universities. Preliminary data were collected prior to participation in the peer program and post-test collections took place after one and two semesters. While non-significant changes occurred in the quantitative assessment of the variables, the assessment of open-ended questions indicate that 81.5% \((n=53)\) of the peers believed they had changed as a result of the peer training and/or experience. Thirty percent \((n=19)\) of the participants indicated that they had increased their level of sexuality knowledge, 20% \((n=14)\) had increased their self-esteem, 15% \((n=10)\) practiced safer sex more frequently, and 14% \((n=9)\) indicated that they were more open to their peer’s behaviors and opinions.
The overarching purpose of the present study was to qualitatively assess the perceived benefits associated with participation in a human sexuality peer facilitation program. Focus groups were used to provide a more in-depth assessment of the perceived benefits exhibited by the peers regarding their experience.

**Peer Facilitation Program**

The university sponsoring the peers of the current study hosts a survey undergraduate human sexuality course that routinely enrolls 1,000 or more students per academic year. In order to provide an experience that is intellectually sound, non-judgmental, and innovative in nature, the professors/instructors recruit undergraduate and graduate peers to serve as course adjuncts. The core responsibility of the peers includes the facilitation of weekly in-person human sexuality discussions, attendance management, grading of assignments, and assistance in solving student dilemmas. Topics of weekly discussions include contemporary sexological issues such as safer sex, gender construction, sex research, sexual communication, sexual scripts, and sexual reform. For their contributions to the program, peers earn three academic credits.

Although the program has been in existence in its original format for 20 years, instructors have recently implemented an online option wherein the peers facilitate weekly discussions through threaded online forums. In addition, faculty members also have piloted a combination experience in which the peers host several in-person discussions per semester in addition to weekly online forums.

**Methods**

**Procedures**

Human sexuality peer facilitators from a state-funded Midwestern university were recruited to participate in focus group sessions. A qualitative design and analysis was chosen as the ideal data collection method due to the stimulation of discussion that is created through this strategy and the richness of data procured. In addition, previous investigations have successfully utilized focus group methods in assessing sexuality-related topics (e.g., Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004; Yarber & Sanders, 1998). All study procedures were approved by the institutional review board at the university. The primary investigator contacted five faculty members who were currently sponsoring the undergraduate human sexuality course and asked permission to recruit participants during instructor-peer debriefing sessions. Upon receiving permission from interested faculty, the investigator visited five debriefing sessions to recruit participants through the distribution of a flier and a class announcement. Three of the faculty members utilized the in-person only method, one the online only method, and one the combination method. Inclusion criteria for the participants were: English speaking, at least 18 years of age, and registered for the peer facilitation course at the university. Compensation of $20 was offered to participants.

Standard suggested procedures were utilized in the conduction of the focus groups (Denzin & Yvonna, 1994; Morgan, 1988). Four semi-structured mixed focus group sessions were conducted in the fall of 2004 and spring of 2005 with the primary investigator serving as the moderator. After previously recruited participants responded to an invitation by e-mail, the primary investigator sent (by e-mail) a brief demographic questionnaire and a study information sheet. The demographic questionnaire included questions pertaining to age, gender, class standing, sexual orientation, academic major, and previous job experience related to the fields of sexology and education. Participants were asked to review the study information sheet and complete the demographic questionnaire prior to attending a focus group session and completed materials were collected by the primary investigator prior to participation in a session. All participants were sent reminder e-mails
two days before the focus group with the time and place of the session that they were scheduled to attend.

The focus groups were conducted during weekends in a private conference room located near campus and participants were given one hour to discuss the various perceived benefits associated with participation in the program. Each session occurred thirteen weeks into the academic semester, allowing ample time for the peer facilitators to develop opinions regarding their involvement in the program. While the only structured question for the focus group sessions was “How have you benefited from being a sexuality peer facilitator?”, the moderator allowed ample interaction between the participants to provide more in-depth responses. Each focus group was moderated by the primary investigator and audio taped for later transcription. The transcripts did not identify individual participants.

Participants

A total of 21 peer facilitators attended the four focus group sessions (n=7, n=7, n=4, n=3). The age of the participants was 21.76 years. Sixteen of the participants were female and five male. Nineteen identified as Caucasian, one as Asian/Pacific Islander, and one as African American. Twenty of the participants identified as heterosexual and one as bisexual. Seventeen were undergraduate students and four were enrolled in a masters program. The majority of the participants (n=11) were enrolled in an academic major in the School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation. In addition, seven of the participants were enrolled in the School of Arts and Sciences, two in the School of Education, and one in the School of Continuing Studies. Five of the participants were currently enrolled in the university undergraduate human sexuality minor, and 11 had previously held a part time job related to sexology or education. Thirteen of the participants utilize the in-person discussion method, three the online method, and five the combination method.

Results

Analysis

To establish reliability, the transcripts were analyzed by both the lead author and second author for emerging themes. Strategy for analyzing the results reflecting recommendations made by Krueger (2002) and included initial coding by multiple investigators, preliminary establishment of themes, consensus by the investigators, and finalization of themes. Because this was an exploratory investigation, the participants were given ample time to provide a variety of responses to the primary research question as well as interact with each other. When the participants created a potential theme associated with participation in the program, the moderator allowed for ample discussion and response time to further investigate its importance. Overall, all of the participants contributed to the sessions with varying degrees of participation depending on their own assessment of their ability to contribute to particular themes.

Initially, the two investigators analyzed the transcribed sessions independently and coded the themes as they emerged throughout the sessions. Afterwards, the investigators met to discuss the results of their coding schemes and to establish potential themes. After comparison of findings and the establishment of consensus by the investigators, it was decided that the codes reflected five themes which reflected benefits associated with participation in the sexuality peer facilitation program. These themes included: professional development, exposure to diversity, sexual attitude reassessment (SAR), relationship enhancement, and presentation/group facilitation/communication skills. These themes have been presented below with illustrative quotes. In each case, quotes from multiple participants were chosen to represent the interactions and beliefs of the group. In all of the quotes, “P-1”, “P-2”, “P-n” represents quotes from different participants.
Themes

Professional Development.

Career preparation experiences have been shown to enhance job procurement potential in recent college students (Sagen, Dallam, & Laverty, 2000). In the present study, participation in the program acted as a form of professional development for several of the participants. This included increased interest in a field related to human sexuality or education and/or a field experience that may enhance their ability to acquire a future occupation.

P-1 If someone came to me today and told me that he would pay me a salary to do this, I would do it without a second thought, I would just do it, I mean …I love it… I don’t know if I am going to end up in graduate school but I have been studying psychology for 3 years. I have always wanted to go into counseling and the interpersonal relationships which I get out of this are helpful. I don’t want to do research. I’m more interested in applied health science, key word “applied” so that is something I will definitely look for and I hope that I can find something very close to what I am doing here because I really do like it a lot.

P-2 I was talking to my friend the other night and I was like, “you know this is my last semester here. I have been here for four years.” I was like, “I am not quite sure what I want to do, but nothing has been more enjoyable to me then teaching this discussion.” And it’s like I don’t really know if I want to be a teacher or work in a university but maybe do something like peer education and human sexuality. That’s almost like, exactly like, something I would like to do. I really would have never found that out so if I wouldn’t have done this, because I never really considered something like that.

P-3 My major is public health with a minor in human sexuality so I know I want to talk to minorities about issues and most of the issues we have are related to sex anyway like AIDS and pregnancy. So this is what I would want to talk about. There are a lot of things that my instructor did that I know if I did have to plan a group I would use. I mean I would have a lot of resources and ideas. [Group 1].

P-1 I think this was the turning point for me because after being a discussion leader I decided to go ahead and apply for my PhD and fortunately I did get admitted into it and I want to concentrate in human sexuality. I think this class was my turning point.

P-2 I think that when you go to an employer or a law school and graduate school or whatever and they look at your resume they will see that you were a human sexuality discussion leader and be like “oh that’s interesting, tell me more about that.” Then they start getting some answers other than the ones that were just given by others. And I think that at least in their mind that might give you more skills and you might stick out more in their minds.

P-3 I’m currently an education major and it’s a great experience to understand. This is my first time kind of being in a classroom setting, and just understanding the time management, and the time you have, and the material that you have to get through in that day. It's been a great experience.

P-4 I think I am learning to be a leader and I think that’s going to be part of my career in some way. So I think that I am the president of a club and I think that this and all of those experiences just help me shape my leadership skills more and I think that it will always be useful no matter what I am doing. [Group 2].

P-1 I not really sure exactly what I want to do, but it helps, I definitely think it helps because I know I want to do something with counseling or with education or public health and it’s just kind of broad so, I mean doing this is and having to actually grade their assignments and having students be like “oh, I am sorry that I turned it in late” and that kind of teaching effort I know I don’t really like that and I
would just sit back and think “Oh, maybe I don’t want to do the education side of it.” It helps you think about it a little more too, I don’t know, I think it helps.

P-2 I also think that being a discussion leader has helped me because not only am I a discussion leader, I am going to minor in human sexuality and I think that is going to help my career even if I don’t necessarily use it. It still makes me more qualified for whatever I am going to do. [Group 3].

P I think that this is going to help me down the line because whatever I am doing is definitely going to have presenting ideas to people and I think I have …and really what we are doing in this class are presenting ideas and trying to get them to grab onto them and move forward with them. Because no matter what you do, you don’t want to come in and preach to people. You want them to be interested from the first word you say. So that’s a really a tool and skill to build. [Group 4].

**Exposure to Diversity**

Diversity within the collegiate environment is seen as an asset and an overall critical tool for the facilitation of learning by collegiate sex educators. Although many individuals may feel intimidated or underexposed to diversity related to human sexuality, the constructed environment provided by the sessions appears to enable the expression of diverse opinions. The participants reported that participation in the program provided useful exposure to diverse opinions and attitudes related to human sexuality. This included views of individuals of various ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations.

P I think it’s more personal because you get to hear like people’s views that are straight, people that are gay, White, Black you know you just get to get a different expression of everybody’s. . . sexual … you know experience . . . it’s cool . . . you learn a lot. [Group 1].

P-1 I really enjoyed getting to know other people’s opinions on the topic of sex and see all of their views and how they have been brought up and stuff like that, and collaborating together and really talking about it. That’s meant a lot to me to. Just learning about other people’s perspectives.

P-2 For me, my major is in higher education and student affairs so I interact with college students in a variety of settings from traditional conferences to programming to dealing with incidents. And so it’s nice to have a different avenue to try to get to know the students because if gives you a different perspective to what students are dealing with in the residence halls and to try to understand where students are coming from, personalities, views, opinions, experiences. It’s been another avenue to try to get to know the students.

P-3 When you are a discussion leader you definitely hear everyone else’s opinions and it kind of broadens your horizons like you get to know more of what everyone’s opinions are about different subjects and why they feel this way and stuff like that.

P-4 I think I have gotten somewhat of a range for what the students are thinking, what behaviors they are engaging in, what sort their backgrounds are, and you realize the diversity of experience and information and just the background information that they bring with them. So I think to understand the range of what students are feeling and how they are interpreting their sexuality and expressing that. I think I learned that more so than what’s in the book. [Group 2].

P I also feel that having the experience with the instructor . . . like he’ll talk about it. You get more of an interview about how the sexuality education system works. That’s the things that when you are in a human sexuality class you are not necessarily listening to everyone else’s opinions. When you are a discussion leader you definitely hear everyone else’s opinions and it kind of broadens your
horizons like you get to know more of what everyone’s opinions are about different subjects and why they feel this way and stuff like that. [Group 3].

P I think that I have learned from the students, like she said before. Just like their views and their backgrounds and how they were raised. We have online discussions, and just reading how they were brought up with religion, and how sex was taught to them, just how different families deal with the whole sex issue because everyone is different. [Group 4].

**Sexual Attitude Reassessment**

Sexual attitude restructuring/reassessment (SAR) programs were created in the 1960s by the National Sex Forum and have been utilized in academic classroom settings (Vandervoort & McIlvenna, 1979). The purpose of contemporary SAR programs is to provide an opportunity for the attendees to assess their own cultural influences, deconstruct their own assumptions about human sexuality, and become desensitized to unfamiliar sexual practices and sexological issues. The instructors/professors utilize SAR components within their course through the use of explicit media and the discussions facilitated by the peers. The participants reported that leading the sessions facilitated a reassessment of their attitudes related to sexological topics.

P-1 When I discuss some of the issues with the students I notice on a real general level along with them I’m sort of breaking my own discomfort zone on whatever issues that we’re tackling with them.

P-2 I really thought that I knew how guys think, through this I’ve found that a lot of guys are insecure and uncomfortable with a lot of different things …I’ve learned a lot like they are more sensitive than I thought, and they are kind of like, I don’t know, uncomfortable, and embarrassed about certain things.[Group 1].

**Relationship Enhancement**

Because the collegiate environment is associated with increased autonomy and the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, relationships between significant others and parents can be challenging. Participation in the programs appears to enable students with the ability to overcome previous difficulties related to relationships. Several peers revealed that participation in the program has enhanced their relationships with their significant other, friends, and/or family members.

P-1 I live with a lot of girls. I’m not in a sorority, but I live with five other girls and we all have extremely different sexual backgrounds and just to come together with that and also like with my boyfriend, like it’s been really good because, like I kind of see more of the guy’s perspective on this. Like I realize a lot like you were saying that guys have a lot of insecurities and I really have been horrible at recognizing those and addressing those in my relationships and I think that was really important. . . I think this is a great thing for relationships. It’s so awesome.

P-2 It made me realize weakness in my relationships, um like where I need work on even though I know how relationships work out. So great, I know the good things to do, I realize that I am not perfect, and event though I’m open about sexuality there are some things about myself that I’m not open about and that really made me realize those. Like my limits and my boundaries and what I like and don’t like...all that kind of stuff. It really made me realize those kinds of things even though I know a lot about it, it doesn’t mean that I am perfect at it.

P-3 With relationships like with my mom, like it has helped soo much, like she is such like a sex negative kind of person. Like the only kind of sexual talk she has had with me is that I can’t bring home a Black chick, and if I get someone pregnant I get kicked out of the house. Like that was it, but now we talk every week and I’m like “Oh, this is what we talked about” and she’s like, “Oh, cool.”
- 4 I've noticed that with my parents too. The more I talk about how excited I am that somebody brought up this in my human sexuality discussion. They're kind of like, “OK, that’s really neat. Awesome.” But at least they are hearing that and trying to be supportive. [Group 1].

- 1 I used to be shy and my mom used to talk and try to educate me about the subject and I would just walk away. After being a discussion leader, I made a point to call her and let her know everything that we discussed and I think that made a whole lot of difference. Now I am really expressive and I can talk about everything and it’s really helped me.

- 2 My boyfriend and I have been together for a while and we are pretty open about talking about it. But after discussion every Monday night I would call him to talk about it and then we would begin discussing. I would talk about the topic and then in our relationship how that relates, and then we end up having an hour talk about our relationship. So it definitely helps, you know, the sex aspect. [Group 2].

- I have had more friends come to me in sexual situations like trying to get a hold of emergency contraception and different sexual problems and sometimes friends of friends come to me asking things which was kind of really weird since I didn’t really know them but now I am used to it. When I start talking about something most of my friends are used to that…which I think is good because it’s opened my big group of friends to it. Even if it’s me just saying that I do this on a regular basis. [Group 4].

**Presentation/Group Facilitation Skills/Communication**

A critical component of the program is its reliance upon effective presentation, facilitation, and communication skills. Prior to becoming a peer facilitator, many of the participants expressed feeling anxious and uneasy about their responsibilities. Most felt very comfortable with the sensitive and sometime controversial nature of the topics to be discussed; however some anxiety was provoked due to their feelings of not having the necessary skills to facilitate a discussion among a group of their peers. After attending weekly training sessions led by their professor/instructor and gaining experience in group facilitation, many of the participants expressed a decrease in their anxiety levels and an increase in their self-efficacy. Specifically, they indicated that their involvement in the program enhanced their group facilitation, presentation, and communication skills.

- 1 I think that I am not so afraid to get up in groups. I am definitely not the kind of person that likes get up in front of groups and this has helped me to just get on there level and just talk to them and be their leader even though they are my peers. I think it’s helped me.

- 2 I think that I always used to be very shy in being in a group because the greatest fear that I had was that the other people would really listen to me and think that whatever I was talking about didn't make sense. So this really gave me a chance to have an audience that was in a way forced to listen to me and it helped in a way overcome that fear and become more comfortable talking in front of a group.

- 3 Well, I think for me, my undergraduate degree is in English secondary education so I’ve had the experience and plenty of opportunity getting to talk in front of a group of people but I think that to talk about sex with a group of people…It’s hard to find a topic that is more taboo for people or makes them as uncomfortable, and to be able to have that open discussion with people is great. And like to learn about, as someone said when to dive in, when to sit back, how to make that work. You get some communication skills that you can’t get in certain other settings due to the content. [Group 2].

- 1 You have to facilitate a discussion and make sure that everyone is talking and listening and everything so that means that you have to do some active listening and basically hear the underlying
statements that everybody is saying and not necessarily what they are saying but like why they are saying it.

P-2 I think it’s good for enforcing responsibility and stuff like that, and also it’s good in bettering your public speaking skills because every time you speak to them you have to present in a manner that isn’t offensive to anyone and that induces their opinions and thoughts about it. Overall, I think that it helps with my writing and public speaking.

P-3 Yeah, I definitely think it helps with public speaking and I …I’m not afraid to talk about anything but like I’ve never had to encourage other people to talk about something and say make a question out of it to make them continue, cause I like…like that’s what we have to do to encourage them to do things instead of just sit there and leave 20 minutes early. [Group 3].

P-1 It’s gotten me to open up and talk about stuff that I wouldn’t usually say. When I was in the discussion group as a student I was the quiet one. I mean, I would say something every once in a while, but now it’s really opened me up to talk a lot more.

P-2 It taught me how to argue. Because they all agree on everything so I’m always trying to think of something else so I can be like, “What about this….” Even if they can’t discuss it among themselves they at least thought all together how to shoot down my ideas. It’s really taught me to be on both sides because I’ll be agreeing with them but, I’ll be like, “What about this.” And they’ll be like “I can’t believe she said that, * and they will fight for their point.

P-3 I was nervous about being in front of the group because I don’t like being in front of groups and talking so I guess I kind of had to…to be in charge you kind of have to. I kind of had to get over fears about being in front of everybody. [Group 4].

Discussion

The results of this investigation suggest that a variety of benefits are procured from the participation in a human sexuality peer facilitation program. Furthermore, these findings corroborate previous studies that suggest that investigators should consider the influence of the program upon the peer as well as the target population. Finally, focus groups can be utilized when assessing the perspective of the peer and are a useful tool in procurement of detailed beliefs and opinions regarding the peer experience.

The present study may have limitations. Because of the limited sample size, the results may not generalize to all sexuality peer facilitators. However, this is generally the case; the sample size of the present study is consistent with that of Klein and Sondag (1994), who utilized a similar investigation methodology with peers as participants. In addition, the use of peers from multiple faculty members may facilitate varying degrees of participation and/or perceived benefits from the participants. However, since the participants were all recruited from the same university under similar programs, the participants may exhibit a higher degree of homogeneity when compared to previous investigations.

This study has implications for future research. Additional investigations are needed to assess the peer perspective and its relationship to effective programming. This study has provided more detailed results than quantitative counterparts and could be used as a basis for the creation of reliable and valid peer programming instruments.

The findings of this study may have programmatic and practical implications for college health and peer helping professionals. The variety of perceived benefits associated with participation in the program can be used to recruit peers for future pedagogic and primary prevention programs.
Moreover, the benefits from the program provide ample demonstration of impact evaluation and could be used to procure additional funding for peer-based programs. In summary, the findings in this sample of collegiate human sexuality peer facilitators demonstrate the efficacy and power of peer helping and its ability to influence young adults. The results disseminate the need for data-based evaluations of peer-based programs.

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**Editor’s Note**

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