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## Peer Helping Programs in the Colleges and Universities of Québec and Ontario

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### Abstract

This paper presents the results of a study on peer helping in 19 colleges and universities in Ontario and Québec. A review of the research associated with peer helping is summarized and the various roles played by peer helpers at the post-secondary level are described. An interview questionnaire was designed to gather information about peer programs. Questions focused on goals and rationale, peer selection methods, training, logistics, program monitoring, evaluation, follow-up, difficulties encountered, and marketing strategies. In addition, peer leaders and program co-ordinators were asked about recommendations they would make to prospective peer program developers. General findings and trends are presented.

### Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude portant sur la relation d'aide par les pairs dans 19 collèges et universités en Ontario et au Québec. Une revue des recherches concernant la relation d'aide par les pairs est présentée et les divers rôles joués par les pairs dans la relation d'aide au niveau post-secondaire sont décrits. Un questionnaire par interview a été élaboré pour cumuler l'information sur les programmes utilisant la relation d'aide par les pairs. Les questions s'orientent sur les buts et la rationnelle, la méthode de sélection des pairs, l'entraînement, les logistiques, le type de contrôle, l'évaluation, le suivi, les difficultés rencontrées, et les stratégies. De plus, les pairs et les coordonnateurs des programmes ont été sollicités pour offrir leurs recommandations aux futurs animateurs de programmes d'aide par les pairs. Les conclusions et les orientations nouvelles sont présentées.

The use of peer helpers in post-secondary institutions has been the subject of attention for more than 25 years. A survey on peer helping programs in educational institutions was carried out as early as 1963 by Zunker and Brown (1966). A later survey conducted by Zunker (1975) showed continued, rapid development of peer programs and that the majority of institutions surveyed favoured using student paraprofessionals. Carr (1981) stated that the growth in peer counselling stems in large part from studies which reveal few students choose the help of professional counsellors. Instead most students rely primarily on friends as sources of help when having difficulties or making decisions (Carr, 1984).

Evidence also indicates that peers are as accepted or more accepted than professionals by student "clients," especially in the initial phases of developing a relationship (Brown & Myers, 1975; Tinsley, Brown, de St. Aubin & Lucek, 1984; Wrenn & Mencke, 1972). Often peers are able to impart information in a more informal, less intimidating manner. They can bridge the generation gap and assist professionals in gaining better insight into student problems and needs (Newton, Angle, Schuette & Ender, 1984).

Research on the helping relationship lends additional support for the use of peers. Lay persons can promote client change over relatively short periods of change. Carefully screened college students have demonstrated a capacity to learn helping skills after having been trained in programs ranging in length from 20 hours to one year (Carkhuff, 1969; Giddan & Austin, 1982; Ender & Winston, 1984). Students can often be as effective as professionals in many counselling activities (Carr, 1981, 1984; Ender, McCaffrey & Miller, 1979), and several studies have shown that the act of helping is beneficial or therapeutic for the helper (Carr, 1981; West & Ray, 1977; Woudenberg & Payne, 1978).

While the most commonly used form of peer helping in the Ontario college system is peer tutoring (Kingsland and Carr, 1986), many colleges and universities in Canada have expanded to other areas of peer helping. Orzek (1984), for example, proposes the use of peer support groups as an effective intervention for dealing with personal and academic needs of college students with learning disabilities. Humber, Georgian and Niagara Colleges are using peers to assist special needs students. Their peer helpers take notes, give attendant care, and write test answers dictated by visually impaired students. Dawson College in Montreal trains peers to work with students from remedial and English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) classes. Brown (1965), Clark (1975), Pais (1978), Puig (1982), and Pyle and Snyder (1971) recommended using peers to help orient new students in their academic and environmental adjustment to college life. Cambrian and Georgian Colleges involve peers extensively in helping new students.

Simpson, Pate and Burks (1973) suggested peer counsellors be used in the area of placement. With funding from the Esso Education Foundation a successful project which integrated group counselling and the use of peer counsellors was introduced into the placement operation at the University of Virginia. Peers have been used in career planning (Ash & Mandelbaum, 1979; Carr, 1984; Knierim & Stiffler, 1979; Zehring, 1976). Sir Wilfrid Laurier University has been successfully selecting students to work as peer career assistants in their placement and career services for many years. Guelph University has also used peers in a career counselling capacity.

Peer counselling centres, run and managed by students, are operating at Carleton, York and Windsor Universities. Seneca College trains and supervises students to work as peer counsellors in the counselling department. Numerous authors have described the benefits of using peers in counselling functions, not as replacements for professionals, but rather as adjuncts to services already in existence (Ender, McCaffrey & Miller, 1979; Getz, Miles and Johnnie, 1978; Hewitt, 1977; Hinrichsen & Zwibelman, 1979; Lindquist & Lowe, 1978; McCarthy, Wasserman & Ferree, 1975; Zunker, 1975).

Peer advising is another area where colleges and universities have

made use of student assistants. Brown and Myers (1975), Frisz, (1984), Layman (1981), Murray (1972), and Titley and Titley (1982) studied the positive effects of using peers as academic advisors for new students. Cambrian College uses peer advisors to offer assistance and support for new students from outlying communities.

Carleton and Queen's Universities use highly trained peers to provide telephone counselling. Canadore College successfully initiated a phone line project in 1986 which they expect to continue. Humber and Georgian Colleges use peers as ambassadors for college liaison functions and as tour guides for potential students. Ottawa University has a peer training program for residence hall advisors.

Many innovative peer programs have also been implemented. Bernard, Roach and Resnick (1980) describe the training of campus bartenders to recognize and refer students with potential emotional and psychological problems. Trimble and Carter (1981) detail test anxiety workshops using undergraduates as leaders. Barrow and Heterington (1981) describe the training of peers to lead social anxiety management groups. Perkins and Kemmerling (1983) promote the use of peers in assertiveness training groups. Tombough and Heinrich (1977) involve peers in financial aid programs. Zwibelman and Rayfield (1982) describe an innovative program where peer helpers use a campus radio station to provide outreach counselling services. Peers have been used to assist foreign students (Ho, 1974), manage campus racial tensions (Westbrook & Smith, 1976), discuss sexuality (Zwibelman & Hinrichsen, 1977) and provide drug treatment information (Ruhf, 1977).

Since the advantages or benefits of peer helping have been documented extensively, and because the roles peers can play in post-secondary institutions have expanded considerably (see Table 1), it may appear that initiating an effective peer program would be an easy task.

TABLE 1

*List of Roles and Responsibilities of Students Involved as Peer Helpers*

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Academic advising	Working with native students
Academic tutoring	Orientation
Assertiveness training	Personal counselling
Bereavement	Physical disability assistance
Campus radio stations	Providing information
Career assistance	Working in residence halls
Community development	Facilitating self-help
Crisis intervention	Providing stress reduction
Financial aid	Helping study groups
Health assistance	Telephone counselling
Health promotion	Reducing test anxiety
Learning disability assistance	Assisting with transitions
Making referrals	Women's studies

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Harris, Chatterton, Kingsland and Hall (1987) have provided an excellent guide for students who wish to initiate peer programs on campus. However, for a counselling service considering implementing a peer program, there are several areas that have not been addressed in a systematic way in the literature. The present study was conducted to obtain more concrete details regarding program implementation issues as experienced and managed by peer programs in Ontario and Quebec.

The goals of the present study, which was conducted as part of a sabbatical leave program, were to review the literature associated with peer helping, study methods of program implementation, and examine the effectiveness and scope of peer programs presently existing in other institutions. To accomplish these goals the study itself was divided into a number of steps, which are briefly described in this section in order to provide an overview of the entire study. Readers who are interested in the complete study (Lawson, 1987) are encouraged to contact the author.

#### A DEFINITION OF THE TERM "PEER COUNSELLOR"

Before detailing the steps which were taken to accomplish these goals, it might be useful to clarify the use of the term peer helper. As illustrated in Table 2, there are more than 25 different terms used by various institutions when describing the person who carries out the peer work. Carr (1984) provided a definition which appears to be widely used in the Canadian literature and applies to the majority of programs. He defined a peer counsellor as a person who is *trained* and *supervised* to provide *practical assistance* and *personal support* to persons of similar age or experi-

TABLE 2  
*Terms Used to Describe Peer Counsellors*

Peer Ambassadors	Tutors
Peer Tutors	Dons
Peer Advisors	Donnettes
Peer Learning Assistants	Liaison Workers
Peer Support Workers	Student Counsellors
Peer Helpers	Peer Counsellors
Peer Aides	Student Peer Counsellors
Buddies	Assistant Counsellors
Proctors	Counsellor Aides
Prefects	Student Helpers
Paraprofessionals	Student Paraprofessional Helpers
Teaching Assistants	Student Assistants
Residence Advisors	Student Aides
Orientation Guides	Subprofessionals

ence. According to Carr, practical assistance can include problem-solving, decision-making, listening, mutual sharing, action planning and other types of social support activities.

While Carr's definition applies to most of the students carrying out peer roles, many programs have chosen to use a term other than peer counsellor to describe the individual providing the service. The choice of term appears to reflect concerns regarding either confusion between the role of professional counselling and peer counselling, reducing challenges to issues of "turf," reflecting the specific objectives of the role, tradition, legal liability worries, recognition of minimal training or an attempt to find an all encompassing term.

**TABLE 3**  
*Type and Location of Peer Programs in Ontario and Quebec*

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Peer Advising Programs	Cambrian College Lambton College
Peer Ambassadors Program	Georgian College Humber College
Peer Counselling Services	Carleton University Seneca College University of Windsor York University
Multiple Service Peer Helping Programs	Guelph University Queen's University
Peer Tutoring Services	Cambrian College Canadore College Carleton University Champlain College Conestoga College Dawson College Georgian College Humber College John Abbott College Lambton College Loyalist College Mohawk College Niagara College Seneca College St. Clair College
Special Needs Assistance Programs	Georgian College Humber College Niagara College
Student Career Assistants	Sir Wilfrid Laurier University
Student Phone Line	Canadore College
Tutoring Service for High Schools	Champlain College Georgian College

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### *Steps and Procedures*

The first step in the study was to identify institutions and key personnel in Ontario and Quebec involved with peer helping programs. Both colleges and universities were chosen in order to provide a broad spectrum of post-secondary organizations. Ontario and some parts of Quebec were chosen as target institutions for both their geographical similarities and to minimize the costs associated with conducting personal interviews. Key personnel from 19 institutions received a letter or telephone call requesting their co-operating in this project and all agreed to participate. Table 3 lists the type of peer program at each institution contacted for this study.

The next step was to attend peer counselling workshops, conferences and training events to gain more information about training and to network with other programs. Participation in these events in Kitchener, Ottawa and Toronto proved to be a valuable resource for both networking and confirming existing programs and identifying additional programs not covered in the initial review.

The third step was to review the literature. This examination provided a theoretical framework, a *raison d'être* for the peer helper movement. Information concerning needs being met, approaches used, and goals, objectives, and outcomes were gathered from the literature review.

TABLE 4  
*Peer Program Questionnaire*

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1. What was the rationale for initiating such a program in your institution?
  2. What are the goals of your program?
  3. How did you select your students?
  4. How do you train your students? What skills are covered? What tools are used or strategies implemented? How long is the training and in what way is it delivered?
  5. How is the system and its logistic components set up? Advertising? Financing? Where and when do appointments for helping sessions take place? What length are the sessions?
  6. How do you monitor the program to ensure that it meets its projected goals and continued existence?
  7. How do you evaluate your program either formally or informally?
  8. Is there any follow-up? If so, how do you do it and when?
  9. Have you encountered any difficulties? If so, what were they and what did you do to resolve the situation?
  10. What recommendations would you make to another institution which is considering implementing such a program?
  11. What were the marketing strategies used for "selling" the program to colleagues and administrators?
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Journal articles as well as texts written by key persons involved in the peer helping movement in both the United States and Canada provided the majority of information. A complete bibliography is contained in the full report.

The fourth step was to devise a questionnaire based on the literature review and perceived needs. Eventually an instrument was developed which consisted of 11 questions which requested information about rationale, goals, selection, training, logistics, monitoring, evaluation, follow-up, difficulties, recommendations and marketing strategies (see Table 4 for the specific questions). All interviews were conducted in person or on the phone and averaged one to two hours in length. Additional materials such as application forms, policy statements and advertising were also solicited when available and, where practical, were included in the final report. In some instances student training sessions were observed.

The final step was to summarize the data collected and to prepare a set of recommendations for Algonquin College's planned peer program. In the following section the responses to each question are summarized. In the original report separate summaries were prepared for peer tutoring programs and other types of peer helping programs. However, for the purposes of this report these summaries are combined unless noted.

#### RATIONALE FOR INITIATING PROGRAMS

In general, three types of reasons were stated for implementing programs. The first reason dealt with the nature of student interaction. Many programs stated that students prefer to talk to each other on an informal basis or that students perceived needs in other students which were not being met by campus services. A second reason for starting programs focused on the value that peer helping would have for the institution. For example, many programs believed that peer programs would augment, extend or increase the reach of existing services; reduce attrition and increase retention of students. It was thought that the programs would improve student adjustment and lower demands on existing services; and be a cost efficient and effective method for handling work load. The final reason dealt with the impact such a system would have on students. Several programs mentioned that helping students deal with stress, providing students with emotional and academic support or helping students cope with a variety of personal issues were major reasons for starting a peer program.

#### PROGRAM GOALS

A total of thirty-two goals were stated by the different programs. They ranged from broad statements such as "offer greater and better service

to students while helping as many as possible” or “provide developmental and preventive rather than remedial services” to more narrowly defined goals such as “to act as referral agents,” “to help students improve study habits,” or “to reduce stress and anxiety.” Several institutions expressed goals in terms of the impact the peer program was expected to have on the campus in general. Two examples are “to improve the welfare of the campus community” or “to foster the growth and development of all students.”

#### SELECTION SYSTEMS AND PROCEDURES

In most cases, selection included recruiting, the application and interview process and an identification of certain personal characteristics considered essential to the role. Recruiting normally was accomplished through advertising: posters, flyers, announcements, word of mouth, memos to faculty, campus media, information sessions or direct recruitment of particular students by faculty, counsellors and peers. Most programs used some type of application form, and almost every program required personal interviews. Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one or panel basis and averaged about twenty minutes for each interview. Recruitment generally took place in early fall for most programs, but several mentioned recruiting on a year round basis.

While grade point average or faculty recommendations played a role in a few programs, the personal characteristics of applicants were considered most important in the selection process. The qualities which were most often mentioned included: empathy, interest, availability, maturity, knowledge of the community, sense of responsibility, good communication skills, non-judgemental; ability to give and receive feedback, self-confidence, energy, ability to make interviewers feel comfortable; ability to foster independence, patience, stability and in some cases characteristics which were specifically related to a particular job, such as legible handwriting for students who might be involved in taking notes for disabled students.

#### TRAINING

Several programs mentioned that while they actively recruit and select students based on the qualities described above, they also use the training component as a selection tool. Final selection of an applicant is based upon successful completion of the training. Most tutoring programs offer about two to three hours of training, the majority of which focuses on the day to day operation of the program. Basics in communication skills, study skills and possible problems are discussed, but in general this portion of the training lasts only two sessions. Some institutions reported training tutors in groups while others used a one-



on-one system. At least two colleges have more extensive weekly or bi-weekly training for tutors. In some instances the training is actually a credit course with skill practice sessions, assignments and on-going supervision.

For most other peer helping programs, particularly those focused on peer counselling, training is more extensive (usually an intensive workshop followed by weekly meetings) and is both didactic and experiential with role playing considered to be an essential component. Most programs use a training manual and provide skill training in observing and listening, communication, clarifying, problem-solving and referral. Several will invite guest speakers in to assist with training in areas such as sexuality, birth control, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, depression and suicide. Almost all programs include training sessions on the role of the peer counsellor, its limitations and boundaries.

#### LOGISTICS

While all institutions described themselves as responsible for the selection, training and administering of funds, the actual where, when and how differed considerably. In regards to peer tutoring, some organizations adopt a *laissez-faire* policy whereby once students and tutors are matched, the responsibility of deciding the time and location for tutoring is left up to the parties involved. Other programs are more structured, with sessions scheduled by the program developers and a location provided. Most tutoring programs are run by professionals rather than students and emanate from counselling services. In a few cases where such a program is related to a course for credit, the programs have been linked to learning centres and English departments. All tutors are paid either monetarily or in the form of a credit. Most institutions offer a free service or charge students a minimal initial fee. Funding is received from college budgets, student associations and work study programs.

Certain common features can be seen in other peer helping programs, notably in peer counselling centres. Many such centres use a walk-in system rather than scheduling appointments. They also operate telephone lines where students may call in for information and assistance. The services tend to be anonymous with first names only being used. Issues dealt with ranged from giving information about the educational system, health and sexual concerns to areas such as relationships, loneliness and depression. Most of these centres are located within universities and are managed and staffed by student volunteers. However, at least two colleges, Seneca and Canadore, are expanding their helping programs to include more comprehensive peer counselling services.

### MONITORING PROGRAMS

Tutoring programs are monitored through informal feedback from faculty, counsellors, tutors and students. In some cases interviews with tutors and students are conducted. Several programs have tutors keep contracts, time sheets or other forms which are reviewed to assess each tutor's work load. In some programs, tutors maintain journals, files or summary reports and submit them to co-ordinators on a weekly basis.

Most of the non-tutoring programs have peer helpers maintain daily logs to monitor the quality of the response given and actions taken. Monthly statistics as well as mid- and year-end reports are used. Informal feedback from peers, faculty and students is solicited. Meetings of peers in groups or individually with a co-ordinator on a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basis are quite common as methods for monitoring goal achievement and program maintenance.

### EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Formal evaluation for all types of peer helping programs involve one or more of the following methods: a) recording of statistics; b) evaluation forms or questionnaires completed by tutors and peer helpers; c) forms completed by users of the service; d) submitting month end and mid-year reports; e) meeting with and interviewing tutors and peers; f) letters of commendation; g) success sheets based on percent of students passing; h) co-ordinators conducting assessments of peers.

Informal evaluation is done through feedback from tutors, peers, faculty and users of the services, but few institutions have initiated extensive evaluation systems. A few have reported that no evaluation takes place and some are formulating plans and recommendations for the future.

### FOLLOW-UP

Few peer helping programs are involved in any formal follow-up. In the case of peer tutoring, some programs will check final marks against original grades of students tutored. Others distribute a "success" sheet or reports to faculty who referred students to the service. Peer counselling programs report that follow-up is generally not possible due to the anonymity of the interactions. Most of the leaders believed this was an area that needed further development. They hoped to generate some form of follow-up with students, but they seemed puzzled about how to accomplish this and they gave it low priority for the use of their time.

### DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

In general, whenever a difficulty was encountered, the program leaders would look to other programs for advice or they would experiment with

a specific plan to determine its effectiveness in resolving the situation. Difficulties were encountered in the selection of peer helpers, the selection of co-ordinators, motivating peer helpers, gaining appropriate facilities, time constraints (for matching, monitoring and supervising), gaining support from faculty, dealing with resistance from counselling professionals, charging fees for service, and various budget considerations.

Almost all leaders reported experiencing difficulties, but most had found solutions. For example, if an inappropriate selection had been made for a peer tutor, the program leader relied on feedback and confrontation skills. Similarly if a peer counsellor candidate did not work out, then attention was given to improving the selection process by increasing the involvement of existing peer counsellors. Where recruiting was time consuming, full time co-ordinators were hired. When peer counsellors experienced their own pains and concerns, support and supervision were considered essential.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS OF PROGRAM LEADERS

By far the majority of recommendations that program leaders wanted to make to prospective program initiators dealt with establishing the foundation for a peer program. Many program leaders mentioned the importance of gaining faculty support, insuring clarity of goals and researching the operations of other similar programs. Leaders warned against rushing into training and the "action" phase of peer helping without doing the "legwork" necessary to gain support from faculty, administration and student government. While having clear selection procedures and recruiting peers from all divisions were recommended as important, program leaders commented quite often on the importance of training. Leaders were concerned with involving the peers in the training process, not just the training content. They recommended that peer training should provide opportunities for peers, trainers, supervisors and co-ordinators to engage in dialogue, feedback, and exploration of mutual issues in addition to skill training.

#### MARKETING STRATEGIES

The final question in this interview series asked program leaders to discuss how they went about "selling" the peer program to colleagues and administrators. More than 20 strategies were detailed. The majority of approaches emphasized providing thorough and specific program and information to faculty, keeping faculty informed on a regular basis, and involving faculty in various aspects of the program such as soliciting recommendations for potential peer helpers and insuring awareness regarding referral procedures.

Many program leaders stressed the role that advertising, media and

other written communication played in convincing faculty. Several leaders mentioned the role that knowledge of research on peer helping and practices of other programs had in selling the program ideas to colleagues. Several program leaders believed that once a program has been established, the peer work sells itself.

### CONCLUSIONS

Peer helping programs have been in existence for quite a while and seem to be gaining momentum rather than being a "flash in the pan." The longevity of the movement can lead one to conclude that these programs must be of some value. The time and energy expended by professionals and students to organize and implement programs supports this conclusion as well. Although differences exist in terms of program emphasis and funding, both colleges and universities have shown keen interest in the development of such programs. Trained peers can be effective. Moreover, co-operation between students and professionals can lead to the expansion and strengthening of service delivery at a relatively low cost.

Certain factors must be considered for the proper implementation of peer helping programs: needs must be assessed; a broad base of support must be obtained; good "front-end" preparation must be undertaken; careful selection of peers must be included; and training must be experienced by the peers as relevant and respectful of their needs and maturity. These key factors will play a crucial role in the success or failure of a program. Institutions adhering to these components have seen their programs not only succeed but grow as well.

Educational institutions concerned about meeting the needs of their students, creating positive influences in their development and helping them to be productive in their academic lives can rely on peer programs to achieve these goals. Dwindling enrolment in the colleges and overcrowding in the universities of Ontario has led many post-secondary administrators to call for a significant system overhaul to meet the changing nature and needs of the student population (Tausig, 1988). And, if these administrators are serious about meeting student needs, then who better to consult with about these needs than other students? Whether or not peer helping relationships are used in a formal sense, they will continue to occur quite naturally. The issue for colleges and universities is to use this natural resource in ways which allow both students and institutions to achieve their needs, goals and visions.

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