Effectiveness of Peer Advising Programs on College Campuses

Summer 2013

Prepared by Lorena Guadiana

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Summary

- There is no research showing the effects of peer advising on students.
- Peer advising programs are increasingly more effective, but evident research gaps still exist.
- Building a peer advising model suitable for the students being addressed is critical.
- Peer advisor programs can provide various benefits to peer advisors and administrators.
- Peer advising programs need to be structured, carefully planned, provide training, and continuously evaluate themselves.
- Forefront advisor participation in the research process can help generate stronger empirical data that informs their own field.
- A better effort to quantify, rather than theorize the benefit of peer advising programs for all stakeholders involved is recommended.

Introduction

Student support that fosters academic success and increases graduation rates is undeniably a major responsibility of college campuses. Various campuses have indoctrinated programs to support student achievement and one of them includes peer advising programs. A literature review of published research on peer advising indicated that developing and implementing such programs on college campuses are increasingly more effective. Building a peer advising model suitable for the students being addressed is a principal concern and critical to its success. A peer advisor program paradigm requires careful planning, training, and continuous assessment. Engaging advisors in the research inquiry process can also provide various benefits for administrators, advisors and student advisees. This article explores the effectiveness of peer advising through evidence provided in four pieces of relevant research literature.

Literature Review

In a research article, Diambra (2003), an assistant professor at the University of Tennessee, introduces three core reasons behind the application of peer advising programs: 1) bridge the gaps between teaching, learning, and advising, 2) student recruitment and retention, and 3) a sense of connection through similar experiences. His research investigates the peer advisor program at the University of Tennessee. Faculty from the Human Services Program at the university developed a peer advising program and connected the goal of the program to orienting, guiding, resource provision, referrals, and to the development of programmatic activities that support human services. The faculty included the following five components in the peer advising program model: a) peer advising selection, b) orientation and training, c) program identity and service

through activity completion, d) self-directed peer advising activities, and e) on-going improvement through feedback and evaluation. He highlights that the program placed a high level of importance on developing a peer advising handbook as a training tool for new peer advisors, pre-planning peer advising activities and ensuring that peer advisors worked on major projects of their choice. A high emphasis on program structure appeared to have had a significant impact on the early success of the program.

Additionally, the program also provided advisors the opportunity to build professional competencies in line with the Council for Standards in Human Service Education. Diambra described that through the program advisors were able to practice and develop skills, develop leadership outside of the classroom, venture into new professional territory, and that the program aided with the promotion of service to the academic program and peers. He highlights that future research needs to emphasize measuring peer advisor competence development.

In another article, Diambra and Cole-Zakrzewski (2002) describe results from a survey administered to the six female peer advisors and to the faculty participating in the peer advising program. Both the peer advisor and faculty survey responses had the following intersecting and beneficial themes:

1) A shared perspective in a student-student relationship provides for a unique and personal advising relationship.
2) Advising accessibility increases spontaneous advising; especially in shared classes among peer advisors and advisees.
3) Peer advisor responses to student curriculum-and academic-related questions benefit faculty members.
4) Events increase program visibility and camaraderie among faculty members and students.

Diambra and Cole-Zakrzewski describe rudimentary discoveries from activities documented by peer advisors, albeit affirmative findings of the peer advising program at the University of Tennessee. Through the examination of documentation of a peer advising journal, which contained combined entries of individual advisor activities, Diambra and Cole-Zakrzewski discover that peer advisor activities focused largely on projects instead of peer advising and more than 75% of academic advising or guidance activities were occurring outside the peer advising office. Peer advisors indicated that a lack of documentation that detailed their peer advisor responsibilities was a deterrent, as well as not being able to confidently answer advisee questions about academic concentrations outside of theirs. The faculty responses included no suggestions about program improvements except the article mentions a faculty commenting that one peer advisor's involvement in the program was interfering with their own academic responsibilities.

Aiken-Wisniewski et. al. (2010) underline the need to include forefront advisors in the research process. The authors present their case to support advisor involvement in

research and describe three research strategies (action inquiry, grounded theory, and program evaluation) to address inquiry in higher education. The authors express that the higher education community has made little advancement in moving from a purely discovery research paradigm to valuing applied research. They provide two noteworthy issues to support their case: 1) advising professionals represent less than 10% of the first authors of articles published in the NACADA Journal, the flagship outlet for dissemination of scholarship on academic advising (Kuhn & Padak, 2005), and 2) the advising field has largely encouraged a tradition of sharing best practices and advising theory without empirical support.

Aiken-Wisniewski et. al. make significant criticism about the exceptional position academic advisors have to affect and be affected by research. Advisors are often the primary point of contact with students and their interactions offer opportunities to expand on higher education inquiry, integrating their published scholarship offers opportunities to inform their daily practice and programs, and their identities can continue to develop as they obtain more knowledge in addition to that acquired about a single student or institution. They conclude that practitioner-researchers need insight as well as accountability and to present evidence of the benefits of advising. Advisors need to be included in research because they can increase the development of theories and literature that offers a stronger foundation for student engagement.

A study by Seegmiller (2003) focused on a peer advising course she developed at a psychology department with a diverse student population at Hunter College in New York City. In an effort to offer better advising for psychology majors, Seegmiller created a Seminar in Peer Advising. An important portion of her research includes an evaluation component from where she provides some notable findings. To clarify, her findings primarily focus on results derived from peer advisor responses to the seminar evaluation (see #1-3 on the list below). The department conducted another evaluation that collected feedback from advisees (see #4-6 on list below).

The following are Seegmiller's discoveries subsequently to peer advisors ratings about the value of the course components [respondents used the corresponding 5-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all valuable) to 5 (extremely valuable); 1 (much lighter workload) to 5 (much heavier workload); and 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied)]:

1) Peer advisors considered that the material covered during the course, especially graduate school and career information, valuable to them (M=4.83 for graduate school, SD=0.48, and for their careers, SD=0.38)
2) Peer advisors considered that the material covered during the course, especially graduate school and career information, valuable in their peer advising (M=4.71, SD=0.46 for graduate school; M=4.75, SD=0.44 for careers)
3) Peer advisors perceived the course workload comparable to other university courses (M=3.08, SD=0.86)
4) Advisees were satisfied with Seegmiller's advice (M=4.07, SD=1.06, N=167)
5) Advisees were satisfied with peer advisor advice (M=3.44, SD=1.24, N=185)

6) Advisees made frequent use of the library binders produced by peer advisors (M=321 hits per semester, SD=24.2)

Seegmiller cites that future outcomes assessment of the course will examine advisee experiences as well as how faculty and peer advisors could increase advising effectiveness.

Conclusion

The aforementioned research studies do not disqualify the positive gains peer advising programs can make on college campuses. In Diambra's (2003) article, however, he largely describes rather than evaluates the peer advising program at the University of Tennessee. His research collaboration with Cole-Zakrzewski published in 2002, presented some insights that largely critiqued the time and effort of advisors and the structure of the program. Aiken-Wisniewski et. al. (2010) make a valuable recommendation about increasing advisor involvement in research and support this by largely critiquing the peer advising culture, but more theoretical research is presented. Seegmiller (2003) provides more quantifiable research, but her research results are generated primarily to assess a peer advising course she created. Although the research does not discard implementing peer advising on college campuses, a better effort to quantify its benefits for all the stakeholders is needed.

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