

White Paper

The State of Peer Education at the University of Cincinnati

Executive Summary

Peer education is a process and pedagogy that deploys students to assist in the delivery of teaching or mentorship to each other (Collier, 2015; Ender & Newton, 2000). Peer education is a highly effective, cost-efficient tool for increasing learning and persistence through graduation as well as student satisfaction with their educational experience. This strategy is particularly well-suited for our mission, experiential learning culture, and student population and therefore has emerged as a vital component in the University of Cincinnati's student success support structure. Nearly *every* strategy for enhancing student success incorporates peer education—from faculty-led course redesign efforts to co-curricular programming aimed at developing a culture of student success—yet, peer education is under-recognized given its mainstay role.

While universities commonly utilize peer educators in discrete programs, to our knowledge, no institution has deliberately orchestrated multiple, independently-managed peer education initiatives to work in concert, advancing student success. The Peer Education Network envisions a university-wide alliance and dedicated leadership charged with elevating and streamlining peer education efforts at the University of Cincinnati. With greater coordination, more thoughtful investment in resources, and by devoting energies toward meeting the goals outlined in this paper, UC will become a nationally recognized leader in both the practice and scholarship of peer education.

Current Strengths and Challenges

The University of Cincinnati is nationally distinguished by our level of student engagement in Learning with Peers (*National Survey of Student, 2015*). According to the 2015 National Survey of Student Engagement, UC first-year students are engaged in Learning with Peers, specifically Collaborative Learning, at levels comparable to the top ten percent of all 2014 and 2015 NSSE institutions (2015). According to NSSE, these interactions are valuable both as a retention tool and to prepare students to “collaborate with others in mastering difficult material and developing interpersonal and social competence... to deal with complex, unscripted problems they will encounter during and after college” (2015).

At least 500 student leaders are specially selected and trained to hold peer educator positions at UC with specific responsibility to facilitate meaningful learning through instruction and/or mentorship to their peers, individually or as part of a group. Peer educator positions are found in academic and student life settings with sample titles ranging from Student Orientation Leader to Undergraduate Teaching/Learning Assistant to Learning Community Peer Leader to Resident Advisor. A conservative estimate of their reach suggests that over 10,000 UC students are mentored or taught by a peer educator each year; students may be impacted more than once with first-year students likely experiencing multiple peer education touch points (*Scope of UC Peer, 2015*).

Not only is the level of student engagement in peer education activity at the university nationally noted, but UC also has peer educators that are nationally certified. For example, at least 20% of university peer educators have been certified through a nationally recognized program administered by the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA). CRLA is “a group of student-oriented professionals active in the fields of reading, learning assistance, developmental education, tutoring, and mentoring at the college/adult level” (“About Us,” 2015). Learning Community Peer Leaders and Learning Assistance Center (LAC) Supplemental Instruction Leaders receive Level III International Mentor Training Program Certification, the most advanced level possible. LAC Academic Coaches receive Level II International Mentor Training Program Certification and LAC Peer Tutors receive Level II International Tutor Training Program Certification (“About CRLA Certifications,” 2015). Additionally, Student Wellness Center Peer Educators receive national certification through the BACCHUS Initiatives of NASPA (“BACCHUS Initiatives of NASPA,” 2008-2016).

The development and growth of the University of Cincinnati's peer education programs have been informed by and contribute to research findings. Positive student outcomes described in the literature include reinforced intentions to graduate, strengthened confidence in their abilities, and increased academic accomplishments (“BACCHUS Initiatives of NASPA,” 2008-2016; Collier, 2015). While Peter J. Collier was composing his book, “Developing Effective Student Peer

Mentoring Programs,” he consulted with, and interviewed, the director of UC’s First Year Experience and Learning Communities about their exceptional work with peer education (2015). At the University of Cincinnati, 65% of first-year baccalaureate students enroll in classroom-based learning communities. Of those students, 83% reported that having a Peer Leader enhanced their experience at UC with the experience being so meaningful that 74% reported that having a Peer Leader increased their likelihood of continuing their education at UC.

University of Cincinnati units that most heavily utilize peer educators indicated that they hold a common set of desired outcomes for peer educators’ work with students (*Scope of UC Peer*, 2015). In table 1, the desired outcomes sought are displayed with each unit’s interest indicated by the presence of an “X” in the specified box.

Table 1. Impact categories for peer education efforts (*Scope of UC Peer*, 2015).

	<i>Peer Education Units</i>						
<i>Increased Student Outcomes</i>	Student Wellness Center	Resident Education & Development	First Year Experience	Lindner College of Business	Campus Recreation	Learning Assistance Center	New Student Orientation
Networks of Support	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Self-Management Skills	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
University Engagement	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Graduation Rates	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Retention Rates	X	X	X	X		X	X
Community/Civic Engagement		X	X	X	X		X
Professionalism		X	X	X	X		X
Student Wellness	X		X	X	X	X	
Depth of Learning			X	X	X	X	
Grade Performance			X	X		X	X
Integrative Learning			X	X	X	X	

Not only do the students served by peer education benefit, but the peer educators themselves experience valuable learning gains. UC’s Student Wellness Center Peer Educators were included in a National Peer Educator Study (NPES) that used the Council for the Assessment of Standards’ (CAS) Learning and Development Outcomes to analyze peer educator development. (*National Peer Educator Study*, 2014-2015). Using a pre/post-test design, the NPES revealed that peer educators showed a dramatic increase in six peer educator development dimensions. Among them are Cognitive Complexity (reflecting on previous experiences, considering assumptions, thinking critically, and applying learned concepts to practical problems) and Knowledge Acquisition, Construction, Integration, and Application (awareness/knowledge of campus and community resources, interpreting thoughts and ideas, evaluating arguments effectively, and developing problem solving skills) (2014-2015). These results are consistent with other studies that suggest positive impacts for peer educators include improved academic performance, personal growth, improved communication skills, and increased self-awareness (Collier, 2015).

Peer education is a common thread running through programs at the university dedicated to enhancing the student experience. The Peer Education Network was created in Fall 2015 with support of a temporary program coordinator that reports to the Directors of First Year Experience and Learning Communities and Academic Excellence and Support

Services in order to bring together peer education programs and to jumpstart PEN. The Peer Education Network was formed to fulfill UC's College Completion Plan, Strategy 16 (develop a collaborative peer education initiative) and to position UC for national recognition. The mission of the Peer Education Network is to improve student learning, retention, progress towards degree, academic satisfaction, and similar student success measures utilizing peer education.

When created, the Peer Education Network was charged with the following:

- Articulate a vision for peer education at UC
- Integrate peer education into curricular, co-curricular, and experiential learning structures
- Institute high-quality standards of practice across the university
- Share best practices, resources, assessment, and research findings applicable across a variety of peer education settings and structures
- Generate efficiencies and innovations to extend and leverage peer education impact on student success
- Seek external recognitions and resources

The cross-divisional steering committee represents multiple units within Academic Affairs, Campus Services, Enrollment Management, and Student Affairs. The steering committee also serves a broader constituency group, including the LGBTQ Center, URSC, UCBA, CEAS, CON, UC Libraries, and A&S. As the Peer Education Network has evolved, the steering committee has come to increasingly value having a PEN forum through which programs from across the university can act with a collective voice to advocate for policies, procedures, and practices that streamline the use of peer education to advance student success. This group has provided a level of advocacy and support not previously realized. For example, the power of PEN's collective voice has already resulted in compelling UC Human Resources to change the student hiring process to be more effective, efficient, and student-friendly. The steering committee is highly committed to PEN despite their work load and time constraints. However, without the support of a structured and accountable position dedicated to PEN, it is unlikely that the group will maintain current levels of productivity in subsequent years.

Despite UC's emphasis in utilizing peer education, peer education program administrators have identified the following challenges (*Scope of UC Peer*, 2015):

High Quality Practices

- Inadequate ratios of professional staff relative to the number of peer educator staff
- Inequitable peer educator compensation across programs with similarly qualified and trained students receiving hourly wages that range from minimum wage to twelve dollars per hour
- Inconsistent peer educator training and credentialing across programs
- Limited and unclear promotional pathways for peer educators within and between peer education programs
- Lack of assessment and public relations personnel to appropriately coordinate efforts and disseminate information about the positive impact of peer education

Efficiencies and Innovations

- Inefficient and unsatisfactory university-level processes and timelines for hiring peer educators
- Inadequate program funding
- Inadequate facilities in order to properly function
- Limited resources to attract and recruit highly-qualified peer educators

Consultation and Support for Program Development, Information, and Referral

- Lack of a clear point of contact to field requests from individual UC faculty and staff seeking to develop new programs or to incorporate peer educators into their classrooms
- Inadequate structure for UC faculty and staff who are interested in starting or expanding peer education programs to receive ongoing guidance, resources, and support
- Lack of organized communication and collaboration structures to develop resources and strategies for collectively addressing shared program and student needs

Vision for Moving Forward

The Peer Education Network believes that the University of Cincinnati is well positioned to become a national leader and model in the peer education movement. PEN has outlined the following:

Goal One

Recognize the peer education experience as a form of experiential learning.

- Add peer education to the suite of categories qualifying to meet the experiential learning requirement. Peer education represents a significant professional and educational benefit for the students acting as peer educators. The University of Cincinnati's General Education Program requires all baccalaureate students to engage in *at least* one type of experiential learning experience during their program of study. The university currently recognizes a specified range of experiences to fulfill this requirement.
- The Peer Education Network proposed the following:
 - Academic programs may choose to utilize courses with the Peer Education attribute to fulfill the experiential learning graduation requirement, most likely as a mid-collegiate General Education experience.
 - Peer Education shall become a course attribute for the academic transcript.
 - The Peer Education course attribute may be applied at the section level when ordering classes.
- If the proposal is approved, it would:
 - Recognize the educational value that select peer educator experiences provide to students during their undergraduate career.
 - Provide a way to incorporate peer educator experiences into the academic transcript.
 - Provide the ability to measure and track peer educator activity to assess the scope and impact of peer education at the university.
 - Establish a consistent criteria set for university-recognized peer education experiences.
- Articulate and emphasize the transferrable skills that students at the University of Cincinnati obtain from their experience as a peer educator.

Goal Two

Establish a set of standard measures for the assessment of peer education programs at the University of Cincinnati.

- Incorporate the common competencies and goals of peer education programs into a set of standard measures utilized during assessment.
- Develop a reporting tool that captures the multifaceted impact that peer education programs have on the students served and on the peer educators.
 - Assessment matrix utilizing key metrics including program-specific outcomes, UC baccalaureate competencies, Student Affairs competencies, funding-related university performance goals related to student success, etc.
- Build high quality research and assessment support.
 - Additional research and assessment support and expertise can combine program-specific insights with rigorous methodologies to produce high-quality research for presentation on the national stage.
 - Individual offices generate large amounts of assessment data, but often need administrative support to sift through them to produce assessment reports and scholarship for local and national audiences.

Goal Three

Standardize best practices between peer education programs.

- Develop and implement core/baseline training for peer education programs.
 - PEN is currently partnering with Student Affairs to create select online peer education training modules.
- Set baseline standards for peer education efforts including areas that all peer educators should be knowledgeable about and trained in.
- Incorporate ongoing professional development for peer educators as an integral component of a peer educator experience.

- Create a standardized, tiered pay scale for paid peer educator positions at the university.
 - A tiered pay scale would ensure consistency across university units and would allow opportunities for promotions and raises.
 - Each level of the pay scale would be set with different defined values based on position competencies, performance, level of responsibility, training certification, academic performance requirements, etc.
 - Incentives for retention and/or opportunities for promotions could be based on increased training certification, increased level of responsibility, and increased dedication to the position.

Goal Four

Recognize and leverage the extent to which peer education already exists at the University of Cincinnati.

- Continue to monitor where peer educator positions are found to assist in the delivery of student success in and out of the classroom, e.g., learning assistants leading classroom-based activities under the direction of faculty, certified Student Wellness Center peer educators engaged in Wellness Center educational outreach programming.
- Create partnerships with the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CET&L) to recognize the extent of collaborative learning within the classroom, e.g., peer review as a technique utilized in English Composition and faculty-supervised course teaching and learning assistants.
- Create and implement methods for reporting “success stories” involved in peer education at the University of Cincinnati.
 - Share the accomplishments of student academic and professional success through publications and national presentations.
 - Ensure quality experiences by benchmarking within programs and at the national level.
 - Equalize the value and importance of each peer education position at the university.
 - Spotlight current peer educators and peer educator alumni for their milestones.

Goal Five

PEN is recognized and functions as UC’s centralized resource, information repository, and referral clearinghouse.

- Create a partnership with Professional Practice and Experiential Learning (PropPEL) to advance peer education locally and nationally as a form of experiential education.
- Develop a three to five year strategic plan for strengthening peer education at the University of Cincinnati that is connected to funding and other necessary benchmarks.
- Investigate the possibilities of obtaining robust funding by submitting and receiving grants for research, obtaining gifts for operations, and utilizing other similar fund-raising avenues.
- Offer a consulting service to other developing and/or existing peer education programs at the local and national level in which best practices and resources will be shared.
- Create and disseminate information about peer education.
 - Establish common hiring practices, job descriptions, and best practices across university peer education programs in an attempt to create consistency. This could include specific minimum applicant requirements as well as defined ratios of professionals to students within peer education programs.
 - Host conferences, workshops, roundtable discussions, etc. on peer education importance and peer education program development at the local and national level.
 - Develop a “How To Guide” for peer education at UC along with complementary documents that would include clear articulation of the steps to take and guidelines to follow to ensure a successful program.
 - Raise awareness among faculty and staff about peer education.

Deliverables

The University of Cincinnati already has the framework to become a national leader and model for peer education. The Peer Education Network has begun to move UC away from a siloed approach to managing the work of peer educators to instead embrace a strategic and consolidated effort to enhance the undergraduate experience and increase student success. This addresses UC's commitments under the College Completion Plan required by the State of Ohio and approved by the UC Board of Trustees. As it evolves, the Peer Education Network will:

- Continue ongoing strategic planning
- Develop a structure for engaging all peer education supervisors across the university to ensure high quality practices and generate efficiencies and innovations across the university
- Expand and maintain a web-based resource repository (framework currently in development)
- Create an annual scan of peer education activity at UC
- Develop an annual, university-level reporting and assessment tool for peer education
- Establish cross-unit professional development programs for faculty, staff, and peer educators
- Prepare presentations and papers for submission to peer-reviewed journals and conferences
- Submit proposals to external funders
- Host local and national workshops and institutes on peer education

With foresight there will be opportunities to develop and fund PEN deliverables through new and thoughtful investment, greater coordination, and sharable resources. Ideally, PEN will be resourced with full-time staff to serve as liaisons and coordinators for managing the centralized efforts of this university-wide alliance. PEN is seeking assistance with performing the following ongoing functions through a combination of dedicated personnel and university partnerships:

- Advocate on behalf of and serve as the voice for PEN's collective interests
- Facilitate the ongoing strategic planning development and implementation
- Support assessment, research, and publication
- Assist in authoring and forwarding grant proposals
- Assist in branding and marketing of peer education
- Offer consultation, program development and review services
- Receive and field requests for assistance from faculty and staff creating "pop-up" peer education experiences
- Organize and facilitate PEN activities
- Continue development and dissemination of sharable resources
- Coordinate and/or complete follow-up tasks including maintaining the PEN website

The Directors of First Year Experience and Learning Communities and Academic Excellence and Support Services will continue to marshal PEN efforts utilizing the content expertise and guidance of the steering committee. PEN is exploring possible partnerships with university units that could house or drive portions of the required work. For example, ProPEL provides central coordination for university programming for various forms of Experiential Learning (Coop, Academic Internship, Service Learning, Undergraduate Research, and UC Forward). Likewise, CET&L is charged with supporting faculty as they seek to maximize student learning using innovative pedagogies such as collaborative learning with peers. The Peer Education Network will develop strategies for obtaining operation and seed money to support the following:

- Incentives for units to develop innovations and standardize best practices
- Expansion of existing peer education programs
- Development of sharable resources
- Matching funds for potential grant proposals
- Hosting professional development and recognition events for peer educators, faculty, and staff

Findings and Conclusions

Peer education plays a central role in forwarding student success with documented results in increased student performance and career readiness, higher GPAs, lower DFW rates, increased retention, and increased student satisfaction at the University of Cincinnati. The Peer Education Network has fostered a rare and important collaboration across four divisions – Academic Affairs, Campus Services, Enrollment Management, and Student Affairs. PEN is poised to discover new efficiencies as we reap the benefits of sharing our interdisciplinary, cross-divisional expertise and resources. The Peer Education Network believes that, with thoughtful investment from higher administration and greater coordination,

the University of Cincinnati will emerge as a national leader and best practice model for a well-orchestrated collaboration around peer education to advance student success.

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