

The Case for & Use of Undergraduate Peer Leaders in the First-Year Seminar (FYS)

Multiple advantages are associated with the use of peer leaders in the FYS class:

- (a) they are likely to be effective as discussion facilitators because they are less likely to be perceived as intimidating authority figures;
- (b) peer leaders are likely to develop higher-level cognitive skills as a result of their teaching experience (Whitman, 1988);
- (c) their involvement in the FYS increases their contact time with the faculty or staff member who is teaching the course, which serves to promote their retention and leadership development; and
- (d) they represent a very cost-effective form of student support for new students.

Involving trained undergraduates as peer instructors in the FYS is a teaching strategy that benefits both new students and the more advanced peers who work with them. New students profit from exposure to caring, more experienced peers, and the helping peers also profit by gaining leadership skills and increased feelings of self-worth (Whitman, 1988). Kuh et al. (2005) identified campuses that had substantially higher-than-predicted rates of student engagement and graduation than would be expected based on their student and institutional characteristics (e.g., admissions selectivity and percentage of commuting students). Based on multiple site visits to these campuses to identify distinctive practices that accounted for these institutions' unusually high rates of student success that might serve as recommended benchmarks of "best practice," the research team recommends using undergraduates as "junior professors" to teach and mentor their peers. This peer-teaching strategy is likely to promote the retention of both new students and their peer teachers, and it would do so in a cost-effective manner because peers are the least expensive members of the college community to employ in any type of support program. In addition, John Gardner (1996) notes that there are other advantages of involving students as peer leaders in the FYS:

The use of peer leaders may provide a sounding board, a reality test for the older and ostensibly wiser instructor-of-record who each year is increasingly older than traditionally aged freshmen. Service as a peer leader provides an additional learning and leadership experience for the best and brightest students on your campus. The peer leader concept makes possible more student ownership of the freshman seminar. Students, in turn, recruit other students not only to take the course but also take it seriously. And finally, the peer leader program may encourage some of our very best students to join our profession, a profession that is rarely considered by entering college students because they have had no exposure to it prior to matriculation (p. 2).

Potential Peer Leadership Roles in the First-Year Seminar

- * Model exemplary classroom behavior (e.g., attentiveness, note taking, and engagement).
- * Relate personal experiences or provide a student perspective on course

topics.

- * Co-teach a course topic unit with the class instructor.
- * Help the instructor with classroom management issues (e.g., class attendance, classroom civility, distribution of course materials, and record-keeping).
- * Facilitate and participate in class discussions.
- * Facilitate and participate in small-group work.
- * Engage in role-play debates (point-counterpoint) with the class instructor.
- * Inform the class about and encourage their attendance at upcoming campus events related to the course content or student success.
- * Recruit and host potential guest speakers.
- * Research and select content-relevant course videos.
- * Provide written feedback to students on their completed assignments.
- * Communicate with students outside of class via e-mail.
- * Facilitate or moderate electronic discussions related to coursework.
- * Develop a Blackboard website for the class.
- * Develop a Facebook site for social networking among classmates.
- * Serve as a liaison between students and the course instructor (e.g., provide feedback to the instructor on class dynamics and progress).
- * Hold out-of-class meetings with students to assist students with course topics about course assignments (e.g., during designated office hours).
- * Organize course-relevant field trips or service projects.
- * Form and facilitate study groups or test-review sessions.
- * Meet with individual students outside the classroom to review midterm grades and course progress.
- * Provide advice to students experiencing academic difficulties.
- * Refer students to campus-support services relating to course work or personal issues.
- * Facilitate focus groups on how the course (or the campus experience) may be improved.