

“Peer” into Success: Students as Peer Advisors in Leisure and Recreation Departments

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Abstract

Use of student paraprofessionals in many roles and programs on university campuses has increased dramatically in the past 40 years. However, one type of paraprofessional program that has been underutilized in leisure and recreation departments is peer advising. Given the emphasis on service learning and experiential education opportunities in leisure and recreation curricula, this type of program fits well within the mission and values of the field. Peer advising programs can provide both valuable learning experiences for students and substantial benefits to the department. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to describe a highly successful peer advising program at a midsized midwestern university and to place this program in the larger arena of student paraprofessional work, highlighting benefits and drawbacks to student participants, student users, and the department. The paper concludes with suggested steps for implementing a peer advising program.

Keywords: peer advising, student services, curriculum design, experiential education, service learning, professional development

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Introduction

Educators in leisure, parks and recreation have long touted the benefits of service learning and experiential education. We have seen these opportunities implemented through internships, field experiences, required volunteer and professional experience hours, and classroom exercises. Such opportunities are typically focused on the individual student and/or the public (in the case of service learning projects). One opportunity that has been underutilized by many leisure and recreation departments, however, is

the creation of a peer advising program. In fact, a recent phone survey of 20 universities and college departments selected at random from the 2002-2003 *SPRE Curriculum Catalog* revealed that none of the departments contacted had a program of this nature. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to describe a highly successful peer advising program at a midsized midwestern university and to place this program in the larger arena of student paraprofessional work, highlighting benefits and drawbacks to student participants, student users, and the department. The paper concludes with suggested steps for implementing a peer advising program.

Student Paraprofessionals

Over the past 40 years, the use of student paraprofessionals in a variety of roles and programs on university and college campuses has grown considerably (Carns, Carns, & Wright, 1993; Ender & Newton, 2000). Called peer advisors, peer counselors, peer mentors or other similar titles, students have typically served as residence hall assistants, as first-year and transfer orientation guides, and as mentors, counselors and advisors in various student services departments (e.g., career services, academic advising, minority student services, etc.). More recently, student paraprofessionals have been used in peer counseling settings, addressing such issues as AIDS education, eating disorders, sexuality, and other health and wellness concerns (Burke, 1989; Carns, et al., 1993; Lenihan & Kirk, 1990; Winston & Ender, 1988). Students in these roles perform needed services while gaining valuable personal and interpersonal skills and increased academic and personal development (Ender, 1984; Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000; Habley, 1979; Holland & Huba, 1989; Russel & Skinkle, 1990). There is a great deal of literature, in fact, that suggests that student or peer advisors/mentors are as, if not more, effective than faculty and professional staff in such settings (e.g., Carns, et al., 1993; Frisz & Lane, 1987; Habley, 1979, 1984; King, 1993; Nelson & Fonzi, 1995).

Benefits and Drawbacks

There are many benefits associated with the use of students as peer advisors, whether at the university or departmental level. Those deriving the greatest benefits may, in fact, be the peer advisors themselves, as noted above. Other benefits include the following:

1. Increased acceptance of peers as advisors and satisfaction with the quality of information gained in the advising process by fellow students (Brown & Meyers, 1975; Frisz & Lane, 1987; Habley, 1979; Nelson & Fonzi, 1995; Rabecki & Brabeck, 1985; Reinarz, 2000);
2. Potential for increased availability and accessibility of student advisors: Students' schedules may allow for more flexible advising hours or locations, especially during heavy advising periods such as registration (Habley, 1979; King, 1993; Nelson & Fonzi, 1995);
3. Efficiency and cost-effectiveness of service provision: Students can receive credit for their work, volunteer their time and talents, or be paid at rates lower than

- those of professional advising staff (Ender, 1984; Habley, 1979; King, 1993);
4. Increased identification of peer advisors with other students and with the department/ university, leading to a sense of ownership and belonging (Habley, 1979; Russel & Skinkle, 1990);
 5. Improved organizational dynamics in the department or service program, stemming from the enthusiasm and creativity student paraprofessionals bring to their roles and the improvements in services mentioned above (Habley, 1979; Reinartz, 2000); and
 6. Provision of an educational, experiential laboratory for learning valuable professional skills, especially for students involved in the helping or human service fields (Frisz, 1984; Habley, 1979). The conceptual, technical, and interpersonal skills developed by peer advisors are often transferable to their professional lives. For example, a peer advising session with a fellow student may include discussion about the requirements for a class (information processing and dissemination/teaching), creation of a multi-year plan of study for a student (organization and planning), or usage of databases and web information to search for a potential internship (technological and information literacy). The ability to handle these responsibilities professionally helps prepare peer advisors for similar responsibilities in the workplace.

As wonderful as these benefits might be, however, there are also potential drawbacks with using students to aid in the advising process. These include such issues as:

1. **Continuity:** As a rule, students tend to graduate! Additionally, if students receive credits for participation, there may be limits in the number of terms they can serve as peer advisors. For example, in the program at a midsized midwestern university, students can receive credit for up to two semesters as Peer Advisors. They are introduced to the Peer Advising program and build their skills in the first term, but it is not until the second term that they become truly proficient in the advising process. Thus, just when the student advisors have become most adept at their jobs, they leave (Habley, 1979; King, 1993);
2. **Resources and personnel needed to provide training and supervision:** Related to continuity, this issue is often a “hidden cost” of paraprofessional programs and directly affects the quality of the services provided (Habley, 1979; King, 1993);
3. **Students’ difficulty in balancing their role of helping other students with their role as students themselves:** Once the peer advisors are known as people who can offer assistance, they may find themselves (or, at least, feel that they are) “on call” at all times, even outside of Peer Advising, making it difficult to complete their own work (Carns, et al., 1993; Habley, 1979);

4. Lack of objectivity: Students are often perceived, especially by faculty and administrators, to have a lack of objectivity when advising others regarding difficult courses or challenging instructors (Carns, et al., 1993; Habley, 1979; King, 1993; Reinartz, 2000); and
5. Lack of accountability: Given the high turnover in peer advising programs, advising errors may not be detected immediately (Habley, 1979).

Most of these drawbacks can be reduced, if not eliminated, through careful program design, training, supervision, and record-keeping. The remainder of this paper will describe one program that has maximized the benefits of student paraprofessional use, while minimizing the drawbacks mentioned.

Peer Advising in Action

The Peer Advising program in the Division of Leisure, Youth & Human Services (LYHS) at a midsized midwestern university, is considered by students, faculty and administrators to be a highly successful program and an invaluable resource that contributes to the quality of the academic program. The program was launched in 1995 in an effort to provide LYHS students with a wider array of advising options and access to program information. Although it took about four years for the program to become fully established, there are now 12-15 Peer Advisors (PAs) each term selected to provide representation for each of the six focus areas in the Division (Nonprofit Youth Administration, Outdoor Recreation, Programming Services Administration, Therapeutic Recreation, Tourism, and Youth Services). Students are able to enroll for academic credit for participation in the program (two hours per semester, for a maximum of two semesters). The course description for the Peer Advising class (titled Professional Leadership Practicum) reads as follows: "Practical experience in professional leadership, requiring students to develop, implement and evaluate a peer-advising program. Provides multiple opportunities for students to be significantly involved in the work of the Division of LYHS and of the LYHS profession" (UNI, 2002-2004).

In addition to anecdotal comments and evidence over the past few years, the Peer Advising program itself was cited for excellence and innovation in a recent NRPA re-accreditation report. Furthermore, a recent opinion survey of students and faculty in the program provides evidence of the program's success in meeting its goals. In the survey of students (N = 124, representing students in all stages of the academic program), 90% of users felt the information they received was very accurate, 81% said the Peer Advisors either provided them with new information or clarified information they had heard previously, and all indicated that the information and services provided were valuable (23%) or very valuable (77%). Of those students who said they did not use the Peer Advising program, 71% were new, prospective, or undeclared students in their first class in the major who said they had not yet needed those services.

Recruitment and Selection of Peer Advisors

Interested students (junior status or above) must apply to become Peer Advisors and undergo a competitive selection process. To fill the open spots each semester, the current PAs are given the responsibility of actively recruiting potential replacements. Faculty members are also able to nominate those students whom they feel would be good Peer Advisors. The criteria for selection are evidence of academic success (typically 3.0 GPA or above), enthusiasm for helping others, good communication skills, desire to work as part of a team, and motivation and persistence in effort. An added consideration when selecting new Peer Advisors is, as mentioned above, adequate representation for each of the six focus areas. Final selection of advisors for each term is made by the instructor who teaches the course.

Having criteria such as these serves several purposes. First, the Peer Advisors must be capable of understanding and providing accurate information about academic and extracurricular programs and opportunities available to students in the LYHS program. Second, they must be able to provide advice in an objective, yet empathetic, manner. Third, they must be able to meet both group and personal goals, balancing their work as PAs with their work as students. Fourth, they must be able to interact positively with their Peer Advising team members, as well as with a wide variety of students and faculty. Finally, they must be capable of serving as ambassadors for the LYHS Division. Thus, they must be people who will conduct themselves in a professional manner. The criteria help insure that students will be able to perform these tasks and meet their goals with ease. Additionally, as is found in other areas of life, having a competitive selection process (mentioned earlier) raises the status of Peer Advising and creates respect among the student body, leading to increased demand and desirability. Students who are Peer Advisors are recognized by both faculty and fellow students as leaders in the Division. In the student survey mentioned earlier, 50% of the students (including those who had not yet used Peer Advising) indicated that they were interested in becoming Peer Advisors, because it would be a good way to gain additional leadership experience in the Leisure, Youth and Human Services field, to help other students, to gain more insight regarding LYHS and to improve their interpersonal skills. The half who said they were not interested gave the reasons that they were graduating, they were new to the major, and/or they had too many other commitments.

Program Administration

During the early years of the program, supervision of the Peer Advisors was a responsibility assigned as an additional administrative or advising task, rather than as part of a faculty member's assigned teaching load. The program did not thrive until it was managed within the structure of an academic course. This is an important point; having a regularly scheduled class session in which students can participate in necessary training and discuss their progress on various projects, as well as having a faculty member with time dedicated to providing that training and supervising the activities of the

students, has allowed us to avoid or mitigate the drawbacks related to lack of continuity, adequate training and supervision.

Faculty are involved in the program in a number of ways. First, because the work of the Peer Advisors is so closely tied to the work of the faculty, the instructor for the class serves as a liaison between faculty and students, relaying important information in both directions. The instructor also serves as a role model for the students, demonstrating proper advising techniques, encouraging faculty/student interaction, and modeling professional behavior. The other faculty become involved through work with the PAs on individual and group projects and providing information regarding the major. The model employed in the LYHS Division is truly collaborative, and both Peer Advising and the Division benefit.

A second critical administrative component is having a specific space allotted for a Peer Advising office. The space must be large enough, at a minimum, to hold one-on-one advising sessions and to house support literature for the advising process (school/department information, internship information, job opportunities, etc.). The space should include a computer, printer and phone, to assist not only in the advising process but also in completing the various projects in which the Peer Advisors are engaged (described later in this paper).

Training is the third essential administrative component of a successful Peer Advising program. Many of the potential drawbacks of such a program, such as lack of objectivity, lack of accountability, and difficulty in balancing student and paraprofessional roles, can be mitigated or eliminated through proper training. Specifically, students must receive adequate training in such areas as the advising process, professional ethics, administrative skills, and time management. This training provides students with both the skills and the confidence to perform their duties successfully.

Program Components

There are several components of the Peer Advising program itself, including completing academic assignments, advising students and conducting group and individual projects. In addition to providing a valuable service to the department and to fellow students, the multiple components of the LYHS Peer Advising are designed to enhance the students' ability to succeed in the professional arena. These components, as enacted at a large north western university, are described below.

Academic Assignments. Because students receive academic credit (two hours) for serving as Peer Advisors, there are specific academic assignments they must complete. First, each student must generate a list of goals and objectives he/she will meet during the term, called the "Learning by Objectives Agreement" (LOA). The LOA serves as a learning contract for the course and includes a statement of purpose in addition to the student's goals and objectives. Second, students are required to complete at least one major project during the term (described later in this paper). Third, each student must

hold office hours (three hours per week), during which she/he advises students and works on projects. Fourth, each student is responsible for taking minutes during at least one class meeting and for facilitating the subsequent meeting (including creating and distributing an agenda). Because many undergraduate students have not had the opportunity to run a business meeting prior to their experience in the Peer Advising class, this requirement serves as a valuable learning opportunity. Finally, each student must submit a written report of her/his work during the term. This report (the completed LOA) includes the student's purpose statement, her/his goals and objectives, and thorough descriptions of the projects in which she/he was involved. Students are asked to evaluate the success of the projects and to analyze any challenges they may have encountered. They must include copies of all work associated with their projects, as well as documentation of their office hours and their meeting agendas and minutes.

Academic Advising. One of the major goals of the Peer Advising program is to augment the academic advising provided by the faculty. Each student in the major has a primary faculty advisor, who is responsible for providing academic guidance. The value of this dual advising model was affirmed by the students who use the program: 71% of users in the survey (mentioned previously) preferred using both their faculty advisors and the PAs, rather than either exclusively. The PAs are able to support the dual advising process through supplying basic information regarding the major, handouts, and general academic advice to fellow students. Specifically, students may find the Peer Advising office to be more convenient for picking up forms and getting information quickly; it should also be noted that, for some students, it may be easier at times to ask questions of or get advice from a peer than from a faculty member (Ender & Newton, 2000; Habley, 1979).

Peer Advisors are particularly effective in providing information to prospective majors who do not yet have a faculty advisor. Consequently, the PAs must know and be able to explain in detail the requirements for the major/minor, as well as general education requirements for the University. Additional information they should be able to provide for all students includes registration procedures, department and university policies, internship information (requirements for and how to locate potential sites), career and graduate school opportunities, campus referral services, extracurricular opportunities (major-related student clubs, upcoming events, etc.), and other information that may be of interest or use to prospective and current majors.

The advising process occurs in an office designated for the Peer Advisors. They are to maintain the professional atmosphere in this office—neatness and maintenance of up-to-date reference materials and handouts are a priority. Peer Advisors are told that their office should be maintained with the same level of professionalism (or better!) as a faculty member's office.

Training for the advising process is an important part of the Peer Advising class. Before being allowed to work one-on-one with students, PAs learn proper advising skills, such as objectivity, active listening, and maintenance of confidentiality. Their positions

as peers providing advice can place these students in difficult positions. For example, when asked to give an opinion on the difficulty of a class or an instructor, the PAs are trained to discuss typical workload or requirements for the class and the particular instructor's teaching style or preferred methods (e.g., lecture, discussion, etc.), rather than commenting on the level of difficulty (which varies for each student) or aspects of the instructor's personality. It is essential that the advisors resist imposing their own values or feelings on advisees; the paramount goal of the advising program must be to provide accurate information in an unbiased fashion. A program that institutionalizes or formalizes the "student grapevine" regarding classes and instructors can lead to the decrease in the quality of the academic program itself, if students are steered away from challenging instructors and courses (Habley, 1984). Additionally, advisors are encouraged to point out that classes change from semester to semester and to suggest that students meet with instructors themselves prior to taking a class.

A second dilemma arises when students come to advisors with difficult problems, whether academic or personal. In these situations, it is essential that the Peer Advisors be trained in active listening skills, issues of confidentiality, and methods for referring students to the appropriate support services (faculty or administration, counseling center, financial aid, career services, etc.). They must be aware of what is and is not appropriate for them to handle and have resources at their fingertips to deal with problems as they arise. Please note that it is not suggested that Peer Advisors themselves serve as counselors for students in crisis.

A third ethical issue is that of confidentiality. Because Peer Advisors may have access to information regarding advisees' grades and academic records, and because they are in positions to offer advice or counsel other students, they must be properly trained in issues and policies related to maintaining confidentiality (Habley, 1984). (Note: These policies often differ from one institution or department to another, but those receiving federal funds are governed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, also known as the Buckley Amendment, which prohibits the release of educational records without the expressed written consent of the student).

Projects. The Peer Advisors participate in a variety of group and individual projects each semester. During the weekly class meetings, students formulate projects and solicit ideas on how to complete them. The group projects generally involve major events or tasks that affect the LYHS Division as a whole; there is typically one major project that everyone works on (a mandatory requirement) and several smaller projects that sub-groups or individuals work on each term. Beyond the major project, an individual can participate in as many group projects as her/his schedule allows. Most advisors work on an average of 2-3 group projects each term. While the major projects, in particular, often involve organizing special events, similar to assignments students might have in a programming class, the small sub-group or individual projects represent administrative and or/advising tasks that would have to be completed by faculty members were it not for the Peer Advising program. Examples of these projects are described on the next page.

1. *Senior Presentations/Spring Banquet.* A major recurring event in spring term is the LYHS Spring Banquet. On the morning of that event, students who have competed their senior internships return to campus for a poster presentation session, open to all students and faculty. Combined, the poster session and banquet require significant planning and coordination, which is handled entirely by the PAs. For the poster presentations, they reserve the space, order tables, chairs, and other necessary equipment, promote the event, and coordinate set-up and tear-down of the event. The Spring Banquet is a larger project, involving dinner, speakers, and presentations. Planning for this event begins during the fall term, with the selection and reservation of an appropriate facility. The remaining details (e.g., guest speaker(s), food selection, cost, invitation and printed program design, and decorating theme) are determined during spring term. The students research and present options to their fellow Advisors, and final decisions regarding each detail are made in a democratic fashion. The LYHS faculty are often asked to contribute suggestions or to offer opinions on choices, but true decision-making power rests with the PAs (under the guidance of their instructor).
2. *Agency Awareness Day.* A second example is Agency Awareness Day, held each fall within the Division. The purpose of this event is (a) to provide opportunities for students to become familiar with the varied organizations and types of employment opportunities in the LYHS field and to inquire about internships, volunteer and paid employment opportunities; and (b) for the agencies involved with our program to meet the faculty and students in the Division and learn more about what we do. Participating agencies set up display tables and interact with visitors in an open exhibition, followed by a catered luncheon with faculty. Once again, the Peer Advisors are responsible for all aspects of planning and implementation of this important event.

Students are also involved in smaller individual projects during the term. The selection criteria for these projects are that they must (a) improve the LYHS Division in some capacity, and (b) challenge the student(s) to use the skills they have acquired (or are acquiring) in their classes. Projects sometimes, but not necessarily, relate to a specific focus area within the major. Examples of individual projects include: updating the LYHS Peer Advising website; building a database of internship and graduate school information; writing a grant for technology equipment or other Division resources; producing a Division newsletter; planning and coordinating student transportation to and participation in annual conferences; building a database of summer employment options; coordinating Rho Phi Lambda (the National Recreation, Park & Leisure Fraternity); and representing the LYHS Division at University advising days.

Both the group and individual projects require the Peer Advisors to implement the skills and knowledge they have acquired in their major core classes. Budgeting, marketing and promotion, programming, employing the democratic decision-making process,

giving presentations, and utilizing technology are a few of the skills they must use in their work. Thus, participation in this program provides students with significant opportunities to put academic learning into practice and to have real-world experience to bring back into the classroom.

Faculty Perspectives

In examining a program of this nature, it is important to know the perceptions of faculty members regarding the impacts of the program on the department/division and the ways in which such a program either helps or hinders their work as advisors. For the faculty in the LYHS Division at a midsized midwestern university, the Peer Advisors have clearly had a positive impact in several ways. One faculty member summarized:

The Peer Advising program is an excellent information resource for undeclared students interested in learning about the major from the perspective of currently declared LYHS majors. Students like to gain advice and hear the opinions of their fellow students. When a faculty advisor's schedule is full, a student can first gather information about [the major], supporting courses or internship opportunities from the Peer Advising program. . . . Their contributions add depth to our Division.

Another mentioned, "They have contributed to a healthier, more spirited, and more positive social environment. They provide useful information to students [and] they do work that [the] faculty has not been able or willing to do." Several faculty members also mentioned the positive benefits to the Peer Advisors themselves, including professional experience, organizational skills, and research opportunities. Additionally, the work of the Peer Advisors in such areas as organizing academic events and completing administrative and research projects has contributed to the stability and continuity of the Division.

In terms of the advising process itself, faculty members indicated that for the most part, the Peer Advising program helped them in their work as faculty advisors. Though some were initially skeptical of the ability of the advisors to provide accurate information, all now state that the program works well. One said that the "students in general are much more knowledgeable and precise in the questions they ask regarding the advising and curriculum process," and another commented that, "Especially in my first two years, they knew more than I did and I relied on them [heavily]. A connection to them has been helpful for my advisees. Having a specific place for students to go has been a good thing." Others mentioned that the Peer Advisors are available on a daily basis for drop-in advising, which helps relieve the frustration of both students and faculty when the faculty advisor is not available. Two faculty members mentioned that on rare occasions, Peer Advisors have either provided inaccurate information or that students receiving advice have misinterpreted the information provided. However, both stressed that problems of this nature were extremely uncommon, and that the program has been "a valuable asset to our Division."

Steps for Implementing a Peer Advising Program

The goal of this article is to stimulate thought regarding the use of peer advising and to encourage other leisure and recreation departments to develop and implement similar programs themselves. Regardless of whether academic advising is handled by faculty, by a full- or part-time professional in the department or school, or by a campus-wide advising center, peer advisors can help improve the quality of the academic experience for students in the major, as well as providing substantial benefits to departments increasingly constrained by shrinking budgets. Therefore, the following steps are suggested as a method for creating a successful peer advising program.

Step 1. Develop goals and objectives for the program.

Involve both students and faculty in determining what the needs of the department are and how best to meet them using peer advisors

Step 2. Determine how the peer advising course will be implemented in the curriculum.

As mentioned earlier, it is highly recommended that the program be offered for academic credit, rather than treated as an extra-curricular activity, in order to provide both the structure and resources (time and personnel) needed for success. Faculty will need to decide whether to create a specific course with its own title and course number, or whether to offer the course under “Field Experience,” “Readings,” or a similar multi-purpose listing.

Step 3. Determine what faculty member will best serve as the instructor for the course.

This person should be someone who enjoys a high level of personal interaction with students and who is adept at identifying potential resources for the program. Regardless of which faculty member serves as the instructor, it is important for the program to be supported by the faculty as a whole for the program to be successful.

Step 4. Determine where the peer advising office will be located.

Departmental libraries or spare offices are good choices. Storage space (e.g., shelves, filing cabinets), a desk/table, chairs, a computer, and a phone are suggested furnishings.

Step 5. Determine participation requirements for the peer advising program.

Grade point average, ability to learn and communicate detailed information, extra-curricular involvement, ability to interact with peers in a meaningful way, and desire to serve as ambassadors for the department are possible criteria.

- Step 6. Identify potential ethical issues peer advisors might face and establish guidelines.

Create policies (based on those specified by the institution) regarding access to student files and records, confidentiality, and advising limits (i.e., the level of problem difficulty or complexity above which advisees should be referred to professionals. Exceptions (coupled with training requirements) might need to be made to existing policies to accommodate the program.

- Step 7. Recruit students for the program.

Enlist the aid of faculty and students in nominating suitable applicants, based on the criteria determined in Step 5. Faculty (course instructor and/or others) should review applications initially; current peer advisors could assist in the selection process later, as long as confidential information (e.g., GPA) was screened out.

- Step 8. Gather program resources.

This step could be one of the first projects undertaken by the new peer advisors. Information to have on hand includes program and university handouts and brochures, internship information, opportunities for professional development (national and state professional organizations, conferences, workshops, etc.), career information (including job openings, résumé and cover letter information, etc.), graduate school catalogs (including the *SPRE Curriculum Catalog*), reference books (e.g., *APA Publication Manual*), and referral resources.

- Step 9. Advertise the program.

It is important to get the word out to students that the peer advising program exists! Flyers, brochures, class announcements, open houses, and an up-to-date web site have proven effective at a large North Western University. It is also helpful to have the peer advisors make presentations in introductory classes to acquaint new or prospective majors with their services. The program should be highlighted in any information sent to new majors, as well.

- Step 10. Carefully document the work of the advisors.

Include both advising tasks and projects. This documentation is crucial for accountability and program evaluation (see next step).

- Step 11. Provide ongoing training and program evaluation.

As mentioned earlier, proper training of students is critical to the suc-

cess (and acceptance) of the program. Additionally, it is important to evaluate the program to insure that a) the peer advisors are providing accurate information to students, and b) the services offered by the program are meeting the needs of users and the department.

Step 13. Generate project ideas.

Get input from peer advisors, department faculty, and students on projects that will help the department and will be suitable for the peer advisors to undertake.

Step 12 Keep the recruiting process active throughout the year.

Keep a running list of potential peer advisors, and encourage them to apply when the time comes.

Step 14. Enjoy the benefits of a successful program!

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