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# **Fostering Total Wellness through Peer Helping: Reflections on the SMU Experience<sup>1</sup>.**

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Peer Helping is widely implemented in Colleges and Universities in the United States and Canada. Despite the popularity of these programs, very little has been researched on peer helping in the Asian context. This paper traces the theoretical foundations of peer helping and the nascent development of a peer helping program in the Singapore Management University and how this program has developed since the beginning of 2004. The initial focus of the program was based on the model of paraprofessional student counselors assisting their fellow peers through difficult moments in their lives. Over time, the program was fine-tuned to embrace the concept of “Total Wellness”. Based on these experiences, some practical guidelines are derived. The paper also identifies some possible future research directions vis-à-vis peer helping in the Asian context.

Keywords: Peer helping, Total Wellness, Higher Education

## **Introduction**

Peer Helping is widely used in colleges and Universities in the United States and Canada. One study reported that 78% these institutions actively employ para-professionals or college students as part of their peer helping program in their efforts to educate students on various life issues (Klein, Sondag & Drolet, 1994) However, in the Asian context, peer helping is still a very novel concept. There is little research done in this region on this topic. A literature search on the Singapore Management University’s digital library which include electronic databases like ProQuest and EBSCO could not trace any article on peer helping in the Asian context.

Despite the popularity of peer-led programs in the Western countries, there is little consensus on the scope of activities that should be included in these programs. It is no wonder there are so many names associated with the notion of peer helping. For instance, there are many articles written on peer helper-counseling programs (eg., Morey, Miller, Fulton, Rosen & Daly, 1989; de Rosenroll & Dey, 1990; Corn & Moore, 1992). Another popularly used term is peer education. This term is commonly used in health promotion literature (eg., Miburn, 1995; Backett-Milburn & Wilson, 2000; Green, 2001). Essentially, peer education is a form of peer helping which involves the teaching and sharing of information, values and behaviors amongst peers. Peer mentoring is another popular form of peer helping in higher education (Astin, 1984; Tang, 1993; Goodlad, 1995). Peer mentoring has also been used in other contexts like nursing education (Glass & Walter, 2000), violence prevention (Sheehan, DiCara, LeBailly, & Christoffel, 1999) and even sales management (Pullins & Fine, 2002).

Given the many forms of peer helping, we can expect the aims of peer helping programs to be varied. Some Colleges use it as a health promotion program to reduce risky behaviors (Edelstein & Gonyer, 1993). Others use it as a programming tool to “create behavior change in campus settings by (students) serving as role models portraying proactive behavior as normative behavior” (Badura, Millard, Peluso & Ortman, 2000). Still, another institution used peer helping “to make new students’ transition to the tertiary culture as successful as possible” (Treston, 1999, pg. 237). Hence, in practice, peer helping can be used to achieve different organizational objectives.

In this paper, we document our experiences in introducing a peer helping program to foster total wellness among Singapore Management University (SMU) students. Specifically, our objectives are to:

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- a. Briefly review the theories and practices of peer helping.
- b. Describe SMU's experiences in pioneering a peer helping program in Singapore.
- c. Derive some practical guidelines for successful implementation of peer helping programs.
- d. Discuss future research direction of peer-helping in the Asian context.

Our paper adds to the existing literature on peer helping which are predominantly done in the Western context. It could be useful for those currently involved in or are planning to implement peer helping programs in the Asian context.

## **Literature Review**

### **Benefits of Peer-Helping**

Peer helping can be viewed as engagement in interpersonal behaviors by non professionals who take on a helping role with others (Tindall, 1995). Student peer helpers are usually trained and supervised by professional staff like health educators or counselors in these programs. Typically, schools engage professional counselors or trained teachers to train the student helpers in various interpersonal effectiveness skills. After attending the training, the student helpers will then help other students by listening, providing information, giving emotional support, and/or referring to specialists for follow-up. In practice, peer helping programs may involve a wide range of activities like mediation, tutoring and cross-age teaching (Tanaka & Reid, 1997).

One reason why peer helping programs are so popular is perhaps due to the positive experiences by those directly involved in setting up such programs. The benefits of peer helping have been documented and researched extensively in the United States and in Canada. Experiences tell us that peer helping programs lead to positive outcomes for the recipients, helpers and the organizations concerned. For example, in James Cook University, it has been reported that their peer mentoring program had led to better bonding between students, reduction of "isolation syndrome" or "social vacuum" by new students, improvement in the mentors' employability and sense of self-worth, and decrease in drop-out rates (Treston, 1999).

Varenhorst (2003) listed the following benefits in her book "An Asset Builder's Guide to Training Peer Helpers":

- a. Peer Helpers learn lifelong skills
- b. High School students improved on locus of control and on measures of ego/self development.
- c. High school leaders also improved on psychological maturity and leadership skills
- d. Peer programs changed young people's self-reported attitudes about violent behavior, improved school discipline and reduced absenteeism.
- e. Students who trained with a (Peer) tutor outperformed by 98 percent those who were just taught in the classroom.

Likewise, research by Badura et al. (2000) also suggested that students who undergo peer education training improved in terms of their leadership skills, peer education relevant knowledge and personal health behaviors. Yamauchi (1986, as quoted in Ender & Newton, 2000) established that students involved in peer led activities like counseling or health education will be affected in positive ways which enhances self worth and interpersonal skill development. In other words, the most significant effect resulting from the experience of being a peer helper/educator is the impact on the peer helper/educator's own life.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Peer helping is not a new concept. Peer-to-peer initiatives have been around throughout history. For example, peer teaching as a form of peer helping has been traced to the works of Aristotle (Wagner, 1982). Despite its rich historical heritage and current popularity, there is not much reference made to the theoretical rationale for peer helping by its advocates. This could be due to the pragmatic nature of such programs. Often, supporters of peer helping justified peer programs by providing anecdotal evidences of self-reported positive outcomes by the participants - recipients, helpers and the organization. Another reason could be due to the diverse objectives of peer programs. It is unlikely to be able to find a single theory comprehensive enough to provide theoretical justifications for all the diverse objectives (Turner and Shepherd, 1999).

In peer helping literature, two most commonly cited theoretical support comes from Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory and Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. Vygotsky's Social

Development Theory highlights the importance of social interaction in the individual's development of cognition. The main theme of Vygotsky's framework focuses on how a person's cognitive functions are developed through social interaction first between people (inter-psychological) and then inside of the person (intra-psychological). Specifically, Vygotsky (1978) states in his classic book: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals." (pg 57).

Vygotsky's theory is compatible with the philosophy of peer helping. In essence, his theory argues that individual development is derived from the outcomes of the interactions between the individuals and their social environment. These interactions between individuals include peers – i.e., playmates, classmates, and siblings. The social environment contributes to the individual development in two ways. First, it is through the social environment that the individual acquires knowledge (i.e., the content of thinking). Second, the social environment provides the means for the individual to process his or her thinking. To sum up, the social environment specifies to the individual what to think and how to think.

The works of Bandura and his colleagues on Social Learning Theory indicate that modeling is the key contributor of the learning process. People learn by observing the behavior of others and adopting those behaviors as their own. Applied in the peer helping context, peer programs provide students with the opportunities to model the behaviors of peer helpers and practice the modeled behaviors. In addition, effective peer programs provide positive reinforcements to students for successful adoption to the modeled behaviors.

Bandura's social learning framework fits in well with our experiences of peer helping. In particular, experience tells us that the success of peer programs lie in peers observing their more successful counterparts (both academic and personal life) and having a desire to emulate their successes through the modeling of behaviors displayed. The group environment is also important. It is a form of positive social reinforcement for the participants (i.e., the students and peer helpers). Where there is a strong sense of unity between the students and peer helpers, it would lead to increased social interactions and cohesion, which in turn, strengthen the effectiveness of the peer programs.

## **Peer Helping- The SMU Experience**

### **Background**

The Singapore Management University (SMU) was officially incorporated on 12 January 2000 as the first private university in Singapore with 300 students enrolled in the School of Business. In her bid to have a strong academic foundation, SMU signed a memorandum of understanding with the Wharton School of Business to jointly develop the curriculum and to allow for the first batch of students to have an experience of an American based education and pedagogy. Subsequent years saw the development of the next 3 Schools namely, School of Accountancy (2001), School of Economics and Social Science (2002) and School of Information Systems (2003).

Being a young University in a fairly matured tertiary educational scene, SMU needed to position itself differently vis-à-vis the other two universities in Singapore. One way SMU could have an impact was to ensure that her students were well prepared for the labor market through new, innovative and radical ways of training and preparing the SMU student. With that in mind, the philosophy and pedagogy was crafted in such a way that a student would be empowered to take charge of their own academic and student affairs. With an approach like this, students have a great influence in taking the lead for creating a University that is vibrant and dynamic. By allowing students to explore these opportunities for growth, they in turn will develop a sense of ownership towards the University because they have played a part in the molding of that culture.

The Office of the Dean of Students at SMU from the beginning was tasked with the role of developing students in the non-academic arena. The main roles of the Office were to provide assistance to SMU students on several aspects namely, Scholarships and Financial Assistance, Counseling and Wellness, Discipline and student judicial matters. In addition to these, the Dean of Students also oversees the work of two other offices which provide leadership in the areas of student activities (Office of Student Life) and that of careers, internships and community service (Office of Career Services), which are an integral part of the life of an SMU student.

One of the key tasks of the Office was to provide counseling and wellness services to the student population. Based on the experiences of other institutions of higher learning in Singapore, we gather that our students would tend to keep problems to themselves and not approach the counseling service for assistance due to a perceived face-losing stigma of having to “visit” a counselor. Hence, when we initiated our peer helping program in January 2004, we wanted the peer helpers to act as a “bridge” between the counseling service and the student community. Students selected to the peer helping program would act as the “eyes and ears” of the counseling service as they would have had more contact with their fellow students on a day to day basis compared to the professional staff of the service.

The pioneer batch of peer helpers consisted of 20 members. The assistance of the various school administrators were sought in the initial selection of these 20 Peer Helpers. The Administrators were asked to recommend five students from their schools whom they felt had the qualities of a caring person, willing to listen to the trouble or problems of their peers. At the same time, a Kiersey temperament sorter tool was also used to help the administrators determine the students who had the personality which fitted the requirements of the role. After the names were recommended, the program director met up with the 20 selected students and shared with them the vision and purpose of the program. Interestingly, all 20 were extremely keen to be a part of the startup.

A training program was specially designed and conducted by the program director over a period of eight weeks. The training program was designed to be hands-on and informational. The peer helpers were trained on basic counseling skills like rapport building, listening and identification of fellow students in distress. The skills served to inculcate in the peer helpers a sense of an external focus on others which allowed them to eventually develop a keen awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses.

During the initial startup period of six months, the peer program underwent changes in its approaches. It was a learning experience for both the program director and the peer helpers. There are no prior experiences that the program director could draw from since peer helping is relatively a new concept among the institutions of higher learning in Singapore. Without full knowledge and sufficient information, learning was by trial-and-error. Hence, pragmatism was the preferred approach which allowed the program to evolve whilst making necessary refinements along the way. We believe that constant improvements and adapting to changes and needs would help to fine-tune the program in order to meet the needs of our students.

In June 2004, the program director and a leading peer helper attended a peer helping conference organized by the National Peer Helpers Association (NPHA), a non-profit corporation based in Missouri, USA. “The NPHA is dedicated to promoting excellence in the peer resource field... and whose mission is to equip individuals to help others by promoting standards of excellence in peer programs” (<http://www.peerhelping.org/about>). The conference provided an opportunity for the program director and the peer helper to reflect intensely on the progress of the peer helping program. It was felt that the progress of the peer helping program was rather slow. Somehow students in Singapore were still resistant to seeking counseling even with their peers.

During the conference, the concept of Whole-Person Wellness was introduced. It was felt that the concept of whole-person wellness would be more acceptable to the students at SMU since it removed the stigma of counseling. After the conference, the program director and the peer helpers met to fine-tune the peer helping program in order to incorporate the concept of whole-person wellness. It was then decided to broaden the goal of the peer helping program to promote “total wellness” among the students at SMU. “Total Wellness” is actually modeled after Edlin, Golanty & Brown’s (2002), whole-person wellness. It consists of 6 different aspects which are:

- a. *Spiritual wellness* – a person with spiritual wellness should be able to examine personal values and beliefs, search for meanings that help explain the purpose of life, have a clear understanding of right and wrong and appreciate natural forces in the universe.
- b. *Intellectual wellness* – a person with intellectual wellness should be able to communicate effectively through speaking and writing, able to observe more than one side of an issue, keeps abreast of global issues and exhibits good time management skills.
- c. *Social wellness* – a person with social wellness should be able to develop positive relationships with friends and loved ones, and have effective communications with others who may be different.
- d. *Emotional wellness* – a person with emotional wellness should be able to maintain a good sense of humor, recognize feelings and strives to take responsibility for his or her behavior.

- e. *Occupational wellness* – a person with occupational wellness should be able to feel a sense of accomplishment through challenges in his or her work yet balancing work and other aspects of life.
- f. *Physical wellness* – a person with physical wellness exercises regularly and selects a well balanced diet underscoring a positive, health promoting lifestyle.

### **Peer Helper-led Educational Programs**

Total Wellness is a more balanced and broader goal. Previously, the peer helping program tended to focus narrowly on “emotional wellness” with the emphasis on peer counseling. Once the objectives of the peer program were enlarged to include the other aspects of total wellness, the program director and the peer helpers quickly worked together to come out with a series of programs to promote the new objectives.

One of the first programs conceived after the introduction of Total Wellness was “Stress Management Week”. The event was held on the second week in the month of September 2004. The focus of the event was to educate the student community on the need to manage stress in their lives through identification of stressors and also to find ways to deal with it. Students were encouraged to write down their stress management techniques on a small note and paste it on a giant board which was erected near the thoroughfare of the Campus. In return for their notes, each student was given a “squeezeie” stress ball to remind them of the need to manage stresses and have balanced physical wellness.

Focusing on intellectual wellness, “Time Management Week” was organized in February 2005. The purpose of Time management week was to raise the awareness of proper time management amongst students. Proper time management would lead to students being able to balance their work commitments and schedules for a healthy peace of mind. For the event, various quotations on good time management were pasted beside the clocks in all seminar rooms on campus. In addition, a static poster board on Time Management was placed along the thoroughfare on the Campus ground in order to elicit responses from students making their way to and from seminars.

Following the successful management of these 2 key events, a Student Wellness Centre (SWC) was launched in late February 2005. The purpose of the SWC was to give students a place to rest and recover from the stresses of the academic day. A library was set up within the SWC to have specially dedicated books on whole-person wellness including categories like diet, exercise, academic strategies, time and stress management and many more. In addition to books, magazines and board games have also been included to allow students to have more options to “de-stress”. In order to cater to physical wellness, 2 massage chairs were included in which students were free to utilize throughout the opening hours of the SWC.

In the month of March and April 2005, two other peer helper led events were organized namely, “Yoga by the Park” and a “Health and Wellness Carnival”. The events were planned out of a focus on physical and emotional wellness. The student community was invited to attend the events through various means like emails, posters and word of mouth “advertising”.

The carnival consisted of stalls selling health foods like frozen yoghurt and other wellness services like health checks by a local Kidney Dialysis organization and eye checks by optometrists. Concurrently at the same time, masseuses from the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH) were invited to provide massages for students and staff. This service proved to be highly popular as the response to that service was overwhelming.

In addition to events, the peer helpers also sought to increase the awareness of their services through an intranet web presence and also giving out of information folders (together with other information pertaining to the Dean of Students’ office) to the student community.

### **Some feedback on the Peer Helping Program**

Since the Peer Helping Program is still at its initial stage, much of the effort has been focused on building awareness among the SMU community and establishing the credibility of the SMU Peer Helpers. The progress of the program has been encouraging as it has been observed that the SMU community has become more aware of the Peer Helping Program, especially, after the launching of the series of programs on Total Wellness. However, many students are still confused between peer helping and peer counseling. Our peer helpers have indicated that they have experienced difficulties due to the perceived social stigma in “counseling”. Some students consider seeking help from peer helpers as a sign of personal weakness. The “face” issue is a major barrier in our Peer Helping Program. This feedback tells us that much more work

must be done to change the perception of the peer helping program from peer counseling to promotion of Total Wellness.

With regards to the peer helpers, the feedback received has mainly been positive. On the whole, it is observed that they are highly committed to their roles. One of the beliefs they hold strongly is “Leadership by Example” and to “Walk the Talk”. Training are taken seriously. Our peer helpers, after attending the series of training sessions have become more confident, self-aware, and experienced a sense of competence with regards to the skills required as a peer helper. They are also perceived by their peers as having the relevant skills to help. Generally, the peer helpers have conducted themselves well amongst their peers, are viewed as good listeners and are perceived in a different light as compared to the general student population. One student puts it: “Peer helpers do not push ideas upon people.”

However, our informal research has indicated that there is a small group of students who are cynical about the Peer Helping Program. These students stereotype peer helpers as a bunch of politically correct geeks representing the authorities of the University. Naturally, this group of students is unable to relate to or have faith in the peer helpers. There is also another group of students who feel that since peer helpers are their peers, they may not be professional enough to help them.

As a whole, our peer helper-led educational programs have been well received by the SMU community. For each of the activities that were organized (e.g. Stress Management week, Massages by the Visually Handicapped), the participation rates have been encouraging. The Stress Management week garnered almost 500 responses from the student community with regards to their personal suggestions on management of their stress. Another event that was very well received was massages by the members of the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH). An indication of the popularity of the event was that the masseuses were fully utilized for the entire duration of the 2 Day event where there was a constant flow of students and staff going to the Student Wellness Centre to get their massages.

Informal polls with students and staff who attended the Total Wellness Activities showed that most were agreeable that the events were highly useful in highlighting the need for individuals to be aware and take good care of their own wellness needs. Besides reminding and educating, these peer helper-led programs also help to create visibility for the peer helpers and fostering of team-work. They let others know about the goals of the peer helping program and how they could help to promote Total Wellness at SMU.

One concern about our series of peer-led education programs is that it portrays the image that we are very activity-oriented. It seems like we are trying to create one event after another. This is a constructive feedback. It reminds us that we need to put our act together in a more coherent manner so that others can understand how all these activities and programs are tied to our goal of promoting Total Wellness.

## **Conclusions**

### **Lessons Learnt - Some Practical Guidelines**

Even though, our peer helping program is still evolving and growing. We have learnt some important lessons. We realize that it is important to have a holistic approach in implementing the peer helping program. This means that we have to approach the peer helping program at four levels, namely, leadership, culture, peer-helper, and, program-level.

At the leadership level, there must be a demonstration of top management support. When the top management is seen to be interested, it lends credibility to the program. At SMU, the top management is very supportive of the peer helping program. The top management is willing to commit time and resources to support the various activities initiated by the peer helpers. For instance, the top management and members of faculty make special effort and take time off to any special events organized by the peer helpers like the opening of the Student Wellness Centre (SWC). In addition, money and resources are set aside to build up the library at the SWC and organize talks and seminars on Total Wellness. The commitment of resources is a clear indication that the top management is not paying lip service to the peer helping program.

To foster a conducive culture for the peer helping program to flourish, we need to have a shared understanding of the core values and philosophies of peer helping. Peer helping is based on the belief that peers can be a credible source of coping resource and are as effective as professionals. Peer helpers must believe in the value of student empowerment and taking ownership in one’s problem. Culture evolves over time. We have to be patient. We cannot expect to get immediate results from our effort. There are no quick-

fixes. The starting point in developing a culture is from the belief system of the peer helpers. We have to select students whose belief systems are consistent with the core values and philosophies of peer helping. In addition, we need to constantly remind them of these values and philosophies.

The cornerstones of the peer helping program are the peer helpers. We depend on the quality of our peer helpers to deliver our services. Hence, it is important that they be specially selected, adequately trained, and highly motivated. Peer helpers should be drawn from a diverse and well rounded spectrum of the SMU student population. This is to ensure that there is proper matching between the peer helpers and the students. Peer helpers must also be representative of the overall student population in order to lend credibility to the program.

Proper training is important to equip the peer helpers with the requisite helping skills. The training program must be hands-on, informational and relevant to the peer helpers' needs. The training sessions should be interactive and informal to give the peer helpers opportunities to share about their experiences and challenges. Besides skill development, the training also serves as a platform for feedback. These training sessions provide opportunities for the peer helpers to exchange their views about the program and to express their concerns. The time spent together during the training is a good investment in that it helps to build the team.

Although, the source of motivation for peer helpers should be intrinsic, we still need to think of ways to reward our peer helpers for their effort and good work. There are many ways to do that. For example, we can award the peer helpers with certificates of participation or Letters of Appreciation from the Office of the Dean of Students. In addition, training conducted for the peer helpers can be counted as credit hours for their academic studies. The sources of intrinsic motivation in peer helping are varied too. It can be derived from the satisfaction of making a difference in others, doing something meaningful or giving something back to the community.

At the program-level, activities organized for the peer helping program must be meaningful, coordinated and coherent. To be meaningful, activities must have clear goals and these goals must achieve a specific purpose. Sometimes, we fall into the trap of just organizing activities without examining how these activities help us to achieve our purpose. Another potential problem with peer-led activities is coordination or lack of coordination. This is especially in the case when the activities are initiated by different teams of peer helpers. The Program Director has to assign someone to co-ordinate and schedule the activities to ensure that there are no overlapping activities and clashing of events. The suitability of the timing and location, the availability of resources, and order of activities are variables that we need to consider in coordinating activities. Activities are coherent when they mutually support each other and relate to the overall objective of the peer helping program. In other words, the activities must fit together in support of the peer helping program.

### **Future Research Directions**

There is an urgent need to fill the research gap on peer-helping in the Asian context. At the project-level, we need more evaluative research on the effectiveness of peer programs in the Asian context. Evaluation studies are important due to their practical implications. Such studies are the mainstay in countries where peer helping are established. As such, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. We can build from the knowledge-base of these Western studies and adapt their methodologies to our own context. We can also learn from Western researchers their definitions and measurements of effectiveness in peer programs. Since most evaluation studies concentrate on short-term impact (Green, 2001), we can add to the literature by investigating the long-term impact on peer helping. Comparative research on peer-led and adult-led or professional-led program is another potential research approach at the project-level.

There are many possibilities to conduct peer-helping research at the individual-level. For example, we can investigate gender differences in peer-helping relationships. In literature on marketing, we are able to find studies on how men and women differ in their responses to peer mentoring relationships (Fine & Pullins, 1998). It will be interesting to investigate how male and female students react to the same and opposite gender in peer helping. Also, we can investigate the characteristics of effective peer helpers versus peer helpers who are less effective. This type of research will have practical implications on future selection of peer helpers and the viability of peer-led programs.



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