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Peer Helpers: Bridging the gap between the student community and the University's counseling service

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Abstract

Students helping students as a concept is widely used in colleges and universities across the United States and Canada. One study observed that up to 78% of these educational institutions employed University and College students as peer helpers, educators and para-professionals in support of various programs (Klein, Sondag & Drolet, 1994). Since 2003, the Singapore Management University's (SMU) Centre for Counseling and Guidance (CCG) have actively promoted, trained and developed undergraduates to serve alongside the counselors as Peer Helpers. This is part of the overarching strategy of the Centre to build an "Emotional Safety Net" across the entire student community so that students experiencing emotional or mental health distresses would be quickly identified by a peer helper and attended to within the shortest possible amount of time.

This paper outlines the structure, recruitment and training of the peer helpers as well as the focus of the program vis-à-vis the overall strategy of the CCG. In addition, we will discuss the impact of the program amongst the student community and the influence of the program in the shaping of positive helping-seeking behaviors as well as the general perception towards counseling and its benefits.

Introduction

According to Tindall (1995), peer helping is a process of assistance whereby a non-professional helper works with another person using interpersonal communication skills. The usage of these skills and knowledge empower peers to help each other confidently and effectively (Carr, 1988). Peer helpers are individuals who have learnt to care for their peers by talking, tuning-in and listening to their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Carr, 1993).

Peer helping is extensively utilized as a method to supplement traditional models of helping and supporting students in schools and colleges throughout various countries. This approach has been regarded as an effective method of intervention when dealing with issues faced by younger people (adolescence and young adults) as these individuals prefer to interact closely with others similar to themselves (Montermayer & Van Komen, 1985).

There are many forms of peer helping. They include mentoring, befriending, conflict resolution, advice giving and other counseling-based approaches found in the US, Europe and the Middle East (Tanaka & Reid, 1997; Erhard, 1999; Abu-Rasain & Williams, 1999; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Dennison, 2000; Racz & Lacko, 2007; Aladağ & Tezer, 2009). An example of a peer program is the mentoring and tutoring project offered by the University of North Carolina. This program aimed to intervene in the academic functioning and school bonding of students by providing academic advice and guidance (Dennison, 2000). In Saudi Arabia and Turkey, peer helpers were trained as peer counselors equipped with counseling skills to provide help and support to their peers as a form of counseling intervention (Abu-Rasain & Williams, 1999; Aladağ, & Tezer, 2009).

Increasingly, more research has highlighted the benefits of peer helping for both the peer helpers as well as the recipients of the peer helping. For example, Naylor and Cowie (1999) reported the findings from a U.K. survey of teachers and students involved in peer support systems which found that the creation of a socio-emotional climate of "care" was greatly effective in reducing the negative effects of bullying of students. Cunningham, Cunningham, Martorelli, Tran, Young & Zacharias (1998) also found that peer helping programs reduces aggressive behavior in the playground. In their paper on peer helping in Saudi Arabia, Abu-Rasain & Williams (1999) found that service recipients (secondary school students) greatly benefitted from the program due to the emotional support and practical help received from their peer helpers.

In terms of benefit to the helpers, Badura, Millard, Johnson, Stewart and Bartolomei (2003) suggested that peer helpers would attain improvements in their leadership skills, peer education relevant knowledge, friendship and personal behaviors. In addition, Varenhorst (2003) pointed out that peers helpers may also have a better ego/self development, leadership skills as well as classroom discipline. Racz & Lacko (2008) also echoes the same idea that peer helpers would acquire improvements in self-awareness and problem solving abilities after participating in the various trainings and activities.

A scan across the literature on peer helping reveals very few examples of peer helping in the Asian context. The purpose of this paper is to add to the existing literature on peer helping from an Asian perspective through the detailing of the experiences of the peer helping program

initiated by the Centre for Counseling and Guidance of Singapore Management University. In addition, we will also outline the development of the structure and training program and discuss the impact of the peer helping program and the shaping of positive help seeking behaviors amongst the student community.

Peer Helping in SMU

Developments and Processes

The Singapore Management University was founded in 2000. Being the third University in Singapore, the pioneers wanted SMU to be run differently from the other two Singapore Universities. Hence the decision was made early to adopt a broad-based approach to education, very much similar to the American model. In addition, being new, the founding team adopted novel ideas which helped SMU to be unique in terms of the way a University could be run.

When the Counseling Service was started in 2003, the objective was fairly straightforward, i.e. providing counseling services to the student community. Six months following the launch of the service, it was noticed that the service was not extensively utilized by the students in the SMU community. In an exploration with various counseling counterparts from the other Singapore tertiary institutions, it was realized that students in difficulty would have the tendency to speak to friends and family before they took the step to approach counselors in a professional setting. Cepeda-Benito & Short (1998) confirmed this observation in their research on Self-Concealment and Help Seeking behaviors where individuals in difficulty would tend to avoid professional counseling if they could.

With this finding, it was decided that the traditional approaches to the provision of counseling services needed to be re-examined in light of the experiences on the ground. Following that decision, a search through various counseling literature and conversations with various practicing counselors surfaced the novel concepts of peer helping. The initial idea was to have undergraduate students trained in some counseling skills and appointed as peer helpers so that they may act as a "bridge" between the student community and the counseling service. However, the peer helpers were viewed as part of the counseling service by the student community and were also very much shunned by their fellow students the moment it was revealed that they were a peer helper.

Due to this negative perception, a deliberate strategy of attempting to bring the relevance of the peer helpers to the forefront was to couch the program along the lines of promotion and raising awareness amongst the student community to the need to maintain *Total Wellness (*Edlin, Golanty & Brown, 2002). In an earlier paper, Tan & Hsi (2005) reflected on the effectiveness of peer helpers adopting the six aspects of *Total Wellness* as the basis for their modus operandi. The approach reaped dividends as it introduced the peer helpers to the student community in a tasteful and indirect way, leading to an increased acceptance of the peer helpers without the usual negative undertones associated with counselors and para-counselors.

At the same time, as part of the effort to build the credibility of the peer helpers, the counselor (program director by then) and a full time faculty from the Lee Kong Chian School of Business introduced a half credit elective course which sought to train peer helpers in the basics of helping as well as to provide a systematic and structured method to teaching the skills. This course (Facilitation and Counseling Skills) quickly became the foundation for the peer helping program, giving it the importance as well as the necessary academic foundation needed for it to stand apart from a usual student-led club.

Building on their improved reputation, the peer helpers continued to organize events around the theme of total wellness for the next three years. In their enthusiasm, the peer helpers explored various interesting options of bringing the message of total wellness to the community by having various programs like "Massages by masseurs with visual disability", "Talks on Numerology" and the giving out of fruits. However, a point of saturation was reached when the student community began to associate the peer helpers with "massages" and "fruit dealers". It was this development which led to a review of the role of the peer helpers' vis-à-vis the counseling service (also renamed Centre for Counseling and Guidance) in the year 2007.

The review established that while peer helpers were highly recognized amongst the student community, the link with the Centre for Counseling and Guidance (CCG) was weak and a new framework was needed to weave the work being done by the counselors, peer helpers as well as students who had taken the half credit elective course together in a structured approach. With the elective course instructing about 200 students every academic year, there was a fairly large group of about 400 students trained in basic listening skills which were not being tapped on in support of the work of the CCG. It was with this insight that the idea of creating an *"Emotional Safety Net"* was mooted as a way to consolidate the available resources as well as to build a network of Emotional Safety Networkers (ESN) on the ground in order to identify students in distress.

The approach is simple – every one of the 400 ESN's is assumed to have at least 20 close friends whom they interact and spend most of their time with on campus. This would theoretically translate to all students being "connected" on campus (SMU has about 6500 undergraduate students). These close connections would allow the ESNs to sense and notice changes in behaviors amongst their close friends should any of them encounter distressful circumstances in their life. The ESN would initiate a conversation (like any concerned friend would) but due to their training, be able to connect at a much deeper empathic level by the utilization of basic counseling skills in assisting their friends to explore the range of their difficulties. Additionally, the ESNs would refer their friends to the CCG should they feel that the issues confronted are beyond the usual life challenges faced.

Within the Emotional Safety Net, the peer helpers would continue to function in a similar way as the ESNs but with additional roles like the organizing of events related to emotional and mental health for the student community. These events act as a scaffold to the Emotional Safety Net by continuing to raise the levels of awareness amongst the student population.

In addition, peer helpers who have received higher level trainings from the peer helping program would return to assist the program director in the weekly "Facilitation and Counseling" class. They would play the role of observers during the role play trainings and offer feedback to

the students as they learn the basic counseling skills. In echoing Badura, Millard, Peluso & Ortman's (2000) finding about positive outcomes for peer educator programs, this approach allows for peer learning to occur which enhances the development of personal growth for the peer helpers as well the students in the course.

Recruitment and Progression in the Peer Helping Program

The process of recruitment of a peer helper starts at the point students apply to take the half credit elective course. An email announcement would be sent to the entire student community during BOSS[1] bidding period and interested students who apply for the course are asked to submit a one-page reflection journal on the reasons for their application. Subsequently, these students are invited for an interview with the program director to determine their suitability for the course. This approach is very similar to most peer helping recruitment methods as described by Stokes et al. (1988) except in this case, students are applying to take an academic course as an initial step towards becoming a peer helper. Some criteria looked for at this early stage are students with a natural sense of empathy, a keenness to learn helping skills and a past record (informal or formal) of experiences in assisting their fellow peers.

At the end of the academic term, students who have completed this course would then be inducted as an ESN and those desiring to further their training would then be invited to apply as a member of the peer helping team. Interviews are conducted by members of the current peer helping team (guided by the senior counselor of the CCG) to select suitable students to join the program. Students accepted into the program are expected to commit to weekly training sessions with the counselors from the CCG as well as to run the Student Wellness Centre[2].

A peer helper would progress through at least three stages of training within the program. Peer helpers receiving training at the first stage are given the title "Peer Helper Assistant (PHA)" where they are recognized as a novice and allowed the appropriate levels of responsibilities within the team. Once they have satisfactorily completed the trainings and service required for that term, they would then proceed to the next stage of training and given the title "Peer Helper (PH)". Similar to the first stage, once the PH satisfactorily completes the training and service for that term, they are then promoted to the final stage of training and are known as "Senior Peer Helpers (SPH)". Peer helpers at this stage would have received close to 80 hours of counseling related training and have served the community as an ESN, organized several events within the campus and have informally helped many friends and peers throughout that time.

Training within the Peer Helping Program

Egan (2007) proposed that in the training of helpers, the focus should not be on models and skills alone, but to incorporate an exploration of the "shadow side" of the helper's life. Training in the SMU peer helping team's context is deliberately broad based with particular emphases on self awareness & skills development. Issues pertaining to ethics and confidentiality are also covered.

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[1] BOSS (Bidding Online System) – Students in SMU "bid" to apply for all academic courses through an electronic system developed in house.
[2] The Wellness Centre is a nicely decorated location within the University for students to rest in between classes. Massage chairs, board games, magazines are provided as tools to aid in the relaxation.

During the "Facilitation and Counseling Skills" class, the student is introduced to basic counseling techniques like attending skills, listening and questioning skills. Counseling principles with emphases on ethical issues and individual limitations regarding confidentiality are also highlighted. These skills are taught through a combination of discussions, role plays and exercises. In addition, these students are also brought through an exploration of their own behaviors using various behavioral assessment tools. Counseling related videos are also used to support and highlight the helping skills introduced throughout the term.

Following the student's appointment as a PHA, they would be required to attend a two-part training package throughout the second term. The first part consists of a 12 hour training (over six weeks) focusing on basic counseling theories like Client-Centred Therapy (Rogers, 1995) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Beck, 1979). In addition, the peer helpers would be brought through exercises specifically targeted towards raising their levels of self awareness and ability to problem solve. The second part of the training is conducted by a licensed social worker from a local social service agency specializing in assistance to individuals with suicidal tendencies. The purpose of this eight hour training (over four weeks) is to train the peer helpers to be able to identify and help individuals at suicidal risk.

Upon successful completion of the PHA training, the peer helper would go on to be trained in advanced helping skills. Similar to the previous term, the first part of the training would also comprise a 12 hour program where advanced helping skills like challenging, confrontation and reframing are introduced (Young, 2009). Following this, the peer helpers will be enrolled in an external course titled "Mental Health First Aid" (MHFA), supported by the Health Promotion Board, Singapore.

Upon receiving the MHFA certification, these students will be promoted to the level of Senior Peer Helpers and undergo training in support of SMU's crises management process. The Peer Helpers would be briefed and inducted as part of the Crises Management Team and learn how to conduct post incident psychological debrief sessions for individuals who may be traumatized should they witness a major crisis occurring on campus. Following crises management training, the peer helpers will also be introduced to mediation skills, building upon the skills taught in the previous terms.

As part of the supervision process, peer helpers are expected to constantly reflect on their learning and work by regularly writing reflection journals throughout the period of trainings. These journals are read by the various counselors overseeing the different training levels and they offer feedback and comments which are aimed at triggering further reflections which would allow the peer helpers to develop a deeper sense of awareness in their practice. This routine of reflection of their work on a consistent and regular basis is what Schön (1983) calls "reflective practice".

In a student satisfaction survey (n=2945) conducted at SMU in 2006, only about eight percent of respondents highlighted that they would readily approach a peer helper or a counselor from the counseling service should they be in that position of need. Majority of the respondents indicated that they would prefer to rely on friends, religious groups and parents for assistance and comfort when they face emotional difficulties. This response is not unusual. Several studies across the helping profession (including psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors) have explored the issue of client reticence in seeking help when in distress (Corrigan, 2004; Golberstein, Eisenberg & Gollust, 2008; Wells, Robins, Bushnell, Jarosz & Oakley-Browne, 1994). These studies highlighted the possible reasons of social stigma and negative attitudinal perceptions faced by individuals seeking help. In a survey of university counseling centres in 2009 (The International Association of Counseling Services, 2009), it is estimated that about 10.4% of undergraduates across the United States utilize counseling services.

However, after the peer helping program was reviewed and restructured as part of the "Emotional Safety Net" in 2007, the counseling case loads jumped from 47 in 2006 to 69 in 2007, 112 in 2008 and 201 in 2009. The increases in the numbers of counseling case loads could be attributed to the increased contact of students either with ESNs or members of the peer helping team. The statistics of clients utilizing the counseling service in SMU can be used as a barometer to measure the possible positive impact of the peer helping program in modifying help seeking behaviors and the perception of the counseling service among the student community.

Another observed area of change has been a notable shift in the perception towards the importance of counseling by the SMU community (including faculty, staff and students) over the years. Students facing academic difficulties due to personal emotional issues or other distresses then would likely have kept their issues to themselves without anyone recognizing the symptoms of distress. Today, with the Peer Helpers organizing several events as part of the strategy to educate the community towards their emotional and mental health, it is not unusual to overhear students encouraging each other to "talk to a peer helper" or to "talk to a counselor" without a sense of fear or even embarrassment.

One final observed area of change has been the willingness of counseling clients (referred from the professional counselors) to work with senior peer helpers as part of the therapeutic process for some issues. In the past, counseling clients would be highly unwilling to work with anyone else besides the counselor. However, the gradual changes in perceptions has led to clients realizing that having a fellow peer journeying with them can be a highly effective way of reinforcing the outcome of therapy outside of the counseling room.

Limitations

The Peer Helping program, though seen as successful in SMU's context is not entirely free from challenges. In today's environment of budget cuts and streamlining of work processes where "doing more for less" has even permeated the education industry; the increased need to justify the existence of programs has been a paramount concern for the program director. Traditionally a reliance on meaningful statistics has been the main method of justification for

programs. Student clubs and societies require submissions of user statistics to reflect the number of students who attended activities organized as a form of justification for continued funding.

The peer helping program, although seen as an extension of the Centre for Counseling and Guidance, was not exempt from the need to submit user statistics as well. Due to the informal and fluid nature of helping, it was difficult for the peer helpers and the program director to collect statistics of the number of individuals who were helped as the criteria for students helped by peer helpers are fundamentally different from students helped by counselors in a professional setting. One way around this difficulty was to track and submit the number of outreach events organized and the estimated attendance of these events instead.

In terms of benefits, there have been numerous studies (Tan & Hsi, 2007; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Varenhorst, 2003) focusing on participants of peer helping. Our attempt to correlate the impact of the peer helping program on the help seeking behavior of individuals (vis-à-vis counseling centre visits) in SMU is just a starting point. Much more can be done in terms of research in order for us to fully explore other possible impacts arising from the peer helping program. Some areas of exploration include the impact of peer helping on students receiving help as well as the building of a nurturing, supportive and caring environment within the university community.

Conclusion

Peer helping is a viable approach for counselors and educators seeking to implement alternative methods for counseling interventions as well as the impartation of skills and knowledge. Our experience has shown that students who are properly trained, equipped and motivated can serve as excellent adjuncts to existing services such as student counseling, advising as well as to enhance the various services offered by the University. The setting up and maintenance of peer helping programs require high levels of commitment from professionals who are willing to invest time and effort in building relationships and expertise amongst students. In order for these programs to succeed, there is a need for strong visionary leadership from the sponsoring department as well as good partnerships and support from the academic faculty and administration.

There is much scope for peer helping programs to be developed amongst tertiary education institutes across the Asia-Pacific region. It is our hope that this paper positively adds to the growing literature on peer helping as well as acting as a catalyst for our counterparts in adopting this approach as a starting point for the growth and development of their own student services.

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