

# Notes on the Series

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The previous two volumes in this series have focused on instruction in the first-year seminar, with volume II outlining faculty training and development and volume III describing teaching strategies. Here, Jennifer Latino and Michelle Ashcraft continue this exploration by discussing the role of peers in seminar instruction. At the University of South Carolina—the birthplace of the modern first-year seminar—peer leaders have been a part of the instructional team for University 101 since 1993, and in recent years, every section of the course has had either an undergraduate or graduate student serving as a co-instructor. Yet, the use of undergraduate students in the instruction of first-year seminars nationally remains low, ranging from about 5% (Padgett & Keup, 2011) to about 25% (Barefoot, 2002). The purpose of this volume is, therefore, two-fold: (a) to help build a case for the value of using peers in the first-year seminar and (b) to provide insight on how to do so effectively.

Research on peer-to-peer mentoring suggests a number of positive academic and social outcomes for the students served. For example, Supplemental Instruction and other peer-led instructional models (e.g., Lewis & Lewis, 2005; Stone & Jacobs, 2008) have been linked to improved content mastery, higher course grades, and fewer course withdrawals. In other studies, peer interactions have correlated with increased retention (Switzer & Thomas, 1998) and academic success (Kim, 2009; Smith & Zhang, 2010) for underrepresented student populations. Additional positive outcomes for first-year students having peer mentoring experiences include increased engagement (Black & Voelker, 2008), satisfaction (Rose, 2003; Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003; Wasburn, 2008), sense of support (Reid, 2008; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Yazedjian, Purswell, Toews, & Sevin, 2007), and improved academic skills (Landrum & Nelson, 2002). Colvin and Ashman (2010) found that students in a first-year seminar valued peer mentors for assisting them with course work, connecting them to the institution, helping them get involved on campus, and providing individual attention.

Yet, peer education experiences also facilitate important academic, social, and personal outcomes for the students who serve as mentors, including factual knowledge, helping others, friendships, personal growth, positive regard for the instructor, skills, and decision making (Badura, Miller, Johnson, Stewart, & Bartolomei, 2003). Students participating in a 2009 study noted improvements in interpersonal communication, organization, time management, presentation skills, understanding of diverse others, written communication, and academic skills as a result of peer leader experiences (National Resource Center, 2009). There is also evidence that serving as a peer leader may enhance institutional engagement, as students in this study reported more meaningful interactions with faculty, staff, and other students and a greater sense of belonging at the institution. In a more recent study (Colvin & Ashman, 2010), first-year seminar peer leaders identified “being able to support students, reapply[ing] concepts in their own lives, and developing connections themselves” as benefits of their experiences (p. 127).

Thus, the research on student success programs would seem to provide ample evidence that peer education benefits not only the students served but also the students offering academic and social support. Moreover, including peers as part of the first-year seminar instructional team would seem to increase the likelihood these courses would achieve their most frequently reported objectives: (a) developing academic skills, (b) creating a connection with the institution, and (c) providing an orientation to campus resources and service (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

As the evidence surrounding the benefits of peer education grows, we would hope to find peers as fixtures in first-year seminars at colleges and universities across the country. For program directors who are ready to make this transition, Latino and Ashcraft offer guidance in defining the roles peers can play in the course and in recruiting and selecting a strong group of student leaders. They also describe strategies for training and providing ongoing support to peers, paying particular attention to helping peers build effective relationships with their co-instructors.

While the research on peer education is compelling, it is nonetheless limited. There is still much we need to know about the outcomes students and their peer leaders experience and about which aspects of the experience may contribute to those outcomes. In this regard, well-designed program assessment and evaluation are essential for informing institutional-level practice and improving our understanding of peer mentoring. To this end, the

authors conclude the volume with what can best be described as a 360-degree examination of the impact of peer instructors on the first-year seminar. This discussion offers a useful framework for creating an assessment plan for the peer instructor component of a first-year seminar.

We hope this volume offers readers both the rationale for designing an instructional model for the first-year seminar that includes undergraduate students and the tools to create or refine such a model. As you consider the strategies described here and examine them in light of your own practice, we invite your feedback on this work.

Tracy L. Skipper  
Series Editor  
National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and  
Students in Transition  
University of South Carolina