HELPING DISCONNECTED STUDENTS FIND THEIR NICHE: IMPLEMENTING A PEER AMBASSADOR PROGRAM ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

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Brief Overview

The Peer Ambassador Program was designed to help disconnected students heighten their involvement in the campus community. Generally, this program serves as a complement to students’ regular counseling.

The Peer Ambassador meets individually with students in the Counseling Center after receiving a referral from a staff counselor.

The Peer Ambassador Program not only serves Counseling Center clients; it also provides a valuable internship opportunity to undergraduate psychology students.

Role of the Peer Ambassador

The Peer Ambassador’s role is NOT that of a counselor or therapist. The Peer Ambassador’s role IS to help students find their niche on campus, get involved with activities and organizations in line with their interests, build relationships, and develop community.
Program Goals

For students utilizing the Peer Ambassador service:

Promote students’ retention, academic success, and psychological wellbeing through:

- acquainting students with university resources and opportunities for engagement;
- assisting students in identifying rewarding ways of pursuing their interests; and
- helping students cultivate meaningful relationships with others (e.g., friends, mentors, role models)

For students interning as the Peer Ambassador:

Strengthen students’ interpersonal skills, making them more adept communicators in professional contexts.

Afford student interns with experience as a paraprofessional.

Educate students about services, policies, procedures and good practices of an APA accredited University Counseling Center.

Help students gain a sense of the working environment within a Counseling Center.

Assist students in developing a greater affinity with the University, as they actively engage with campus offerings (student organizations, programs, offices, student leaders, faculty and administrators).

Prepare students for practica in graduate school AND help students be competitive during the application process.
Responsibilities of the Position

Peer Ambassadors should be prepared to devote approximately 6 to 10 hours each week to fulfilling their Peer Ambassador responsibilities.

These responsibilities include:

- meeting with students individually to: familiarize them with the University’s resources, identify potential barriers to students’ developing community, and encourage their authentic self-expression.

- drafting individualized “Action Plans” for each student, providing a variety of recommended resources (people, organizations, offices, etc.) and contact information.

- maintaining appropriate student confidentiality, adhering to HIPAA, ethics, confidentiality regulations, and Counseling Center policies.

- networking with campus offices and organizations to better understand the opportunities for students to get involved at BGSU.

- meeting weekly with internship site supervisor to review your activities, to discuss concerns, to role play potential student contact scenarios, and to consult when difficult situations have arisen.

- continuing to update the “Peer Ambassador Guide.” This guide outlines Peer Ambassador procedures and cites resources across campus.
assist in interviewing applicants for future Peer Ambassador positions.

- helping facilitate orientation and training sessions with future Peer Ambassadors.

Program Evolution - Timeline

Spring 2012:

- Following discussion with key Counseling Center staff, David drafted an initial proposal for the Peer Ambassador internship position.

Summer 2012:

- The Peer Ambassador (David) and his Counseling Center supervisor revised this initial proposal, communicating via e-mail throughout the summer.

Fall 2012:

- The proposal for the Peer Ambassador position was finalized and approved by Counseling Center staff.

- Working with his supervisor, David developed necessary documentation for implementation of the Peer Ambassador service, which was approved by the Counseling Center Director.

Documents included:

- Peer Ambassador FAQ document for Counseling Center Staff document which describes the Peer
Ambassador's role and outlines procedures for referring students

- **Peer Ambassador Informed Consent Form** which students read and sign before agreeing to meet with the Peer Ambassador

- **Peer Ambassador Referral Form** which the counselor and student fill out together to provide the Peer Ambassador with advance information about the referred student’s needs, interests, and concerns

- **Student Contact Documentation Form** which is completed by David following his contacts with students so that referring counselors can be informed about what was discussed

  - Peer Ambassador (David) began meeting with students and delivering presentations about his service to Counseling Center staff.

**Spring 2013:**

- David is continuing to meet with students.

- Efforts were initiated to share this new program model with other universities.

- David developed a Peer Ambassador Application Form, selection process and training procedures for future students seeking to become a Peer Ambassador.

- Applications were widely disseminated.
Applicants shall be screened and finalists interviewed for the Fall 2013 Peer Ambassador position.

The candidate selected will begin undergoing orientation to prepare for the Fall internship.

Future Directions

The Peer Ambassador Service has been received positively by the Counseling Center staff and students who have utilized the service.

The next steps are to:

- Finish developing a “Peer Ambassador Guide” that addresses procedural matters relevant to the position and cites campus resources, documenting the “culture” of various student groups, organizations and communities.

- Create evaluative measures to assess student connectedness to campus, value added by specific campus offerings and student satisfaction with their meeting with the Peer Ambassador.

- Collaborate with the BGSU Office of Campus Activities to familiarize peer ambassadors with student organizations, programs and involvement opportunities.

- Share this program model with others:
  - Present at conferences (i.e. the Depression on College Campuses Conference, the Psychology Department Undergraduate Research and Internship Symposium, etc.).
  - Publish an article about the Peer Ambassador Program in a professional journal.