



Towards Best Practices in Mental Health Peer Programming: Highlights from this Year's Conference



WELLNESS • RECOVERY • RESILIENCE

Negar Shekarabi, Psy.D. & Rodolfo Victoria, Ph.D.
University of California, Irvine – Counseling Center

Introduction

Peer programs have proven to be an essential service provided by many university and college campuses. Some estimates indicate that more than 75% of all higher education institutions in the U.S. utilize some form of undergraduate peer assistance program (Newton & Ender, 2010). Peer programs are attractive to campuses and their administrators not only because they are economical but because they have been shown to be an effective intervention for a number of academic and mental health concerns (e.g., retention rates, quality of life, etc.) For instance, the literature has shown that when university students choose to disclose their suicidal ideation, 66% of the time they disclose these thoughts to a peer (e.g., roommate, friend, partner; Drum, 2009). Given the tremendous impact that these programs, and the students and staff that comprise them, have on the well-being of the university community greater effort is needed to clarify the components that contribute to the success of these programs.

The *Towards Best Practices in Mental Health Peer Programming* conference was conceived in the spirit of identifying promising practices in mental health peer programming. With support from the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) grant, organizers developed a day-long program that united peer programs from across the state. The points of emphasis for this conference included the following:

- 1) To highlight those mental health peer programs that have been shown to be effective in addressing mental health concerns
- 2) To provide a networking opportunity for peer students and staff from across the three university systems in California (UC, CalState, & Community College) to discuss strategies in developing, implementing, and maintaining peer programs on a university/college campus
- 3) Utilize the collective wisdom of attendees to brainstorm ideas of how to empirically measure and capture the impact of mental health peer programs, and...
- 4) To “give back” to the students and staff of these programs by acknowledging their contributions and, by consequence, reinvigorating their passion & commitment to the services they provide.

Highlights

Keynote Speaker

Senior Program Manager for Student-Led Initiatives at Active Minds, Inc., **Maggie Bertram** served as the keynote speaker for the conference and shared her own personal struggles with an eating disorder and how peer programs were an integral part in her recovery.

Highlights (continued)

Panel Sessions

Two panel sessions were held for attendees:

- a) The morning panel focused on administrative, funding, supervisory, and other challenges involved in developing and implementing a mental health peer program on a higher education campus.
- b) The afternoon session focused on “giving back” to student attendees by having former peers discuss career development options.

Programs & Poster Presentation Highlights

Presentations focused on a number of mental health topics including suicide prevention, eating disorders, interpersonal relationships, and depression & anxiety issues to name a few.

Coaches Corner (UC Irvine COACH Program)

See our table for a demonstration of this program.

This weekly YouTube series is aimed at college students and provides tips about getting through the stresses of school. This presentation also helped showcase how social media can help expand peer mentoring outreach efforts. By expanding our reach via social media marketing, we are effectively reaching populations that we couldn't before.

Highlights (continued)

Biofeedback Demonstration (UC Riverside Counseling Center)

UCR Counseling Center Biofeedback technicians train clients in multiple relaxation and imagery techniques, including: gaining valuable work experience in a clinical setting, explaining the information gathered by biofeedback sensors, and learning and utilizing basic counseling skills to build a collaborative working relationship with each client.

Programmatic Best Practices in Depression, Eating Disorders, and Sexual Assault Prevention (CSUN Peer-to-peer Education Wellness Program)

Best Practices in the areas of: Depression, Suicide Awareness and Prevention (“Beat the Blues Week”), Eating Disorder Awareness and Prevention (“Eating Disorder Awareness Week”), and Sexual Assault and Sexual Violence Awareness and prevention (“S.A.A.F.E. Week”). Each program hosts a week-long series of events yearly.

Recognize & Refer: Engaging the UCSB Greek Community in Active Bystander Training (UCSB Mental Health Peer Program)

Assessed the impact of “Recognize and Refer,” a 90-minute, interactive, peer-facilitated workshop about decreasing stigma and increasing potential utilization of mental health services. The project targets the UCSB Greek community and gauges their attitudes towards mental health and help-seeking behaviors.



Evaluation Data

Evaluation data was gathered at the conclusion of the conference to gauge the effectiveness of this program. Each item was scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). A response rate of 64.7% was obtained and highlighted the following themes:

- 1) Overwhelmingly, attendees endorsed an evaluation item that indicated they obtained valuable information and skills that they could apply to their home campuses from ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.55$).
- 2) Participants made it be known in their responses that a regional conference for exchanging ideas across campuses (like the current conference) is valuable and important ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 0.32$).
- 3) Qualitative examples include:
 - “Love it! Was so rewarding, validating, and inspiring. Thank you for rekindling my passion for my peer program, I definitely needed it!”
 - “This conference was a valuable resource and I will take what I learned back to my school. Thank you!”

Future Directions

- 1) There is a need to measure the long-term impact of conferences such as this one. While the above data indicates an affective change in attendees, does this passion ultimately lead to observable/behavioral changes?
- 2) It is notable that Cal State and CCC campuses were underrepresented at this conference. How can we continue to collaborate & support these campuses in their efforts to develop peer programs?

References

- Newton, F. B., & Ender, S. C. (2010). *Students Helping Students: A guide for peer educators on college campuses* (2nd edition).
- Drum D., Brownson C., Denmark A., & Smith S. (2009). New data on the nature of suicidal crises in college students: Shifting the paradigm. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 40(3), 213-222.

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