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2. Peer Education Training: The Success of a Train-the-Trainer Framework

3. Practice paper

4. Many programs utilize peers educators and facilitators as part of the framework for leadership development. The success of such programs involves purposeful selection, training, and providing continual support. This paper will discuss a train-the-trainer model sharing strategies and ideas for application in similar programs for training peer educators.

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7. Yes, please consider this for a poster or roundtable in the event it is not accepted.

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PEER EDUCATION TRAINING: THE SUCCESS OF A TRAIN-THE-TRAIN FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Students participate in the learning process of leadership education as they move from peripheral observers to active participants in the process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Many leaders in student and academic affairs on college campuses have provided that student learning takes place in cocurricular and extracurricular settings through interaction with peers, therefore providing a positive leadership model through peer leaders (Hunter, 2004). Additionally, peer educators and leaders learn the subject matter on a deeper level, while gaining transferable skills in partnerships, cooperation, listening, and communication (Topping, 2005).

With college students utilized as peer leaders and educators, there is a need for these students to partake in training to further enhance their roles as peers and leaders. The process of peer leader training involves selecting, training, and providing continual support. The training process brings challenges and educational opportunities for the development of peer leaders. This paper will discuss a peer leader train-the-trainer model sharing strategies and ideas for application in similar programs for training peer leaders. The purpose of this practice paper is to examine how training for peer leaders can best utilize the train-the-trainer model in an applied approach for peer facilitation.

Objectives of this program are based in knowledge, skills, and personal integration (Ender & Newton, 2000):

1. Identify knowledge components for agricultural-based and facilitation topics.
2. Practice skills, methods, and techniques based in facilitation and teaching for all identified audiences.
3. Integrate knowledge and skills with practice sessions including feedback and coaching.
4. Create a community of trust and communication.

This paper will provide literature in peer education including the process and reflection model, describe the details and framework of the current program, provide results from the current training program, as well as implications and conclusions for further practice.

Background

Peer programs bring a positive impact on feelings of self-worth and the development of interpersonal skills (Ender & Newton, 2000; Hunter, 2004). Even more, the peer leader's personal growth is seen through increased knowledge and personal attributes, the ability to resolve complex issues, an enhanced sense of emotional well-being, and being able to find a personal sense of contribution (Ender & Newton, 2000). Peer leader programs aim to build upon an individual's strengths while mobilizing them to become active participants in the learning process (Topping, 2005).

This active learning process begins with a training program for peer educators and leaders. One of the foundational aspects to training peer leaders is to first determine the level of their own competence in leading. From there, the connection can be made between the new knowledge and skills in order to provide the best possible training experience (Ender & Newton, 2000). Hunter (2004) sets forth in a guideline for successful training for peer leaders as a minimum of 10 and up to 25 hours or more spent in training.

As introduced previously in the objectives, a peer educator training includes three critical areas: knowledge, skills, and personal integration (Ender & Newton, 2000). These three pieces can be illustrated further through the Process and Reflection Model by Borton (1970) which stems from the questions of, “What?”, “So what?”, and “Now what?”. Borton (1970) asserts this process is intentional and can be used to generate feedback to help determine how effectively a process is functioning. Based in the functions of sensing, transforming, and acting, this theoretical model provides an organized way of increasing awareness, evaluating intention, and experimenting with new behavior (Borton, 1970). The corresponding question of, “What?”, helps sense the differences between response to the actual effect and the intended effect in the processing and reflection process. This piece is considered the descriptive and self-awareness aspect of the model. The second question, “So What?”, transforms the information into relevant patterns of meaning for analysis and evaluation of the experience. Finally, deciding how to act on the best alternative and reapply information into other situations represents the synthesis piece or the “Now What?” of the model. By applying the processing model, training is presented in a way for peer educators to experience their own reflection while gaining new knowledge and applying it to their relevant experiences. This straightforward approach can be relevant to those at a variety of knowledge and skill levels.

Training for peer educators and leaders should be an active and engaging process for learning. In addition, special attention must be paid in order to establish and provide a supportive community. Peer leaders should be made self-aware and prepared for coaching and feedback. Finally, both trainers and peer leaders should note the time, practice, and feedback that is necessary for all to constantly engage in this process (Ender & Newton, 2000). Continual support is crucial, as well. Whether it is through reoccurring training, communication or administrative support, peer leaders need adequate support to carry out their goals (Hunter, 2004).

Description of the practice

The program used as the model for this practice paper is the National Collegiate Agricultural Ambassador program with the National FFA Organization. Created as an educational program for collegiate students in agriculture, the intent is for these students to serve as peer educators and leaders. Their role is to create awareness and advocacy for the agricultural industry through the facilitation of educational workshops and seminars. The terms ambassador, peer educator, and peer leader are used interchangeably as descriptors of the participants in the training process.

Selection and pre-training exercises

The selection of new ambassadors for this peer education program includes a two-part application process where applicants submit packets to the program manager. The first phase of the selection process includes the submission of an applicant's resume, written essay responses, and a video demonstrating his or her presentation and facilitation abilities. The program staff and selection committee review the applications and videos where the first round of the selection is made. The selected applicants advancing to the second phase of the process participate in a phone interview. Questions for the interview are behavioral-based, asking about specific traits and experiences. From this second round of interviews, the final candidates are selected to become ambassadors.

Once the selection has been made, ambassadors are asked to begin reviewing and attending to issues and topic areas in agriculture prior to training. Ambassadors are also required to review previous educational presentations as part of the new knowledge and content they will need as peer educators. The expectation is that they each review and bring an understanding of one of the previous educational presentations with them to training. With a comprehensive understanding of at least one presentation, ambassadors can immediately begin applying various facilitation and presentation techniques at training.

Peer education training

The design for the initial training is set in a week-long format. The program manager functions as the trainer for the peer education training. Additional training support is provided by industry professionals and returning ambassadors with peer education experience from the previous year. Time is devoted each day of the training to gain knowledge and bring content for a different audience and topic area. Industry professionals bring expertise and knowledge in agricultural topics, while the program manager and returning ambassadors provide the models for facilitation and peer education experience. Within the process of training, the reflective model is used as the trainers build upon the participants' foundational knowledge of the agricultural industry and facilitation techniques. Often the trainer disseminates information through expert sessions bringing knowledge and insight of industry through professionals working in the field and by modeling facilitation practices. By providing this new content ambassadors gain a comprehensive understanding of a variety of current agricultural issues and relevant subject areas as well as how to best communicate and share the message effectively. As the ambassadors progress through the training program, they move into their role as peer educators.

In addition to the contextual knowledge, the peer educators gain awareness and practice skills for the facilitation of different types and formats of audiences. There are nine identified audiences in which the peer educators are asked to present. These are: elementary students, middle school students, high school students in both agricultural and non-agricultural settings, college students in both agricultural and non-agricultural settings, agricultural organizations, civic and community organizations, and audiences within a fair or exhibition.

Recognizing the differences and needs within each type of audience is a crucial component of the training. Awareness and discussion is based upon different learning styles and approaches appropriate for each audience as well as basics for delivery of any presentation. The trainer models appropriate activities, processing questions and reflection, effective directions, and economy of language as basic skills needed for facilitation.

The train-the-trainer format is modeled the trainer, but also through experienced peer educators as returning ambassadors. These returning peer leaders are asked to facilitate and present a model lesson as a way to help the new ambassadors gain understanding of a typical presentation. A step-by-step approach is taken as the presentation is discussed from a teaching and training perspective dissecting it into the specific components.

The culminating experience in the final stages of training is through a “stand and deliver” process for each peer educator. Every ambassador delivers a presentation to their peers and fellow ambassadors, industry professionals, and outside students. This practice experience allows students to combine all elements of the training while receiving feedback and coaching on their presentation. This process assures the trainer and program manager that each ambassador has had the proper preparation in order to carry out his or her role as a peer educator.

Post-training support

Beyond the completion of training, extensive work is required from ambassadors upon return to their respective universities and campuses. The most important aspect of the program post-training lies in the communication network of the program manager and the peer educators themselves. Communication is vital to the success of the ambassadors and the educational programs they deliver. Throughout the year, ambassadors are expected to share with their fellow peer educators any presentations they create, as well as any valuable resources, information, activities, or content they acquire. Continual communication with the program manager is also required of each ambassador as a way to make sure they are accomplishing their objectives and visits for the program while maintaining the process of feedback and coaching. The program manager contacts each ambassador on a monthly basis to monitor their personal and program goals for the year.

An additional level of support is provided as the program manager conducts onsite visits to individual ambassadors. These visits assist the ambassador in their role as a peer educator as they are able to take advantage of extensive one-on-one coaching sessions to further develop their presentation skills. Fellow peer educators and ambassadors provide a significant support as a part of the program, too. Through connections built during the training, these relationships continue to develop as peers serve as leaders and a great sense of support for one another.

Results to date

The National Collegiate Agricultural Ambassador program began in 2005 with 10 ambassadors selected in the first year. Since then, over 81 ambassadors have served the program, representing 29 different states. These peer educators have given over 1,500 presentations to audiences over 72,000. Reaching 35 states and two countries, the impact of the

program has been extensive. Due to the relationships and sponsorship of industry partners, the ambassadors have benefited from mentorship, career opportunities and other resources.

As the program has evolved, the program management has sought to improve the process and experience for a sustainable program. In the beginning of the program, training was limited to one week of face-to-face training. Since then, an additional training has been implemented during their year of service. At the mid-point of the ambassador's experience, they are brought back together with the entire group to further their knowledge, skills, and practice. This second training picks up with supplementary content and knowledge on agricultural issues with an enhanced focus on practice and delivery. With months of experience to their benefit, peer educators are asked to create their own individual presentations on topics of their choosing. This process helps transform what they learned in the previous training and through their experiences and evaluate their progress and growth. The presentations are critiqued through coaching from the audience, their fellow ambassadors, and the program manager on both content and delivery.

Recommendations/Implications

With five years of experience and lessons learned from this program, there are several implications and recommendations to be shared. The framework for this program for college students as peer educators can be applied to other groups with an educational purpose. Beginning with a purposeful selection of peer educators and clear objectives, the train-the-trainer model can be employed in many settings.

First, the importance of face-time with the individual ambassadors and the group is necessary to build trust and community within relationships and the entire group. The program manager helps foster this sense of community in order to sustain support throughout the year. When individuals feel connected to the group and comfortable with the manager, they are more willing and able to share their experiences and ideas. One recent development in the program was to develop a weekly communication page as a way to engage in constant and concise communication while maintaining a weekly connection to the program manager and the group.

Continual communication in a variety of formats is needed to share necessary information and resources while maintaining the expectations set forth in the beginning. Peer educators are required to share the valuable information and resources they find and use within their own presentations and work. Students are given a resource notebook at the beginning of the year with the intention for them to add to their own and share information with others creating an inclusive resource.

Coaching is an underlying foundation of the development of each peer educator in the program. Students must be open to receiving feedback and make a commitment to improving their skills in facilitation. As they are exposed to the coaching process, the program manager as the coach helps them to see and understand the value and importance of constructive feedback and the need for being open and willing to receive such information. In addition, students are also asked to provide feedback to others to help their fellow peer educators grow and develop.

An arsenal project was developed through an identified need for documentation of the process and how the program is organized. This project provides a tangible resource for ambassadors to utilize throughout their year of the program. This resource contains model presentations, facilitation tools, and consistent reinforcement of the training principles. As an additional support and communication piece, the arsenal meets different needs of ambassadors needing different levels of support. Other groups featuring peer education frameworks may find it worthwhile to create a sustainable resource, such as an arsenal, to bring continuity to their programs.

Capitalizing on the experience of returning ambassadors as peer educators is beneficial. Often they can speak to real experiences that reinforce components of the training or the need for support and communication. Returning ambassadors not only serve as a vital resource to the ambassador group during the initial training, but also serving as a resource and sounding board for the new ambassadors as they begin their year. After ambassadors serve one year in the capacity of a peer educator, they are given the opportunity to return to the program. They undergo a different selection process that focuses on their commitment to sustaining the program and serving as a leader for the new ambassadors.

The final implication for this program is to stress the importance of peer educators as leaders. Not only do these peer educators learn the subject matter on a deeper level, but they are also gaining transferable leadership skills in helping, cooperation, listening and communication (Topping, 2005). With these skills also comes personal and social development, which can contribute to a sense of cohesive community (Topping, 2005). It is the hope of the program that these peer educators take the knowledge and skills they have gained from the program and implement them into their university and local communities.

Conclusion

The impact of this program on college students as peer educators has been substantial. These students have gained knowledge in their areas of study, while also having the distinct opportunity to practice their communication skills through facilitation and education. This program is distinctive in its management of students; selecting only the top collegiate students to represent the national organization and the agricultural industry. Such an experience forces students to be effective in their presentation skills, properly manage their time, stay up to date on a variety of topics, and remain in communication with fellow peer leaders. This program is unique with its design and representation of diverse students from across the nation.

Leadership through education and practice provides an active and experiential model for college students to gain experience working with others and communicating in a professional context. This applied practice is what continues to allow students to be successful within the program, their coursework, and their future careers. It is a foundational goal of the program to provide an educational experience and program that allows students to grow and develop necessary and transferable skills for success.

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