

Health Sciences (HSS) Buddy Program: Evaluation of its First Year

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Résumé :

(traduction)

Durant l'année scolaire 2011-2012, le projet pilote du programme de parrainage en sciences de la santé a été mis en œuvre au sein de l'École interdisciplinaire des sciences de la santé de l'Université d'Ottawa. Destiné à répondre à la hausse du niveau d'anxiété des étudiants, le programme a associé étudiants de première année et groupes d'étudiants plus âgés afin de promouvoir leurs occasions d'échange. La perception des participants de ce programme se traduit par des termes universellement positifs quant au plaisir qu'il procure, à son utilité et à sa pertinence pour les besoins des étudiants. Au nombre des améliorations proposées figurent le recrutement de plus de participants masculins, la liaison avec les administrateurs scolaires pour éviter les conflits d'horaire, faire débiter le programme plus tôt dans l'année scolaire, et la formation de groupes sociaux avec moins d'étudiants. Dans l'ensemble, l'approche adoptée par le programme de parrainage est fort bien acceptée et on souhaite la continuation de son développement.

Mots-clés :

Mentorat, étudiant universitaire, projet pilote, dépression, soutien par les pairs, stress scolaire, milieu académique, éducation

Abstract:

In the 2011-2012 academic year, the HSS Buddy Program pilot project was implemented in the Interdisciplinary School of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. Intended to address rising student anxiety levels, the program teamed freshmen (first year) students with groups of older students to promote more instances of casual social interaction. Participants' perceptions of the program were universally positive in terms of how enjoyable it was, its usefulness, and its relevance to student needs. Suggested improvements include recruiting of more male participants, liaising with school administrators to help avoid scheduling conflicts, starting the program earlier in the academic year, and forming social groups with fewer students. Overall, the approach undertaken by the Buddy Program was seen to be a valuable one worthy of continuation and growth.

Keywords:

Mentorship, university students, pilot study, depression, peer support, school stress, academia, education

Introduction

According to Statistics Canada’s 2012 Mental Health Survey, Health At A Glance, young people aged 15 to 24 years are at the greatest risk for mental illness. Additionally, suicide is the second leading cause of death among this age group (Statistics Canada, 2012). These statistics coincide with the typical life events of this demographic; they are likely to be moving away from home for the first time, pursuing post-secondary education, being evaluated by stricter academic standards, and navigating new and demanding social circles. The result is a number of factors that contribute to this population’s unique vulnerability to mental and social anxiety.

To help address concerns about such anxieties, many of which may lead to mental illness, the bilingual (English/French) Health Sciences (HSS) Buddy Program pilot project was launched by the Interdisciplinary School of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa in the 2011-2012 academic year. This peer-based social support program, which has since continued to operate, was intended to leverage student social contact to help minimize anxieties experienced by incoming freshmen students. A comparable mentorship program with similar objectives has shown benefits for youth, especially in reducing risk-taking behaviour and increasing confidence in school performance (Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

The HSS Buddy Program connected groups of freshman students with ‘Buddies’, who were upper year students. The objective of the buddy was to encourage group social activities in a supervised setting and subsequently move to unsupervised settings. At the beginning of the program, the ‘Buddies’ partook in a training session that informed them of the program’s objectives and their role and responsibilities regarding their designated group of students. The five final groups consisted of students from several years (one through four) and ranged from four to six members. As the purpose of the initiative was focused on the social aspect of university life, it was not intended to provide academic mentoring or tutoring. With this pilot study, we sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the program by soliciting the perceptions of its participants.

Methods

At the end of the 2011-2012 academic year, the program’s participants were emailed a request to complete an online

questionnaire, which was hosted on the website SurveyMonkey.com. The questionnaire was anonymous and consisted of 33 questions, both multiple choice and open-ended, requiring approximately 10 minutes to complete. Respondents were asked about their perceptions of the program’s logistics, whether it was enjoyable, and its usefulness. The questionnaire's three open-ended questions are shown in Table 1, with question #9 only given to

Table 1 Open-ended questions asked of Buddy Program participants.

Question	Question
9	Do you have any suggestions for improving the training component of the Buddy program? (<i>for Buddy mentors only</i>)
25	What was the biggest barrier preventing more frequent meetings?
31	We’d really appreciate any comments or criticisms you might have for us.

the upper year 'Buddies'.

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using SurveyMonkey’s internal statistical analysis tool, with frequencies of responses reported. The open-ended questions were interpreted contextually using summative analysis, which involved an assessment of how frequently recurring responses occurred.

The project was funded by a student experience grant from the University’s Faculty of Health Sciences. Approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Boards of the University of Ottawa.

Results

The program's inaugural year attracted 20 first-year students (5 males and 15 females) and 52 upper year Buddies (9 males and 43 females). The survey response rate was poor considering the small sample frame, with 24 Buddies (46%) and 8 first year students (40%) responding. Among all respondents, 89% were female and 89% were Anglo-phone.

More than half of the Buddies (52%) were 2nd year students, while 45% had been involved in some sort of prior peer support or mentorship program.

A large number of freshmen (43%) learned about the program through the leaders of their on-campus residences, while email and in-class announcements each accounted for 30% of respondents' awareness. Although half joined along with a friend, only 38% described themselves as shy or introverted.

The majority of Buddies (85%) felt their involvement in the program was beneficial both to them personally and to the first year students in their assigned social group. Also noteworthy is that 100% of the Buddies would have preferred that if the program had been available when they had been freshmen. The majority of first year students (75%) found the program experience to be beneficial, while all respondents would recommend it to others.

All Buddy mentors found the training sessions to be appropriate, with 90% feeling that one day was sufficient for training. The least useful aspect of the training was the quality of the on-campus resources for mental illness identification and response, which were perceived to be poor. Despite this finding, 95% felt well prepared to take part in the program after the training session.

Interestingly, all but one of the freshmen reported that "making new friends" was the motivator for joining the program, with most (86%) desiring to make friends more among the upper year students than among their own cohort.

Most respondents (54%) reported that their social group met only once during the duration of the program, outside of the initial supervised gathering. A maximum of three meetings were had for the most active groups.

The results of the summative theme analysis of the open-ended questions are presented in Table 2, with Scheduling, Group Size, and Timing During the School Year being the topics most commonly touched upon.

From the open-ended responses, all respondents felt that the program had started too late, as it commenced approximately halfway through the academic year. Scheduling conflicts were also identified as a barrier to participation, as were the sizes of the social groups that were assigned. The latter observation is weakened by the finding that 61% of respondents felt that their group size was "just right," while only 32% felt it was "too big".

Discussion

All participants, both freshmen students and the Buddies, praised the HSS Buddy Program as being a rewarding experience. The program's intent was to help build social connections, which is known to promote a sense of belonging (Patton et al., 2006), which in turn may contribute to diminished stress and anxiety. It should be noted that while the program intentionally distanced itself from academic mentoring responsibilities, some groups were indeed observed to be engaging limitedly in activities relating to scholastic counseling. As academic mentoring services already exist on campus, the Buddy Program's participants did not report any dissatisfaction with the project's deliberate efforts to avoid pedagogical activities. Instead, the most common criticisms pertained to scheduling issues and group sizes, both of which might have resulted in a decreased frequency in group activity.

The short program duration and lateness of the program's launch were viewed negatively as well, and may have resulted in reducing the quality of the relationships formed. In similar youth mentoring programs, it has been shown that greater benefits are gained from programs that last a year or longer (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). This weakness was unavoidable in the program's inaugural year given the one-time administrative issues that delayed the launch of the program until well into the second semester.

Program participation was higher among females, perhaps reflecting the known gendered nature of help-seeking behaviours (Good, Dell, & Mintz, 1989). College males, on the other hand, may restrict emotionality, perhaps resulting in a decrease in psychological well-being, increased anxiety, and negative help-seeking attitudes (Blazina & Watkins,

Table 2 The frequency of recurring responses that occurred categorized by themes.

Question number	Scheduling	Group Size	Timing during the school year	Miscellaneous
9	3		1	2
25	12	1	9	2
31	1	1	14	5
TOTAL	16	2	24	9

1996). Given this risk, it is advisable that the program's organizers consider avenues for reducing this skewed gender representation and encouraging males to participate.

The positive impressions of the program are not surprising, as the literature indicates a clear benefit from support programs targeted to youth issues (DuBois & Neville, 1997). In addition, the more frequent the mentor and participant interaction, the greater the perceived benefit of the relationship (DuBois et al., 2002); similarly, the longer the duration of the relationship, the greater the perceived benefit (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Conversely, poorly designed and implemented programs may have a negative effect on participant well-being and anxiety levels (DuBois et al., 2002). Hence, improvements in the organization and conduct of the program are not only important to improve its impact, but to avoid negative impact.

Based upon our findings, we recommend the following improvements to the Buddy program: liaison with school administrators to better avoid scheduling conflicts with classes and exams; renewed focus on recruiting participants through improved program promotion, particularly male freshmen; an earlier start of the program in the academic year; and a reduction in the size of the social groups. With each incremental improvement, social networking initiatives such as this may help to assuage the broad trend of social anxiety among young adults.

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