

# The HSS Buddy Program: an in-depth evaluation of its achievements and shortcomings



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## Introduction

With the prevalence of school-related stress-induced suicide and mental illness in today's society among the young adult population, along with the challenging and often intimidating transition from high school to university, newly arrived first year students face many difficulties and stress. According to Statistics Canada's mental health survey (2012), young people (15 to 24 years) are at the greatest risk for mental illness. To address the rising concerns about mental health in the student population, the HSS Buddy Program was launched in the 2012 school year. This peer-based mentorship program, which ran for two years (as of 2014), was intended to provide social support and establish student networking as a means to avoid the potential negative outcomes. The Health Sciences (HSS) Buddy Program paired groups of first year students with "Buddies", who were students in their upper years, allowing for a platform apt for the communication of advice and positive interaction through activities and events. With the evaluation data collected from program participants, the data was analyzed to draw conclusions regarding the overall strength and benefit of the program.

## Objective

To examine whether the HSS Buddy Program was successful in achieving its intended goals, with consideration of the participants' (first year students and buddy mentors) experiences of the program.

## Methods

Succeeding the completion of each term of the program, a post-involvement follow-up online survey ("Monkey Survey"), distributed through email, was used to collect evaluation data from all participants. A separate survey was sent to the first-year students and the buddies, each containing questions specific to their individual role. The survey comprised of a total of 33 questions, most of which were multiple choice questions, but also included a couple of open-ended responses, as well as a concluding final comment section for additional remarks or criticisms. On average, the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The survey served as an appraisal tool of the program experience as well as an indicator of the program's participant demographic. Results from the surveys were compiled and examined through statistical analysis and contextual interpretation. Literature review was also conducted, providing perspective regarding the program's efficiency and acquired outcomes.

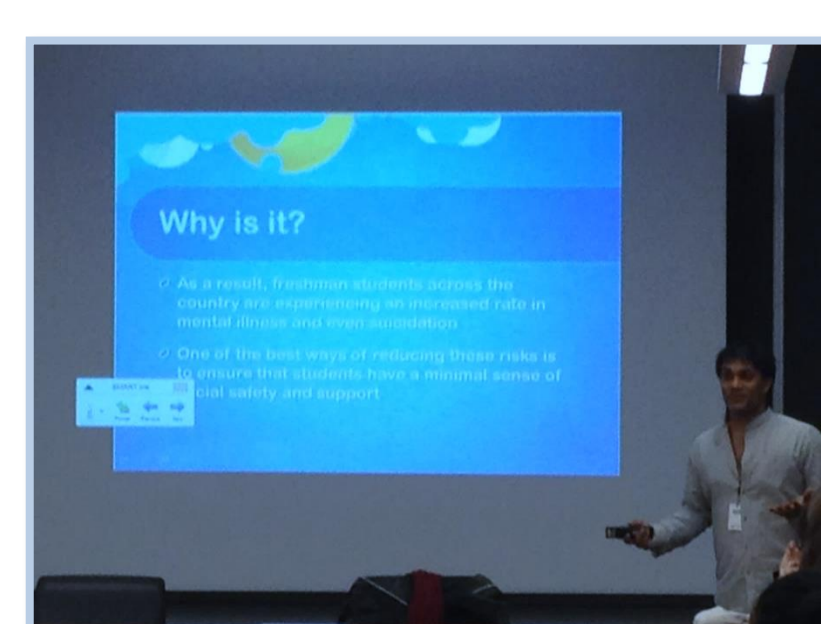
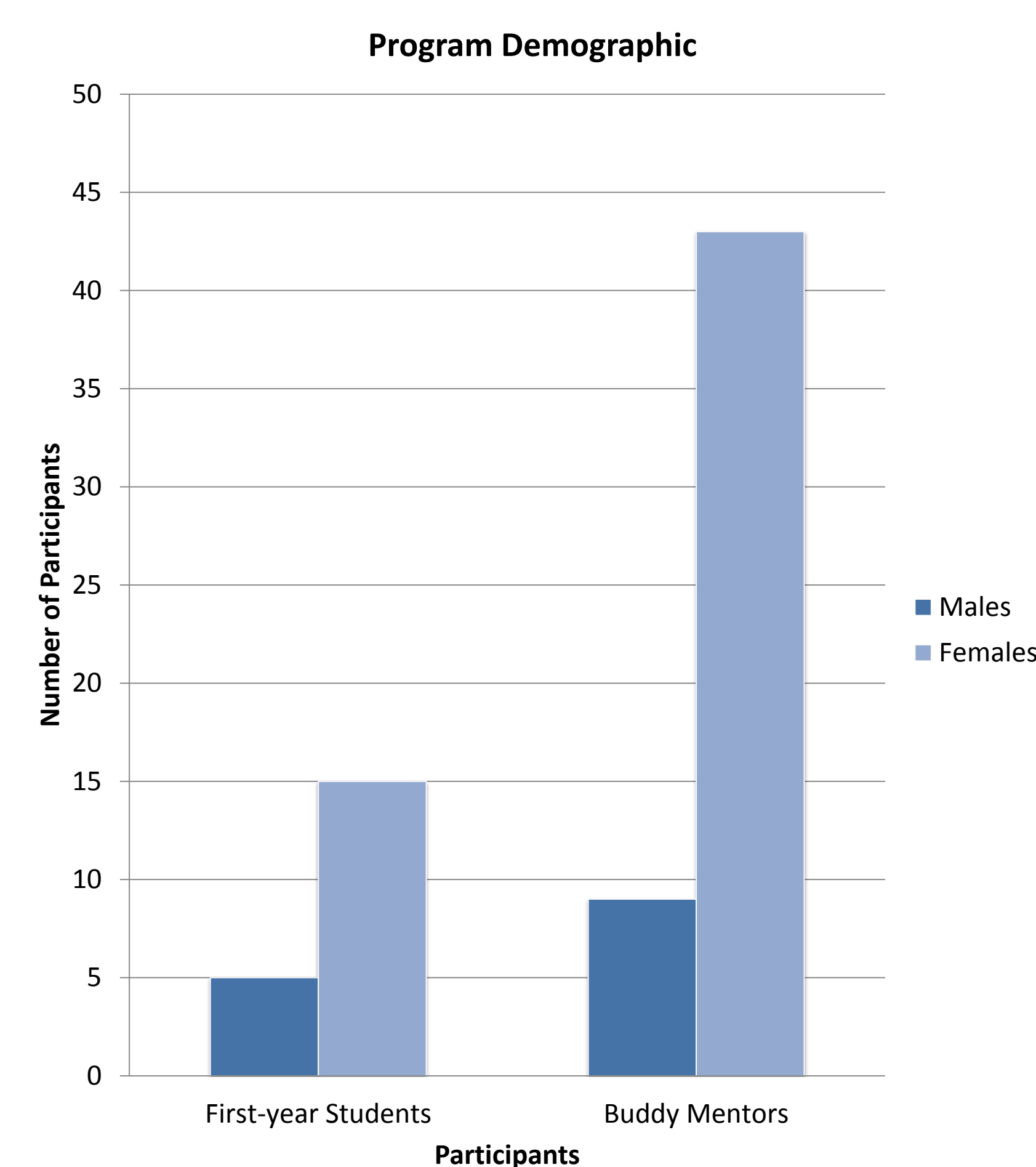


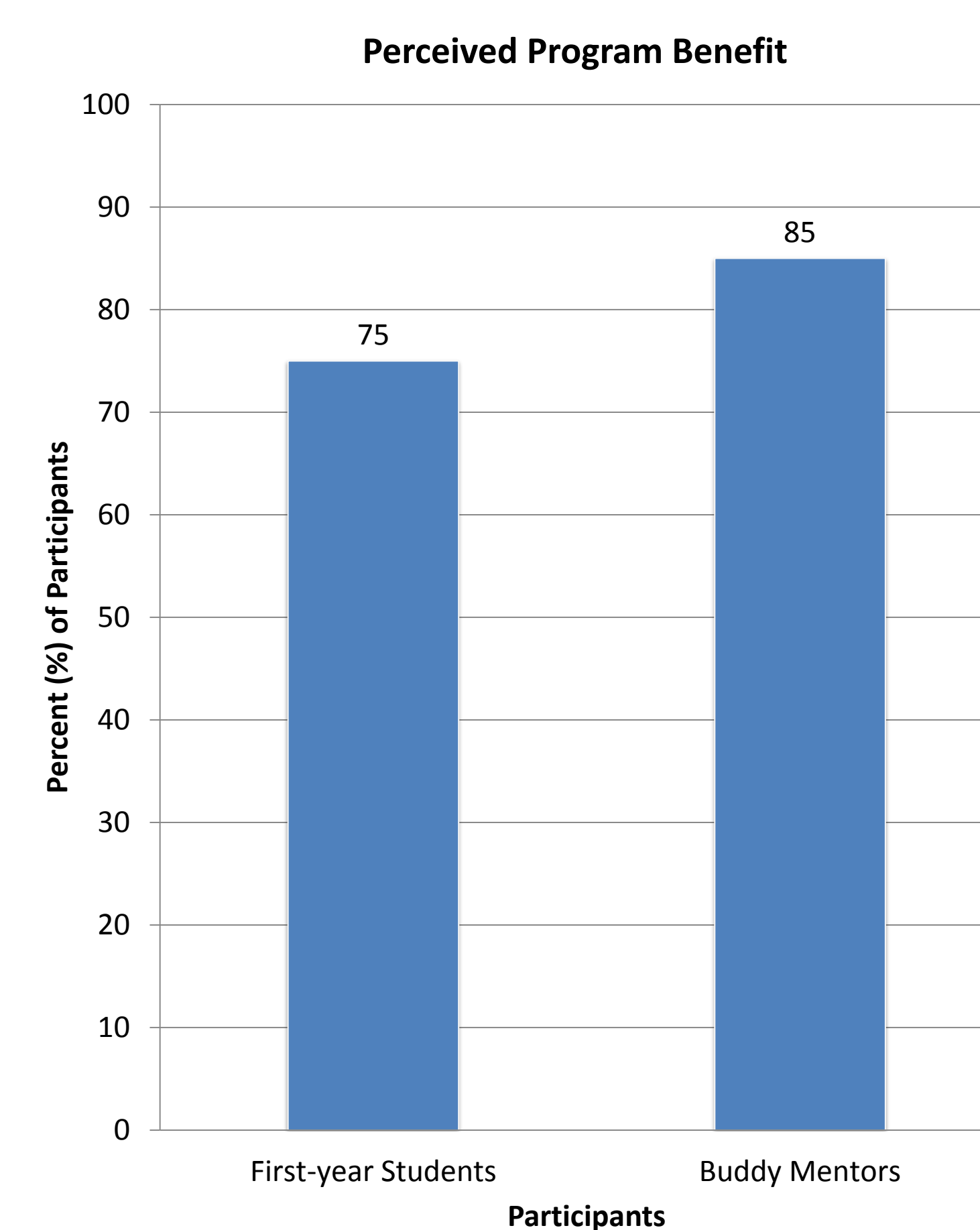
Figure 1 and 2. Buddy Training Session.

## Results

The number of survey participants was 24 buddies (75%) and 8 first year students (25%). Of all that were surveyed, 89% were females. The majority of buddies (85%) felt that their involvement in the program was beneficial to them personally and to the first year students in their group, and would have liked the program for themselves as first year students. All first year students reported that they joined the program to make new friends. The majority of first year students (75%) found the program experience to be beneficial and all would recommend it to others.



Graph 1. The gender composition of first-year students and buddy mentors that participated in the HSS Buddy Program (2012).



Graph 2. The perceived benefit of the HSS Buddy Program (2012) by first-year students and buddy mentors.

## Discussion

Virtually all participants, both first year students and the buddies, praised the HSS Buddy Program as being a great opportunity to enhance the first year experience, build social connections, and gain a sense of belonging - promoting a positive social school environment (Patton et. al, 2006). However, most participants critiqued the incompatible scheduling of activities, the program starting time (mid-year rather than first semester), and the large group sizes. Unexpectedly, the buddies on average found the program to be more beneficial than the first year students, which highlights the need to revise the program service delivery. Further, the small sample of survey respondents, as well as the underrepresentation of males in the program makes it difficult to draw valid inferences regarding program efficacy.

The results obtained are not surprising; the literature indicates a clear benefit (the level of benefit varies) from support programs intended to deal with youth issues (DuBois & Neville, 1997). It is also indicated that the greater the mentor and participant interaction, the greater the benefit (DuBois et. al, 2002). Research shows that the longer the relationship, and therefore the greater the influence and interaction, the greater the benefit (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). However, the literature also reveals that there is a notable potential for adverse effects from poorly designed and implemented programs (DuBois et. al, 2002); underlining the importance of a well developed and structured program. To ensure future success of the program, it needs to appeal to male first year students, ensure quality and quantity of scheduled activities, and increase the program exposure to the HSS student body so that it attracts more participants.

## Conclusions

The HSS Buddy Program proved to be a successful pilot program. The majority of the participants found it beneficial and looked forward at the prospect of future progress. As with every pilot project, a few aspects require revision, but on the whole, the experience was claimed worthwhile.

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Figure 3. Buddy Program training session on acceptable and appropriate behavioural conduct.



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