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# Validating Peer Education Through Assessment

As peer educators and advisors, you know that peer education has a positive impact because you see it everyday. You see yourself become more knowledgeable about health and safety issues and grow confident to speak out as a health advocate. You know when your educational or intervention efforts have challenged a student to think differently about his or her behavior and he or she begins to make healthy decisions. You hear stories of students whose lives were saved because their friends attended one of your programs and knew what to do in a high-risk situation. Through experience, you know that peer education works.

What you know and experience, however, may not be enough when campus administrators and funders ask, "Why should we fund your peer education program?" What they are asking you to do is to quantify what you know from experience so that you can show concrete evidence that your peer education programs have impact. You can validate your peer education programs by gathering information that helps to better assess your efforts and provides evidence for those in doubt.

## What is Assessment?

Assessment is simply collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information to better understand the effectiveness of your peer education program efforts. For example, if one of the objectives of your peer education program is to reduce high-risk behaviors among students, you may want to collect information from your peer educators on how often they have intervened with a friend or other students who exhibited a high-risk behavior. By asking your peer educators to record their activities weekly, you collect information that can

be analyzed to indicate how well you are meeting your objectives.

Through assessment you are measuring the impact of your peer education program. Impact is the effect that peer education programs have on the campus environment, the students enrolled in your institution, and the peer educators in your program. If your peer educators develop and implement a safe-ride program, the impact may be a reduction in the number of students who drink and drive. An impact of being a peer educator may be an increase in intervention skills and in referring students for professional help.

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## Developing Outcomes

In conversations with advisors at conferences over the years on why they have not engaged in assessing their peer education programs, many comment that they do not know where to begin. Begin by identifying what will change as a result of your peer education program. These changes are called outcomes. Learning Reconsidered 2 ([www.learningreconsidered.org](http://www.learningreconsidered.org)) is an easy-to-use publication that provides a step-by-step process for developing student learning outcomes.

Students grow and develop through their experience as peer educators. Assessing

the learning outcomes for students who are peer educators is a way to demonstrate how your peer education program integrates academic learning and student development. The National Peer Educator Study has been assessing peer educators' growth and development in the following student outcomes:

1. Higher order thinking skills (e.g., being able to critically analyze a situation, evaluate information and assess conclusions);
2. Educational gains (e.g., having a career direction, developing long-range goals, and understanding of one's values);
3. Presentation skills and comfort in presenting;
4. Appreciation and awareness of diversity; and
5. Helping skills (e.g., talking with a peer about a risky behavior or choice; intervening in a crisis situation).

BACCHUS affiliates can participate in the National Peer Educator Study and receive reports on peer educators' growth and development. To take advantage of this free resource contact Dr. Matthew Wawrzynski, research coordinator, at [mwawrzyn@msu.edu](mailto:mwawrzyn@msu.edu)

## Including Assessment in Your Current Efforts

We can assess the effectiveness of programs that peer educators present by asking students who attend these programs to rate their knowledge or skills in regard to a particular health topic. First, identify the outcomes of the programs (e.g., students will be able to identify the signs of alcohol poisoning).

At the beginning of the presentation, ask students to complete a quick survey (less than 10 questions) about their knowledge and behaviors associated with a topic (e.g., signs of alcohol poisoning, position to place someone with alcohol poisoning, how to get help). At the conclusion of the program, ask students to rate their knowledge and skills again.

Assessing students' knowledge at two points in time (before and after the presentation of information) will permit you to identify if there is a growth in knowledge and understanding as a result of the program. If you have access to a classroom response system (clicker technology) on your campus, you can quickly gather the students' responses.

Ideally, students will report that they have a better understanding of the health topic after the presentation, but if they do not, there may be an explanation for this. For example, students may have rated themselves higher because they thought they knew more than what they actually did, or the peer educators presenting the information were not effective in their delivery. This information can help to improve education programs. If possible, it is also beneficial to follow-up with students one month or even a semester after the program to see what information they have retained and/or how they have used the information. This will require collecting contact information, such as an email address, to send students a follow up questionnaire.

## Managing and Reporting Assessment

Devise a system for collecting and storing the assessment information. A peer educator, graduate assistant, or staff member can enter data into a spreadsheet application such as Excel. Computer applications make it easy to compare data or create charts and graphs. The highest ethical standards should guide any assessment project and help you determine how the data will be stored, who has access to the data and how the identity of those whom you have collected data from will be protected. Check with your institution's human subjects board to see if they have guidelines on gathering and storing data.

Before you analyze your data, decide what information you want to know. Begin by reviewing the learning outcomes you developed for your program. For example, you may want to know if students who attended your programs had an increase in knowledge of harmful effects of secondhand smoke. By analyzing the differences in the responses to the questions asked at the beginning and end of the peer educator presentations, you will be able to measure change in students' knowledge. Faculty who teach research methodology classes may be helpful in analyzing the information you have collected or identifying students who can assist with analyzing data.

Another critical step in the assessment process is reporting the information gathered to multiple constituents on campus such as student affairs professionals, health educators, faculty, administrators, and students. Reports can include information about the number of programs presented or the number of students reached, but the impact on the programs should be highlighted. Consider using graphs to show increases in knowledge, skills, and healthy behaviors. Think about releasing your reports at key times of the academic year. Highlighting your accomplishments as budgets are being developed may help to sustain your peer education program.

## Getting Started

- Start conducting assessments in small ways:
- Tracking attendance at peer education programs
- Asking attendees to complete a 10 question anonymous survey before and after a peer education presentation
- Collecting attendees emails for a follow up survey six weeks later
- Enrolling in the National Peer Educator Study by emailing [mwawrzyn@msu.edu](mailto:mwawrzyn@msu.edu)
- Stopping students on campus and asking if they remember one of your health promotion messages

- Slowly add assessments to other presentations and to peer educator trainings. By building on your assessment efforts, you will gain confidence and have concrete evidence of the value of your peer education program.

## Resources for Assessing Programs

ACPA, ACUHO-I, ACUI, NACA, NACADA, NASPA, & NIRSA. (2006). *Learning reconsidered 2: A practical guide to implementing a campus-wide focus on the student experience*. Washington, D.C.

Learning Reconsidered Website: [learningreconsidered.org](http://learningreconsidered.org)

Schuh, J. & Upcraft, L. (2001). *Assessment practice in student affairs: An applications manual*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

## Biggest Winner from page 8

### Promotion and Publicity:

Tabling, posters, employee daily email announcement, website, and coverage on local cable station and in campus and community newspapers (*Toilet Paper*, *Aims Angle*, *Greeley Tribune*)

**Collaboration:** Public Information Office, Communication Media Department, Medical Assistant Program, College Worklife and Wellness Program (employee and staff health and wellness program), Campus Bistro, Physical Education Department, and Entanglements Day Spa (donated weekly prizes and grand prize)

**Budget:** \$6,000

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