

The Role of Peer Counseling in a University Setting: The University of Botswana

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Introduction

Peer counseling is a well-documented concept of counseling. As Sisco (1992), Cole (2002) and Pritchard (2007) point out, it is a personal method of change and is based on the idea that most people prefer to seek out their peers for help when experiencing challenges, frustrations, concerns and general problems. Pritchard (2007) has documented that transition from secondary school to university is a stressful and emotional experience for students, requiring a structured support network. When students join the university for the first time, some of them experience emotional stress due to a change in the environment as well as developmental gaps (Steinhardt & Dolbeire, 2008). Research has indicated that peer counseling can be as effective as professional counseling and that is why some institutions have placed it at the heart of their proactive counseling programs.

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After this realization, the University of Botswana introduced the peer counseling program in 2003 which has produced positive results as reflected in the shared experiences of such students. The University of Botswana Careers and Counseling Centre, Peer counseling program, trains and equips students with skills to enable them to help their peers. It allows students to work on issues of their concern with the accepting support of their peers. Peer counselors unlike professional counselors are available to help their peers anytime and their counseling sessions are informal discussions and conversations which are not threatening. This initiative has proved to work.

What is Peer Counseling?

Peer counseling is a helping process that involve two people or a group of people who have a number of things in common. It is a way of relating, responding and helping aimed at exploring feelings, thoughts, issues and concerns with the hope of reaching a clear understanding in order to make informed decisions. De Jager & Ntlokwana (2012, p.3) refer to it as, “a learning situation in which students listen to and help facilitate the growth and development of other students.” It is a process in which trained and supervised students offer amongst others listening support, problem solving skills with little or no advice. They empower others to resolve or cope with their issues and concerns. Peer counseling is easily accessible and relatively informal, it allows the counselors to meet their clients in their comfort zones. Such clients can also be seen at the Careers and Counseling Centre offices, some are provided with services around

campus. The programme is more like a student outreach programme allowing the peer counselors to take the service to other students.

Peer counselors are not therapists or professional counselors but individuals who are trained to help others think through and reflect on the challenges they may be experiencing. The purpose of peer counseling is to increase the number of people in an organization or institution who are skilled in helping others; thereby enabling informal, spontaneous assistance to be available (de Jager & Ntlokwana, 2012)

Research on Peer Counseling

The importance of peer counseling in a university setting has long been realized by a number of scholars. Research noted that peer counseling enables students to appreciate each other as well as understand the importance of education and focus. Peer counseling believes that peers have the ability to reach out and change each other since they understand one another better. The peer concept provides a practical and economical means to meet the increasing needs of students in need of individual help.

Adams (2007), acknowledges the fact that peer counselors help their clients understand and accept themselves as well as the meaning of life relating it to their career interests and satisfaction. Through peer counseling a student can define their career interest and

make necessary career and other general decisions. Peer counseling gives students an opportunity to work on their issues and concerns without fear and intimidation.

Seligman (1978), discovered that peer supervision increased in the peer counselors empathy, respect, genuineness as well as concreteness. Through such skills, a peer counselor is aligned to build a rapport with the peer they are counseling, making it easier to make an impact, and for the client to make sound decisions.

Benshoff (1993), rated peer counseling as an outstanding tool that equips peer counselors in counseling skills and techniques which makes it easier for them to reach their peers but also aid the peer counselors themselves with life skills.

University of Botswana Peer Counseling Intervention

Peer counseling at the university of Botswana was introduced after the realization that students play an essential role of supporting and encouraging each other on a day – to – day basis. This is corroborated by Oxford University (2012) who discovered that students normally look to each other first for help in thinking through issues and for emotional support. The University of Botswana then introduced this programme to better equip a select group of students both undergraduates and graduates so that they could provide informed support.

The peer counseling programme seeks to better equip students for this role, enabling them to feel more confident in supporting their peers and directing them to the available

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support networks available to students. The Peer counselors are recruited through a rigorous screening and selection process. Some of the key competencies for selection include; ability and experience in working with young people, assertiveness, care, communication and interpersonal skills. They should be sensitive listeners who use communication skills to facilitate self-exploration and decision making. In addition they are to come from a range of years of study so that there is a peer counselor from each level of study. Their academic performance should also be above average. In 2010, a deliberate action was taken to include individuals with a disability to make the group representative.

Prior to undertaking their task, peer counselors are trained to understand what peer counseling is. They are exposed to communication, listening, assertiveness, basic counseling skills. They are made aware of the importance of a positive self-concept, team building and conflict resolution skills as well as counseling ethical expectations. Peer counselors' training includes referral issues such as how and when to refer. It also includes the importance of one to one discussion with the supervisor. The emphasized concepts include the importance of confidentiality and the function to provide conditions for change.

Peer counselors have ongoing supervision. They are assigned supervisors amongst the professional counselors who they report to on a daily basis. They refer cases to their supervisors or other professional counselors when the need arises. They also nominate a leader amongst themselves to coordinate their weekly schedule as well as assign the

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peers duties. Other than just provide counseling support and encouragement to their fellow students, Peer counselors are involved in outreach programs, community project and the general marketing of the careers and counseling services. They are more like student advocates and ambassadors of the careers and counseling center. According to their employment contract, they work eight hours a week which they spread across the week with a maximum of two hours per day. This is to ensure that their commitment to academic work is not compromised.

Sample programs that the peer counselors have success fully run include; hostel talks and campaigns, presentations to students clubs, community support services as well as mentoring. These have proved very helpful:

I lived at Block 474 and have had the opportunity to listen to peer counselors presenting on time management and study skills. Their presentations challenged me to apply what they were sharing and since then, my academic record has improved greatly. (student)

Students involved in peer counseling and those who have encountered peer counselors have indicated that their GPA has improved:

Successes

When I joined the peer counseling program, my GPA was nothing to write home about. After joining the program, I was not only exposed to study skills and time management ,but to the importance of asking others as well as admitting when I need help (student 2)

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When I joined the peer counseling program, my GPA was low due to a number of factors. I learned how to work on my personal issues and now though the different skills that we are exposed to taught, my GPA has improved (Khumo))

Other peer counselors had this to say:

At the 2011 graduation, I was named the best fourth year law student. I consider myself fortunate to have joined the Peer Counseling Program because it has helped me stay focused.(GG)

I never thought that fist class was that easy until I learned time management and study skills. My appreciation goes to the peer mentors at Careers and counseling (J.B)

Besides excellence, peer counselors have shared about opportunities due to their peer training:

Exposure

I landed in Finland due to skills from peer counseling where I had exposure and growth. Had it not been of the intensive training we have as peer counselors, maybe I would have failed the interview for international placement. (Kele)

A student who got graduate opportunity after completing her studies had this to say:

I have been exposed to crucial in-demand skills like counselling, interviews, workshop facilitation, peer educator, teamwork, social mobilisation, presentation, communication and networking. Today I am doing PhD” (Chicho)

Leadership

There are student who have shared that peer counseling has the peer counseling program has instilled I them leadership skills:

“I have benefited greatly from the Peer Educator program at UB in that I developed my self confidence, which continues to benefit me in my work life and other areas. I have learnt to develop an individual character that is not influenced by my peers, family and society.” (Lebogang)

Another student who is presently working in South Africa as a director and one of the youngest directors had this to say:

I am currently working for an international company as an International gender based violence coordinator managing a UN funded project in 3 countries: Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Kenya. Thanks to peer counselling at UB which trained and moulded me for four years equipping me with all the skills needed to flourish. (Tummie)

Conclusion

The value of peer counseling is very evident in research. Its impact at the University of Botswana is very clear as evident in the shared profiles. This program benefits both the peer counselors and the students they help. Students that have served as peer counselors have shared positive feedback how the programme has benefited them. They have acquired skills, networked with many people and generally been empowered. They have shared the positive benefits of the programme with student and those that have graduated are always willing to come back and share the positive experience they gained as peer counselors with other students.

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