

Embedding Peer Academic Advising in Dorm Communities at Princeton

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Benefits of Peer Advising

- Socially and experientially close to other students
 - Understand student experience of Princeton first-hand and can offer student perspective
 - Schedules mesh with other students
 - May observe and hear things by being in social space that other advisers might not learn
- Model good decision-making, approaches, and perspective for peers
- Help student integration
- Peer advisers benefit from leadership and mentoring roles

Before We Proceed – The Context of Princeton’s Residential Colleges

- All first years and sophomores randomly assigned to one of 6 colleges so academic cross-section of Princeton
- All first years assigned to specific housing by college without reference to academic interest; sophomores draw into college housing with their friends
- Limited number of upperclass students live in 3 of the 6 colleges and some dorm groups have only sophomores and upperclass students
- Each college has 10 Resident Grad Students who live in the dorms and are assigned to the dorm groups led by the RAs
- Three full-time professional advising staff – a dean, director of studies, and director of student life.
 - Director of Student Life – all non-academic advising and supervises the RAs
 - Director of Studies - academic advising and support for the first years and sophomores and supervises faculty advisers and peer academic advisers (PAAs)
 - Dean – academic advising and support for juniors and seniors, supervises all college staff

Before We Proceed 2 - Peer Advising at Princeton Pre-2011/2012

- Peer Academic Advisers (PAAs) recruited only from seniors with high GPAs with no formal application or interview process.
- Typically called upon only for 3-4 days during orientation and during advising fairs in November and April
- In some colleges, PAAs would be paired with a specific faculty adviser and would attend their advising meeting during orientation; other colleges would have them sit in vicinity of these meetings to pre-advise
- “Training” took place over brunch during orientation

Peer Advising System beginning 2011/2012

- PAAs assigned to dorm communities led by RA and expected to interact with them throughout year
- Goal – by integrating PAAs into cohesive dorm-based community, enable PAAs to increase and sustain contact

Conditions for Success of this Model

- Cohesive nature of dorm communities at Princeton
- Intentional efforts to integrate PAAs into these cohesive communities
- Recruitment and selection of best-suited PAAs
- Improved training
- Monitoring of performance and clear feedback
- Institutional support
- Collaborative relationship with campus partners, notably the directors of student life and RAs

Cohesive Community at Princeton

- Residential colleges as an integrating force
- Princeton as a cohesive, collegial campus

Intentional Efforts to Integrate PAAs

- Schedule interaction early and often during orientation
 - Early return of PAAs
 - Orientation revision
- Expect continuous interaction throughout year through e-mail, study breaks, on-on-ones, and other interactions
- Build (on) relationships between PAAs and RAs
- Assign PAAs to dorm communities where they live, when possible

Recruitment and Selection

- Eligibility expanded to juniors as well as seniors (and to sophomores at one college) and to students who were not necessarily top academic performers
- Formal application and interview process
- Success of PAA program motivating more students to apply to follow in footsteps of their PAA
- Limitation on number of PAAs per college prescribed by Associate Dean of the College making process even more selective

Improved Training

- Two day September training replaces brunch training
- Extended training made possible by approval for PAAs to return just ahead of orientation, which in turn was made possible by institutional support at level of Office of the Dean of the College
- Training organized not college by college but by all colleges and in partnership with other offices
- Parts of training combine RAs and PAAs, involving coordination with Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Students and the Director of Student Life at each college
- In addition, May training organized by each college, including bonding and planning with RAs (and Resident Grad Students)

Monitoring Performance

- Busy students who sometimes become pre-occupied with academics and other extracurriculars to detriment of PAA role
- Importance of regular group meetings, one-on-ones, monthly reports, budget reports, and other monitoring and feedback mechanisms
- PAA leaders to guide and remind other PAAs
- Annual advising survey to provide feedback on college performance
- Associate Dean of the College monitoring each college's performance and holding to high expectations

Incentives

- Asked far more of PAAs but provide little more in return – two free meals per week, college gear, and sometimes other small perks
- Discovered that intrinsic reward of helping younger students and becoming like the advisers who helped them as underclass students was sufficient reward
- In other words, this is an improvement that can be made inexpensively with the right students

A Caveat

- We made several changes at once and there were no experimental controls, so it's hard to say exactly how much of the measurable improvements can be attributed simply to embedding the peer advisers within dorm communities. It is my sense, though, that this was the major factor, and it was the change that precipitated all the other changes we made.

Two Shortfalls of New Peer Advising System

- Disciplinary connection
 - PAAs assigned to dorm communities not sorted by academic interest
 - Students do express desire for advisers knowledgeable about their fields of interest
 - However, we message that PAAs mostly help the many common elements of their experience of Princeton and its academics
 - PAAs make referrals
- Sophomore advising
 - Sophomores less interested in receiving advice from peer advisers – feel more secure about what they know and seek advice from older friends
 - Sophomore integration into dorm communities not as strong

Questions?

- What academic advising do you do in your colleges?
- To what extent is this done by peer advisers?
- What challenges do you face if you do have (peer) academic advising in your colleges?
- If you don't have (peer) academic advising in your colleges, is this something you aspire to?