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## Editorial: Peer leaders as full participants in the academic work of the institution

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## **Editorial: Peer leaders as full participants in the academic work of the institution**

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Welcome to Volume 12 of the *Journal of Peer Learning*. As has become customary for the Journal, this volume highlights the international scope of peer learning research and includes four peer-reviewed articles from New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. Collectively, these articles explore a number of key themes pertaining to the scholarship and practice of peer learning including the continued need to provide high-quality training experiences to peer leaders, the ways in which the peer leader experience benefits peer leaders themselves, and how the particular roles played by peer leaders impacts outcomes for both peer leaders as well as those they lead.

In the opening article of this volume, “A meta-analysis on the effect of duration, task, and training in peer-led learning,” Zha, Estes, Pastor, and Xu conducted a meta-analytic study to examine the effect of peer-led learning on the cognitive achievement of post-secondary students. In their analysis, they evaluated the effect of three factors on students’ cognitive achievement: (a) the duration of peer-led learning sessions, (b) the degree of training peer leaders received to prepare them for their role, and (c) the type of task or role performed by peer leaders. Results of the meta-analysis suggested that students’ cognitive achievement is significantly improved when they participate in problem-based learning activities facilitated by peer leaders. While, on average, student groups with peer leaders who received ongoing training demonstrated higher levels of cognitive achievement, these differences were not statistically significant. Duration of the peer-led sessions was not associated with significant differences in student cognitive achievement. This study makes an important contribution to the research on peer learning in that it employed a more rigorous method for identifying the overall effect of peer-led learning sessions than what is commonly used in traditional literature reviews. Additionally, the study results provide important guidance for the design of high-quality peer learning experiences, as well as point to the need for further research aimed at identifying the features of effective approaches to peer leader training.

In their article, “How peer mentoring fosters graduate attributes,” Scott, McLean, and Golding explored how the experience of being a senior Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) mentor contributed to the development of graduate attributes among 11 PASS mentors at the University of Otago in New Zealand. The authors approached their study as a qualitative case study and used focus groups and interviews to inquire into the lived experiences of senior PASS mentors and to provide understanding of the particular aspects of the PASS mentor role that contributed to the development of important graduate attributes among their group of participants. Through a general inductive approach to analysing the qualitative data gathered through their interviews, the authors identified three key graduate attributes that participants reported were developed or enhanced through their experiences as PASS mentors:

improved communication skills, heightened ability to engage in critical thinking, and a greater awareness of the importance of ethical and responsible behaviour when performing professional roles. The study makes a valuable contribution to understanding of the potential for senior peer leader roles (e.g., PASS mentor and similar senior peer leader roles that include supervisory and training responsibilities) to provide transformative learning opportunities beyond those available in traditional or entry-level peer leader roles. Further, the authors provide helpful guidance for how other peer leader roles can be designed and structured to better facilitate the skills and abilities necessary for a successful transition out of the undergraduate experience and into graduate studies and/or employment.

In the third article, “An exploration of the connection between participation in academic peer leadership experiences and academic success,” Young, Hoffman, and Reinhardt analyse and report on the impact of participation in academic peer leadership experiences on students’ self-reported academic success. Results of the study showed that participation in an academic peer leader experience was the strongest and most positively significant predictor of student peer leaders’ self-reported sense that they had accrued academic benefits through their peer leader involvement. Grounded in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conceptualization of learning as *legitimate peripheral participation*, this study provides strong evidence for the value of peer leader experiences that invite students to be actively involved in the academic missions of their respective institutions, including opportunities to interact with faculty members and lecturers in meaningful ways in connection with their peer leader role. The results of this study also have important implications for our thinking and practice related to the level of peer leader involvement that we both encourage and allow at our institutions.

In the final article in this volume, “Peer learning for university students’ learning enrichment: Perspectives of undergraduate students,” Zhang and Bayley examine the varied experiences of undergraduate students at the University of Windsor (Ontario, Canada) with peer learning. The study employed a mixed method approach with data collected from both an online survey as well as through one-on-one interviews and small focus groups. Participants reported benefits in both informal and formal peer learning interactions, emphasizing that peer learning and mentoring provided a more supportive and inviting learning environment than what they often experienced in interactions with professors. In their concluding discussion of the study findings, the authors recommend that focus be placed on thoughtful marketing and recruiting strategies that provide access to meaningful peer learning opportunities for a diverse population of students, as well as high-quality training programs for formal peer leaders to enable them to more effectively support the learning and development of program participants.

One theme running through the volume is the importance of thoughtfully designing peer leader programs in ways that enhance their potential to facilitate deep, long-lasting, and even transformative learning for participants. Collectively, these articles point to key questions that provide guidance in crafting a peer leader experience that benefits all student participants:

- What types of tasks should peer leaders be asked to perform?
- What characterizes effective peer leader training experiences?

- What types of peer leader involvement and interactions lead to the most positive outcomes?
- How can the peer leader experience be best aligned with desired learning outcomes and the overall academic mission of an institution?

Finally, the authors whose work is featured in this volume provide important direction for future research exploring peer learning and peer leadership. For example, the articles that follow add to growing evidence that peer leadership and peer education might rightly be viewed as a high-impact practice (e.g., Bunting, 2014, 2017; Keup, 2012, 2016) that supports 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning outcomes and prepares students to effectively face personal, civic, economic, and social challenges long after their peer leadership experience has ended. High-impact practices are defined as “teaching and learning practices [that] have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds [and represent] practices that educational research suggests increase rates of retention and student engagement” (Kuh, 2008, p. 9). However, for peer leadership to contribute to deep and meaningful learning like the learning documented in the articles that follow, both researchers and practitioners must continue to work to understand what might be called the “anatomy” of high-impact or transformative peer leader experiences. And, as highlighted by the findings of multiple articles in this volume, peer leaders should be provided with opportunities to act as full participants in the intellectual life of their institutions by being invited to engage with academic and professional staff in the real and authentic work of learning, teaching, and research.

Accordingly, Young, Hoffman, and Reinhardt’s discussion of the implications of *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) for the design of peer leader experiences points to exciting opportunities for additional scholarship exploring how LPP and other less commonly applied theoretical frameworks might inform both theory and practice related to peer learning. By viewing peer leadership through new theoretical lenses, we can continue to expand our vision of the potential for programs such as Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), Supplemental Instruction (SI), and others to complement the curricular learning experienced by students.

Thus, hopefully this volume serves as a springboard to future research that both deepens theoretical understanding of peer leadership, as well as provides highly practical guidance for continuing to refine and strengthen the peer leader experiences offered to students on college and university campuses.

On behalf of the editorial team at the Journal, we hope that you enjoy this volume and its focus on research, practices, and innovations in peer learning. Additionally, we thank the authors who have submitted their work and have worked with the editorial team to prepare their manuscripts for publication. Finally, thanks to our readers for engaging in this scholarly dialogue with us.

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