Editors' Notes

The delivery of more personal instruction and guidance to first-year students is a challenge in this continuing era of budget cuts, increasing class sizes, and reductions in the percentage of full-time faculty. Moreover, pressures of "publish or perish" may lead faculty and administrators to believe that increased concentration by faculty on first-year students is in conflict with other institutional objectives. To counter these limitations, Wright State has turned to the use of peer instructors, or established undergraduate students, to lead or assist with first-year seminar courses. Beyond institutional and fiscal interests are the ideas that peer instructors may add inherent value that conventional instructors do not. Wright State's feedback from first-year students suggests that peer instruction can be at least as effective as alternatives, when sufficiently structured and closely monitored.

The Institution

A rich and dynamic community of nearly 17,000 students (13,000 are undergraduates), Wright State University-Dayton Campus was founded in 1964 and granted full university status in 1967 as the 12th state-assisted university in Ohio. Wright State is a nationally accredited, comprehensive, open admission, four-year public institution with 109 undergraduate degree programs and 46 graduate and professional degree programs. Wright State has six colleges and three schools including schools of medicine and professional psychology. Wright State was developed to provide access to higher learning to the city of Dayton and the surrounding counties. Most (93%) students are from Ohio: 85% White, 11% African American, 0.3% Asian, 1% Hispanic, and 0.3% Native American. Three thousand students live on campus, and 18% of the students are age 25 and over. Approximately 40% of the 3,752 first-year students are first generation (i.e., students whose parents have not earned a college degree).

Description of the Initiative

The University College at Wright State provides a comprehensive first-year experience that includes learning communities, academic advising, developmental education, tutoring, math learning assistance, writing assistance, standardized and placement testing, and new student orientation.

Learning communities at Wright State were officially inaugurated in 2000, but pilot programs have been taking place since the mid-1990s. The learning community (LC) program targets full-time, first-year students (i.e., traditional degree-seeking undergraduates who have earned fewer than 45 credit hours). The majority of these students have never been to college before; however, some first-year students have occasionally participated in the Post-Secondary Enrollment Option Program (PSEOP) in high school but have not completed all of their general education courses.
"Linked" Learning Communities

The program currently serves approximately 78% of first-year students who voluntarily enroll in a L.C. A wide variety of learning communities are offered to incoming students, including theme-based, major-based, residential, and general college success learning communities.

Most Wright State learning communities include a cohort of 25 students who take two or more classes in common, such as psychology, sociology, or history, as well as the first-year seminar designed as the "home base" course.

The four major goals of the First-Year Experience/Learning Community program are to help first-year students (a) adjust to college, (b) achieve academic success, (c) develop personally, and (d) explore career development. The overarching theme is to ease the students' transition from high school to college by providing support, information, and guidance at one of the most critical times in their college careers.

The learning communities support in-class and out-of-class learning experiences. Faculty, staff, student groups, and academic units across the campus—including departments such as residence life, student activities, student support services, and judicial affairs—work together toward the learning community program's success. The collaboration has many benefits including introducing campus resources to new students and getting them involved in curricular activities. Instructors, for example, often bring guest speakers and student groups into the classroom as a way of introducing more campus resources to new students.

In the fall of 2000, 45 first-year seminar sections were offered, enrolling about 50% of the entering first-year students. By the fall of 2005, WSU offered 80 sections of the first-year seminar to serve 1,700 new students. To be able to offer all of these learning community courses, Wright State solicited the help of faculty and professional staff to teach. Most of the faculty members who teach first-year seminars come from the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Science and Math and teach major-based first-year seminars. Most professional staff instructors are University College advisors. Residence hall staff members teach residential living-learning communities, and other campus staff members often teach theme-based sections. Finally, to be able to manage the rapid expansion of the LC program, Wright State hired, carefully trained, and supervised juniors, seniors, and graduate students to serve as peer instructors (approximately 25-30 students) for some of the first-year seminar sections. These peer instructors are solo instructors who fulfill all of the teaching, grading, and mentoring requirements of this position.

The process for selecting peer instructors begins in February and March each year. In April, we interview applicants, and we make selections in May. Our program is open to rising juniors, seniors, and graduate students with a cumulative GPA of 2.7 or higher (3.0 preferred). We seek students with good communication skills, diversity awareness, and prior experience teaching or working with groups, first weekend/summer orientation programs, and/or student organizations.

Research Design

We turned to peer instruction because we needed to serve more students and had limited resources. However, we needed to find out if peer instructors were as effective as the staff instructors in teaching new students. In order to answer this question, Wright State compared student evaluations of peer and staff instructors for UVC101. Specifically, the assessment method was based upon questions on the Student Evaluation of Instruction, which is given to students in all Wright State courses, and the First-Year Seminar Evaluation, which is given to all students in UVC101. The First-Year Seminar Evaluation was developed by University College to assess the four major goals of the First-Year Experience/Learning Community program. In addition to assessing these goals, the evaluation also asks also asked students (a) if they would recommend a learning community and first-year seminar to other students and (b) if their participation in the learning community helped them make the transition from high school to college. Both evaluation forms ask students to indicate their level of agreement with several statements. Students indicate their preferences based on the following Likert
scale (strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2, and strongly disagree = 1). Therefore, a mean for a question could range from a low of 1 to a high of 5, with 3.0 being the midpoint. A mean of all student responses combined for the sections taught by peer instructors was compared with the equivalent mean of all student responses for sections taught by staff instructors. This was done for two quarters, fall 2004 and fall 2005.

Findings

The means for UVC101 students taught by peer instructors and for those UVC101 students taught by staff instructors for fall 2004 and fall 2005 are broken out by seven statements selected for comparison (Table 1). For the 2004 data for “class time was well spent,” the peer instructors’ mean of 4.58 was higher than the 4.21 mean for the staff instructors. Although in 2005 this difference decreased (4.32 for peers compared to 4.21 for staff), the peer instructors again had the higher student ratings. In total, the peer instructors’ means were above the staff means (although not always by much) for 12 of the 14 questions.

Table 1
Student Response Mean Scores for Evaluations of Peer and Staff Instructors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>2004 (n = 906)</th>
<th>2005 (n = 904)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peers Group Mean</td>
<td>Staff Group Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright State standard Evaluation statement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class time was well spent.</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned a lot from the instructor in this course.</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was challenged in this course.</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming into this course I was motivated to learn this subject.</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Seminar Evaluation Statement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend being in an Learning Community and first-year seminar to other new students.</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being in a LC and first-year seminar my first quarter helped me make the transition from high school to college.</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one activity in this class helped me to better appreciate the diversity of people at WSU and/or in the world.</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"Linked" Learning Communities

First-year students may need to seek out upper-class students as mentors and thus may respond more favorably to instructors closer to their age in a course focused on adjustment to college, leading to higher means for peer instructors. Peer instructors' stronger areas could also be attributed to the required peer instructor training that takes place throughout the summer and continues into the quarter. Peer instructors also have weekly supervision seminars to discuss how their classes are going and to share and receive suggestions from the director and returning peer instructors. The amount of training and structure given to peer instructors allows them to focus more time on working with students on an individual basis, while gaining the experience of teaching a college-level course. Staff members who teach our first-year seminar courses are given a master syllabus and guidelines, but do not receive the same amount of individual and group support and structure that peer instructors receive. Thus, the use of upper-class and graduate students as solo peer instructors in learning communities is allowing an increase in the quantity of sections offered, while still maintaining the quality of the experience as perceived by the new students themselves.

Conclusion

Several elements were critical to the success of the peer instructor program. There was ongoing support from the provost and the vice president for curriculum and instruction/dean of University College for using students as peer instructors to expand the LC program. This high level of support made it easier to expand and involve other departments in the success of the program. Secondly, as other academic departments became aware of the LC program, we were able to recruit upper-class and graduate students interested in teaching as a career as well as those who wanted the experience of working with first-year students. This opportunity continues to be beneficial for academic departments, because many of these students teach a first-year seminar for students interested in their major focus (e.g., business, early childhood education, psychology). Third, the development of a quality five-day summer training program, which included a variety of course materials and helpful resources, prepared the peers to be effective seminar instructors. As stated above, the requirements for peer instructors are more stringent than for staff instructors, and the director of the LC program trains and monitors the peers to meet these requirements. For example, the peer instructors' syllabi were reviewed to ensure that each one was following the master syllabus. Small, weekly group supervision meetings were also initiated to discuss issues that could arise throughout the term. Finally, the director of the LC program kept an "open door" policy and helped peer instructors as needed.

We have learned that peer instructors are an invaluable asset to our learning community program. The director of learning communities along with the graduate teaching assistant for learning communities provided a Wright State-specific learning communities supplement called "Into the Water." This supplement is a collection of materials and activities that can be used in-class by instructors of all first-year seminar courses. This supplement will be updated yearly as new materials and new ideas are presented by peer instructors and Wright State University staff each fall. We plan to continue our present training program and will continue to provide more resources such as videos, list of guest speakers, and supplements to make their experience even more valuable. As we expand our learning community program to all other quarters into winter and spring, we expect our peer instructors will continue to be an invaluable asset.

Implications and Recommendations

Other institutions could implement a peer instructor program to teach first-year seminars by seeking support and resources from senior leadership at the institution. It is critical to carefully select and train the peers and to continue to support them throughout their teaching. While this involves training many new instructors each year to replace students who graduate, it allows an
increase in the number of sections of first-year seminar courses offered at a very modest cost while maintaining the quality of the experience for new students.

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