Mental Health Peer Support in a College Setting

An Essential Part of Student Well-Being in Need of Evidence-Based Guidelines

Tuesday, November 15

1:00 – 2:30pm ET

Goals of Research

1. Provide the field with information that can help guide policy and program decisions around adding or enhancing these services on campus

2. Provide student leaders interested in peer support with information on comparative programs and lessons learned

PEER PROGRAMS IN COLLEGE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

An Essential Approach to Student Well-Being In Need of Structure and Support

Commissioned by the Ruderman Family Foundation and the Mary Christie Institute

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Approach

- 22 expert interviews
- Review of current literature
- Survey of counseling center directors
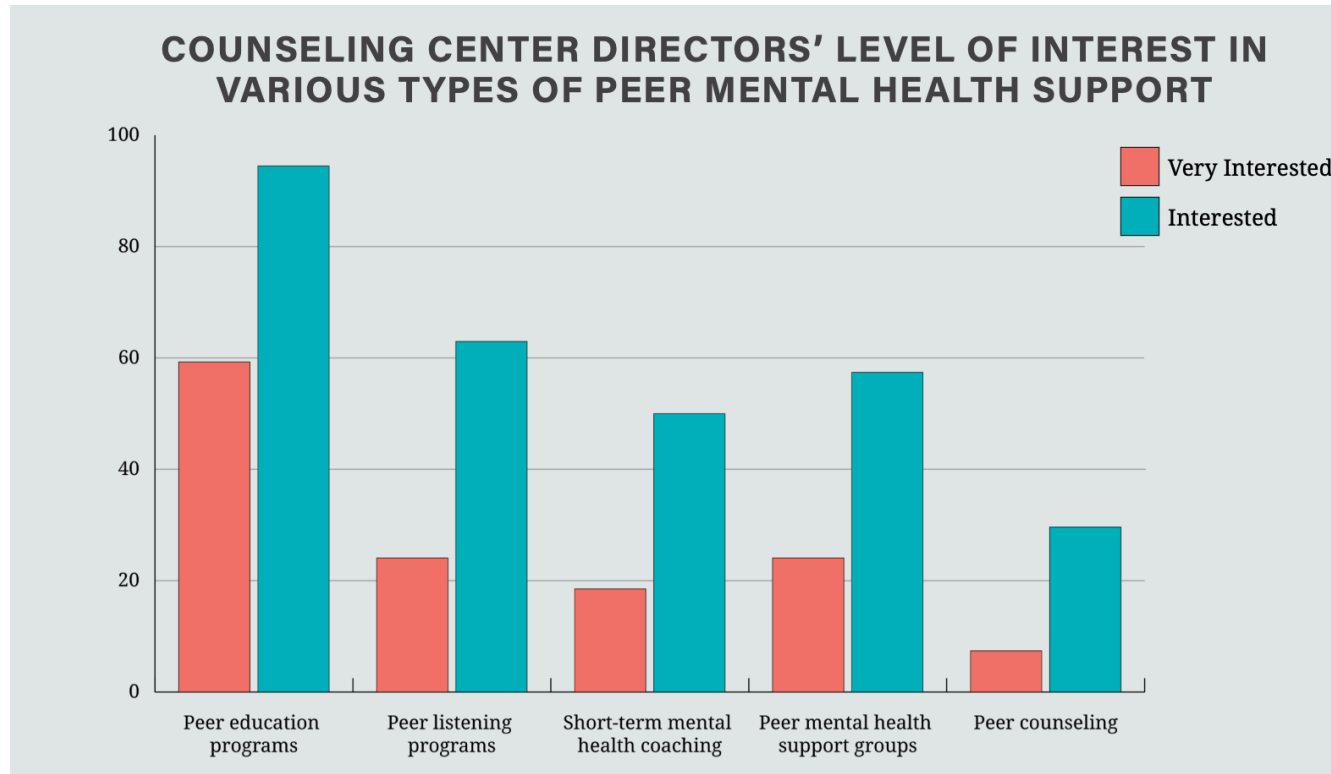- Case studies on well-known programs

Review of Literature

- Inconsistent evidence of effectiveness for programs individually and the practice overall
- Variability in outcome measures causing difficulty in comparison between programs

Most Common Program Types

- **Peer education programs**: Trained peers provide education and information to students on mental health topics; respond to students seeking help for their mental health with resources and referrals. Includes peer ambassador programs, gatekeeper training.

- **Peer listening programs**: Trained peers, on a 1-to-1 basis, practice active listening and direct to resources or referrals. Not directed to offer advice or provide coaching or counseling.

- **Peer mental health support groups**: Groups led by a trained peer; Students share their experiences and feelings and promote their own and others mental wellbeing.

- **Short-term mental health coaching**: Trained peers, on a 1-to-1 basis, provide guidance and tools to improve mental wellbeing, identify and set goals for behavior change, receive support.

- **Peer counseling**: Counseling by a trained peer who helps students work through mental and emotional concerns

Counseling Center Director Interest in Peer Support

COUNSELING CENTER DIRECTORS' LEVEL OF INTEREST IN VARIOUS TYPES OF PEER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Legend:
- Very Interested
- Interested

Categories: Peer education programs, Peer listening programs, Short-term mental health coaching, Peer mental health support groups, Peer counseling

- Near-universal interest (95%) in some type of peer support program

- Significant variation in interest between program type
  - 94% interested in peer education
  - 63% interested in peer listening
  - 57% interested in peer coaching

Counseling Center Director Concerns

IMPORTANCE OF VARIOUS CONCERNS WHEN CONSIDERING A PEER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAM
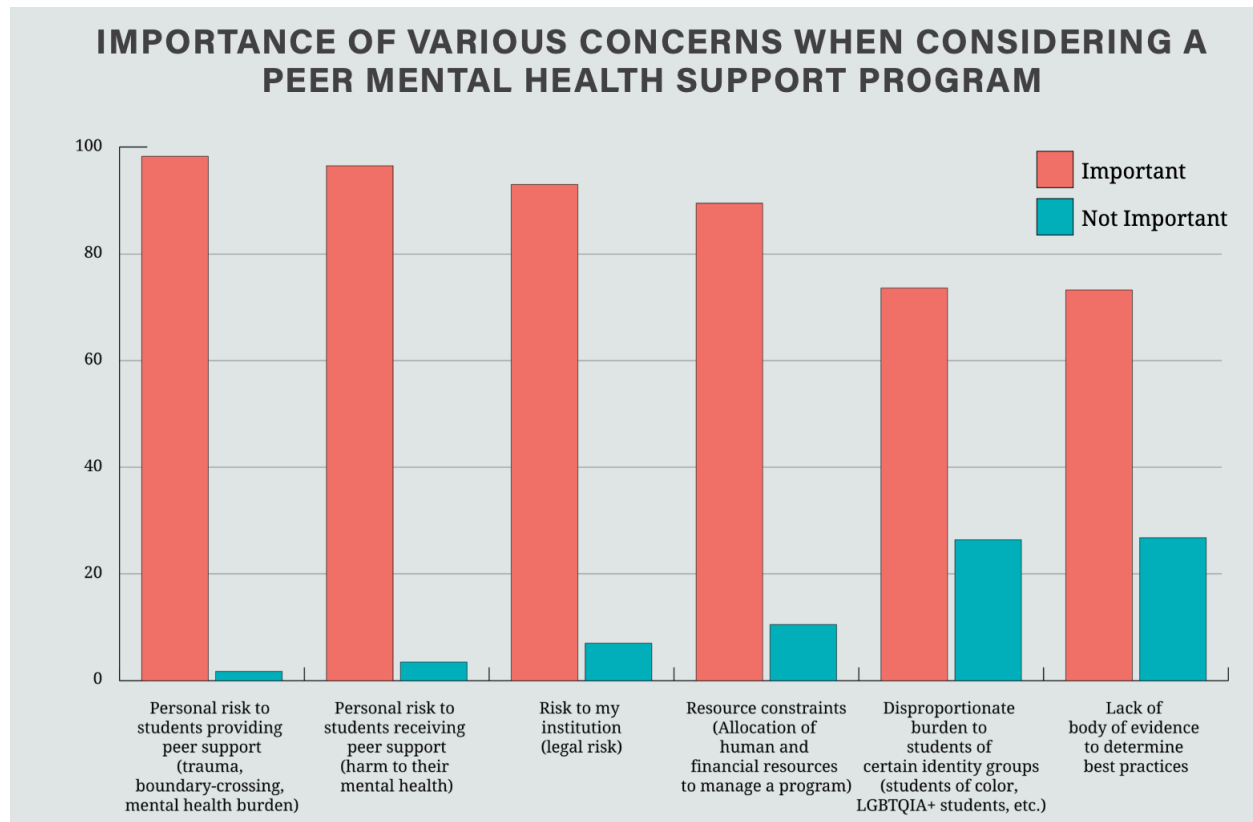
- Nearly half said they believed that lack of standardized guidelines for peer support options were very important (47%).

- Almost all respondents said personal risk to students providing peer support (98%) was important

- Strong majorities believed resource constraints (89%) and a lack of a body of evidence to determine best practices (73%) were important

Case Studies

Variability Among Programs

Mode

Training

Supervision

National vs. campus

Level of intervention

Questions for assessing programs

- Can it help students who might otherwise seek help at the counseling center for a subclinical issue?

- Can it reach students who otherwise wouldn't seek help (like those in marginalized groups)?

- Is it easy to implement?

- Is it cost-efficient?

- Does it avoid risks to student supporter and help-seeker?

- Does it improve counseling center capacity?

Conclusions

I. Peer Support Is an Essential Part of a Public Health Approach to College Student Mental Health

Why?

- Young people turn to peers when in distress

- Peer support has potential to:
  - Help students along the behavioral health continuum
  - Help with sub-clinical issues, reserving counseling resources for students with more acute issues
  - Prevent issues before they worsen
  - Provide a bridge to care for students reluctant to seek help

II. Peer Support Lacks Definition, Standards and Efficacy Data
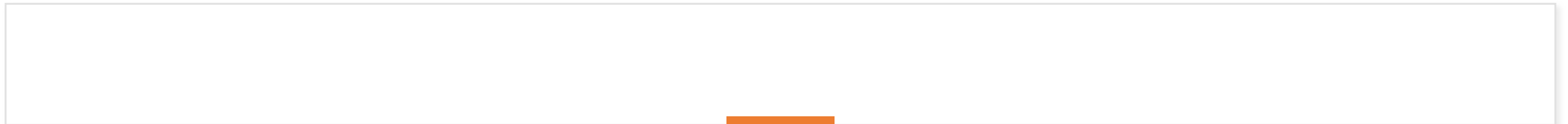
Recommendations
For Colleges and Universities

- Make peer support part of a public health approach
- Conduct an institution-wide audit of peer-involved programs both within and external to the counseling center
- Communicate broadly what is available
- Coordinate peer support efforts with diversity and inclusion offices on campus
- Let students lead
- Encourage the altruism students are demonstrating

Recommendations
For The Field

- Define various peer support types with greater specificity and differentiating properties of each
- Establish standardized metrics to allow for greater comparison and benchmarking between programs
- Direct a coordinated research effort with the purpose of providing evidence for standards and best practices
- Elevate best practices within the domain of peer support and for each of its categories

Next Step

Create an inter-disciplinary working group of non- profit organizations, higher education leaders, and philanthropy partners to **create guidelines** and **articulate a research agenda**

Panel I

- **Dolores Cimini, PhD**, Director of the Center for Behavioral Health Promotion and Applied Research and Senior Research Scientist in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at the University at Albany; Former Director of the nationally recognized Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program

- **Amanda M. Fowler**, Undergraduate Student, Psychology, Human Development, and Sociology, University of Albany; Senior Peer Wellness Coach in the Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program

Panel II

- **David Arnold**, Assistant Vice President for Health, Safety and Well-Being Initiatives and Senior Director of BACCHUS Initiatives at Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA)

- **Marcus Hotaling, PhD**, Director of the Eppler-Wolff Counseling Center at Union College; President of the Association of University and College Counseling Center Directors

Q&A

Please drop your questions in the chat!