The following material has been excerpted from Metz, Cuseo, & Thompson (2013). *Peer-to-peer leadership: Transforming student culture*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.

**The Power of Peer Leadership**

Contrary to how peers are often portrayed in the popular media, they are much more than competitors and sources of negative “peer pressure.” More often, they are sources of positive social influence by serving as collaborators, teammates, role models, and leaders. When inexperienced college students become connected with role models, they are supplied with a source of peer power that’s repeatedly been found to propel them to higher levels of academic performance and personal development (Cuseo, 2010).

“The student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years”

—Alexander Astin, *What Matters in College?*

Peer leadership is particularly powerful because it’s a form of social support that students are likely to perceive as more approachable and less threatening than that provided by older professionals and authority figure (Gross & McMullen, 1983; Rice & Brown, 1990). Since peer leaders are at a slightly more advanced stage of development than those they are leading, students can more readily identify with them and relate to them (Bandura, 1986; Ender & Newton, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Research indicates that students desire and prefer to receive personal support from students who are one-to-three years older than they are, rather than from students of the same age, administrators, or faculty (Rice & Brown, 1990). In addition, peer support can take place in multiple situations that go beyond classrooms and campus offices, and received on a more ongoing basis than “officially scheduled” support provided by faculty and professional staff.

**Positive Outcomes Associated with Peer Leadership**

A long historical trail of research points to the power of the peers for promoting the development and success of college students (Astin, 1993; Feldman & Newcomb, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Peer leaders, in particular, can contribute to students’ success by promoting their: (a) retention (persistence to graduation), (b) learning and academic performance, (c) social and emotional development, and (d) career success.

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\* *Increasing Student Retention (Persistence to Graduation)*

Research consistently demonstrates that student persistence to graduation is enhanced by peer interaction and support (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In a major study of student retention, it was found that peers exerted more influence on student persistence than all other social agents on campus, including faculty (Bean, 1985). Campus research reports indicate that students who are supported by peer mentors are more likely to remain in college at higher rates than student who do not receive such support (Schwitzer & Thomas, 1998; Black & Voelker, 2008). Simply stated, when students become connected with peers they come to see themselves as integral members of a campus community, which increases the likelihood they’ll continue to stay in that community until they complete their college degree (Tinto, 1987, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997).

\* *Promoting Student Learning and Academic Achievement*

Peers can exert powerful impact on student learning and academic performance. For instance, studies consistently show that when students teach (tutor) other students, both the peer teacher and peer learner make significant gains in learning (Whitman, 1988). Peers who tutor other students also experience significant gains in self-concept are likely to achieve higher scores on graduate school admissions tests (Astin, 1993).

“Teaching is the highest form of understanding.”

—Aristotle, Ancient Greek philosopher and a founding father of Western philosophy

In a national study of almost 500,000 students at colleges and universities of all types, it was found that when peers interact with each other while learning, they achieve higher levels of academic performance and are more likely to persist to degree completion. Furthermore, the learning benefits achieved through peer interaction are not restricted to formal, academic settings: college graduates report that their most significant learning experiences occurred *outside the classroom* and were heavily influenced by their peers (Light, 2001; Marchese, 1990; Murphy, 1989).

“The best answer to the question of what is the most effective method of teaching is that it depends on the goal, the student, the content and the teachers. But the next best answer is students teaching other students.”

—Wilbert McKeachie, *Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom*

Effective leadership involves integration and application knowledge from multiple subject areas and academic disciplines (D-Abate, 2009). You will find that your peer leadership experiences will stimulate your ability to draw upon diverse bodies of knowledge—such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, political science and business, and to utilize a broad base of *general education* skills—such as critical and creative thinking, social and emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and learning how to learn.

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

— John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States

\* *Supporting Students’ Social and Emotional Development*

Peers also play an important role in promoting the development of students’ social and emotional skills (Cross, 1985; Feldman & Newcomb, 1997; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Research suggests that peer mentors are able to provide students with greater social and emotional support than older mentors (Barrow & Hetherington, 1981; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000). Furthermore, students who serve as peer mentors also experience gains in social and emotional development—such as improved social skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, sense of purpose and personal identity (Astin & Kent, 1983; Harmon, 2006; Schuh & Laverty, 1983). It has also been found that student involvement in peer leadership and mentoring activities is associated with increased social concern and development of altruistic values (Pascarella, Ethington, & Smart, 1988).

“I know that being a peer leader will greatly benefit my when I begin my career. What I am even more sure of is what will come at the end of the day: self-pride, respect, knowledge, and contentment. I have made a difference.”

—Peer Leader, quoted in Hamid & VanHook (2001)

\* *Promoting Career Success*

Alumni consistently report that their participation in campus leadership roles had a significant impact on their development of career-relevant leadership skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2006). These reports from college alumni are reinforced by job-performance evaluations from employers, which indicate that previous involvement in student leadership positions in college is the best predictor of college graduates’ performance in managerial positions on the job (American Telephone & Telegraph, 1984; Howard, 1986). In a multi-campus study that tracked students throughout their college experience, it was discovered that student-student interaction had the strongest effect on students’ leadership development; in other words, students who interacted most frequently with peers during college were most likely to have acquired leadership qualities and qualifications by the time they graduated from college (Astin, 1993). Studies also show that students who participate as peer leaders experience show significant gains in civic engagement and character development (Bennis, 2009; Komives & Wagner, 2009).

“Not only was I able to use the [peer leadership] experience as a resume builder, but it actually became the center of my discussion in an interview. My interviewer spent 20 minutes during a one-hour interview discussing the responsibilities of being a peer leader. He was impressed that I was chosen for such a program.”

—Peer leader, quoted in quoted in Hamid & VanHook (2001)

In addition to all of these findings, research pointing to the power of peer leadership and mentoring, research on a number of different campuses indicates that peer leaders have a positive impact on students in a variety of other areas, including (a) academic advising (Carns, Carns, & Wright, 1993), (b) health and wellness (Burke, 1989; Lenihan & Kirk 1990), (c) facilitating interpersonal relationships (Waldo, 1989) and (d) promoting intercultural interaction (Berg & Wright-Buckley, 1988; Keup, 2010).

Taken together, the sum of these research findings point strongly to the conclusion that as a peer leader, you are well positioned to create a “win-win-win” scenario for three different parties:

1. Your *peers*—who benefit from your leadership.

“I enjoy it when my former students return [and] express to me the impact I have had on their lives. This one of the best jobs I ever had.”

—Peer leader, quoted in Hamid & VanHook (2001)

2. Your *campus—*you help build a culture of student success on campus “from the ground up.”

“I wanted to become what so many others had been for me. This experience has given me an incredible opportunity to learn more about my school and myself while helping others.”

—Peer leader, quoted in Hamid & VanHook (2001)

3. *Yourself*—you develop leadership skills that will contribute to your success in college and in your life beyond college. When you help other students become more self-aware, define their goals, learn strategically, and develop as whole persons, you do the same for yourself.

“While working on the program, I learned how to be a dedicated and diligent leader and have acquired new skills that will stay with me long after my college experience has ended.”

—Peer leader, quoted in quoted in Hamid & VanHook (2001)

The bottom line: As a peer leader you have the potential to promote positive change in other students, in yourself, and in the college or university where your leadership takes place. That’s a trifecta that can’t be beat!

“In the final analysis, you will be the primary beneficiary of your helping interactions. Helping others grow is, in itself, a personal growth-promoting activity.”

—Ender & Newton, *Students Helping Students*