Report on Peer Support

UNC-Chapel Hill Student Groups and UNC System Wellness Programs

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Peers for Progress
Peer Support Around the World

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Peer support was emphasized as a strategy to improve student mental health in the UNC-Chapel Hill 2019 *Report of the Mental Health Task Force*. Great value can be gained by founding and maintaining these groups and maximizing their potential to address campus mental health at the ground-level. Peer support groups create a culture of mutuality and community, bringing us a few steps closer to a mentally healthy campus. Furthermore, peer support advances two of <u>UNC-Chapel Hill's strategic initiatives</u>:

- **Build our community together**: *Rich in backgrounds and experiences – where all work together toward a common goal of creating a more diverse, equitable and inclusive community*

- **Strengthen student success**: *Prepare students for success by providing a student-centered experience, learning adapted to contemporary needs and access to resources*

The current report sought to 1) identify sources of peer support within student organizations at UNC-Chapel Hill and other campuses within the UNC system, 2) assess strengths and needs of those organizations, and 3) offer recommendations for expanding and improving peer support for mental health at UNC-Chapel Hill. The goal of providing this information is to increase the capacity of student groups to collaborate, enhance their programs, and gain greater recognition across campus.

Sample and Process

Student groups and representatives from other campuses within the UNC system were interviewed about their peer support activities and their needs and wants for future services. 13 key informant interviews were conducted between January and March of 2020, and participants were recruited from student groups and organizations whose mission directly or indirectly addressed mental health at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Findings

Interview participants expressed passion and care for addressing mental health and helping their fellow students. There was great variability in the nature of the needs identified and the structure of support services offered. Interview findings were summarized into six main categories.

- **Common challenges and barriers**: Challenges include need for additional dedicated peer support leadership; difficulty with participant recruitment and retention in clubs and programs; competition between groups providing similar services and programming; difficulty "standing out" to students within messaging across campus; and the challenge of intergroup collaboration failures where work was not shared equally.

- **Strengths of existing programming:** Strengths include maintaining consistent attendance at meetings; group commitment to seeking the stigma of mental health; openness of participants to peer support services and programming; existing support networks outside of mental-health specific environments; development of resources for online navigation; existing learning and collaboration in the Mental Health Coalition; and an overwhelming desire to show each other kindness and improve student wellbeing.

- **Resource needs:**

  o Skills enhancement, program improvement, and community-specific needs: For example, desire for training for more "awareness" of mental health, tailoring of programs to strengths and challenges of specific communities, e.g., LGBTQ students, African American students.

  o Coordination and communication: For example, wider knowledge and awareness of available campus resources within groups.

  o Campus-oriented improvements: For example, culturally representative providers at UNC-Chapel Hill's Counseling and Psychological Services.

- **Thoughts on collaboration:** Groups are open to collaboration and learning from other groups currently offering peer support.

- **Lessons from programs on other campuses:** Wellness programs within the UNC system have a wide breadth of peer coaching topics including finances, school success, and physical wellbeing, all of which are tied to students' overall mental health; they offer the benefit of sharing lessons learned/successes with emerging programs.

- **Future plans and goals:** Existing groups seek to expand the impact and capacity of their programs to reach more students; a variety of groups desire to collaborate with other campus groups; groups strive to develop more infrastructure for mental health support; emerging technology to ease access; and need for expansion of leadership to enhance succession planning and program sustainability.

Implications

Based on these findings, the University has a clear opportunity to capitalize on this information to support student groups and peer support initiatives. The report concludes by outlining key recommendations including: increased funding, improved linkages to CAPS, workshops and training, collaboration between school administration and student groups, and adaptation of programs to serve unique COVID-19 concerns and needs.

INTRODUCTION

Project Background

The *Report of the Mental Health Task Force* published in April 2019[1] encouraged UNC-Chapel Hill to, "Increase resources for programs focused on peer-to-peer support, non-crisis support and discussion."[1] This current report sought to survey current peer support services and activities on campus especially as they relate to the concerns Section 3 of the Mental Health Task Force Report detailed.

Qualitative interviews focused on the types of resources needed for programs offering peer support, as well as the breadth of these programs. Speaking with representatives from these groups afforded the opportunity to understand their future goals while identifying needed resources to optimize peer support to students. UNC-Chapel Hill is a university with over 800 student group organizations, and many other structures lending themselves to peer support. As such, there is ample opportunity to expand and strengthen existing programs and efforts. In doing so, the goal is to add to and improve existing infrastructure for mental health on campus.

Rationale

One of the identified "overarching challenges" in the *Report of Mental Health Task Force* included the observation that "the University is currently disconnected from its own grassroots initiatives."[1] UNC-Chapel Hill student groups, the primary focus of these interviews, encompass some of these grassroots initiatives. This report provides an opportunity for student groups to voice their needs and desires to the formal UNC-Chapel Hill administrative structure. The goal of providing this information is **to increase the capacity of student groups to collaborate, receive support from administration, and to meet or exceed future programmatic goals.**

> "People are *losing their minds* during recruitment and some mental health resources would be useful during that time."
>
> -UNC-Chapel Hill Greek Life

Student mental health is a serious and immediate concern to the University. Data indicate high rates of hopelessness, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and other mental health concerns in undergraduate, professional and graduate student populations both at UNC-Chapel Hill and across the nation.[1] This growing need is compounded by the current distancing measures in place to protect against the spread of COVID-19.

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[1] UNC-Chapel Hill Mental Health Task Force Report | April 2019

[2] Pfeiffer PN, Heisler M, Piette JD, Rogers MAM, Valenstein M. Efficacy of peer support interventions for depression: a meta-analysis. *Gen Hosp Psychiatry*. 2011;33(1):29-36.

[3] Elstad E, Boothroyd R, Henes A, Maslow G, Nelson K, Fisher E. Global systematic review of peer support for complex health behavior. International Congress of Behavioral Medicine; August, 2010; Washington, D.C.

Peer support is an evidence-based intervention strategy for improving mental health outcomes, such as decreasing loneliness, improving disease management, and improving daily functioning.[2,3] It is currently utilized by a number of student groups at UNC-Chapel Hill and throughout UNC system campuses. To alleviate an increasing burden on campus counseling centers, mental health infrastructure can be expanded and improved through peer support initiatives. Grassroots efforts by student groups to provide peer support and **a safe place for expressing emotion improves UNC-Chapel Hill's mental health infrastructure.**

Definition of Peer Support

This project used a broad definition of peer support, which includes but is not limited to support between students with shared lived experience. Organized, planned programs may deliver peer support using dyadic pairs (mutual support), trained peers helping students one-on-one, and group-based support. Beyond programs and groups identified as peer support, it can also present in networks and groups of people who share activities and space for discussion without predetermined agendas or goals. Indeed, peer support is integrated into most socially-oriented groups on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus, such as student-run clubs, common interest groups, resident halls, club sports, and fraternities/sororities.

Lastly, challenges to developing programs included difficulties when trying to collaborate with other campus groups. One participant described an attempt to collaborate with another student group that suffered from poor communication and uneven burden of work for each group. Ultimately, this collaboration collapsed because of the breakdown of communication and task sharing. **The ongoing challenge of maintaining effective communication and work distribution reveals an opportunity for groups to work on their approach to collaboration and equitable distribution of programming work to ensure future success.**

2. Strengths of Existing Programming

Some of the strengths to be highlighted from interviews includes: groups with consistent members at meetings; groups seeking to address the stigma of mental health; the openness of participants to peer support services and programming; existing support networks outside of mental-health specific environments; development of resources for online navigation; existing learning and collaboration in the Mental Health Coalition; and an overwhelming desire to show each other kindness and improve student wellbeing.

Even newer student groups, such as I Am Shakti, have consistent attendance from core members. Many groups have weekly or biweekly meetings comprising returning participants as well as new interested persons. While some students' groups struggled with retention, the ability of others to engage consistent membership could be leveraged as a strength for starting a peer support initiative.

> **We want to know how do you target vulnerable groups without creating stigma, or blaming identity for mental health issues, but also recognizing there are specific risks in certain communities."**
>
> **- SAGA**

I Am Shakti is also one of the groups directly addressing heightened mental health stigma within certain populations. I Am Shakti aims to create a space for the South Asian community to address mental health and challenge stigma. They remain open to other participants, and they create a vital space for discussion and support. Similarly, many other groups such as We Wear the Mask, SAGA, I Am Shakti, and OCEANS also address stigma and create spaces for communities with historically heightened stress and stigma around mental health. These communities include African American students, South Asian students, students with obesity, and LGBTQIA+ students. Student groups are beginning to see the start of mental health stigma reduction within their communities through their efforts to foster awareness and support.

Another strength of student groups is the openness and willingness of leadership to offer peer support services to other students. Participants spoke about wanting to incorporate the benefits of peer support into existing programming and to expand these services for the benefits of their current and future members. Two interview participants represented UNC-Chapel Hill club sports and Greek life, which involve a significant percentage of the undergraduate student body. These participants spoke about the ways in which these institutions already provide peer support, such as through "big-little" matching or team bonding between new players and upperclassmen. These existing networks offer a large opportunity for expanded peer support, and currently act as a necessary resource and support structure for many students attending UNC-Chapel Hill.

Student groups have already begun to collaborate and learn mutually by developing centralized resources and forming the Mental Health Coalition. As mentioned previously, Mind Above Matter is developing an online tool to navigate existing mental health resources on campus. This will be beneficial to those within student groups and those who are interested in getting involved in student organizations and activities. The Mental Health Coalition is an immense asset to campus mental health. The Coalition is run by student government representatives and offers a space for monthly meetings where student groups and interested persons can come together to discuss future plans and ask for collaboration, ideas, and support.

As an attendee at some of these meetings, I witnessed the importance of this continued communication and face-to-face building of rapport. The Coalition is acting as a learning network for students and has the capacity to expand its operations to foster collaboration between groups.

Overall, the interview participants showed passion and care for addressing mental health and helping their fellow students. **Immense value should be placed on the work that goes into founding and maintaining these groups, and the potential they offer to campuses to address mental health on the ground-level.**

> **"We want to know how do you get people to show up consistently – like what others have done. People are spread between different groups doing similar things, and we want to reach students in need and meet their interests."**
>
> **- We Wear the Mask**

3. Group Needs and Desired Resources

Through the course of interviewing, desires and needs for resources came up in a number of different categories including: skills enhancement, program improvement and community-specific needs; coordination and communication; and campus-oriented improvements.

Skills Enhancement, Program Improvement, and Community-Specific Needs

A consistent response, cited by about half of the interview participants, was the desire to learn about how to maintain the mental health of the peer supporters. This point was raised to highlight the importance of offering support to those providing support to others, and learning that peer supporters also have boundaries themselves. Peer supporter mental health can be addressed through training and awareness of other existing resources.

> **"We want to be able to be peer-certified and to connect with any groups who provide trainings so that we able to connect in that way."**
>
> **- Buddy Project**

Participants also expressed a desire for an increase in available training specific to peer support. Some participants cited a desire for training for more "awareness" of mental health, whereas others expressed a desire for training on specific skills to translate to peer support, such as the problem-solving elements of cognitive behavioral therapy. Alongside this desire for the development of accessible training, some participants expressed a need to complete a "peer certification." They saw this as a way to ensure that participants had the necessary skills and knowledge to be peer supporters, and support the role with tangible qualifications and competencies.

As mentioned previously, participants wanted to see an easily accessible online database of resources, including available training. To develop their own peer support programs, participants expressed that they have a desire to see accessible examples of peer support program curricula, and to learn from other existing peer support programs.

Participants spoke about wanting to learn about current best-practices on topics including how to reach vulnerable groups on campus; to reach students otherwise "in-need" of support; to create an open, welcoming, comfortable, and safe space for students to come and talk about issues during group meetings; and to explain the benefits of peer support to participants. In addition to these topics, participants wanted to be able to employ these best-practices without creating stigma or implicating a students' identity in mental health problems. Moreover, many had a desire to learn about issue-specific or community-specific topics, exploring intersectionality (specifically in the lens of peer support), and ways to encourage the overall health and well-being of others.

Coordination and Communication

Within coordination and communication, participants wanted greater knowledge and awareness of available campus resources; to know how to encourage student group leadership participation; and how to smoothly transfer ownership of peer support programs from group to group on campus. As previously stated, awareness of campus resources may soon be improved by centralized resources online. Additionally, the Mental Health Coalition acts as a facilitator to some of these desires for improved coordination and communication.

Campus-Oriented Improvements

On the campus-level, interview participants wanted to see training for staff and faculty on how to avoid perpetuating mental health stigma and weight bias. Participants, specifically OCEANS, wanted to see staff and faculty utilize weight bias training to transform their treatment of students, and to become aware of microaggressions and biases. OCEANS also wanted to see more available support for students with obesity on campus, not in the form of weight loss programs, but in ways to share experiences and receive emotional support. This sharing of experiences was mentioned as a prime opportunity to practice peer support and collaborative learning.

Another important point for campus-oriented change, brought up by Embody Carolina and We Wear the Mask, is the need for students to have access to culturally representative providers at

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5. Faculty and topic experts should provide workshops and training on varied topics, including, e.g., peer support program development, topics of interest to student groups, leadership and organizational development.

6. UNC-Chapel Hill administration should provide support for making peer support accessible to the student body throughout the duration of COVID-19 restrictions. This should include groups adapting existing programs to online platforms during COVID-19, as well as groups beginning new peer support initiatives to address expanded mental health needs during the pandemic.

7. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) has several important roles to play:

    o Recognizing and encouraging general understanding of peer support activities and services as an important part of efforts to improve mental health on-campus.

    o Linking with peer support organizations to facilitate both referrals to CAPS as well as CAPS offering information on campus peer support organizations to those it serves.

8. UNC-Chapel Hill should collaborate with other campuses to encourage peer support across the UNC system.

In closing, peer support contributes to and benefits from a climate of support in the surrounding community. Accordingly, these recommendations should extend to a campus-wide initiative for all persons learning, working, or teaching on UNC-Chapel Hill's campus.

Student Group/Organization	Group Description*
Embody Carolina	A UNC-Chapel Hill Campus Y committee working in partnership with professionals at the UNC-Chapel Hill Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders to raise awareness about eating disorders, cultivate a safe environment for students through meaningful policy change and educate students and community members about how to be a compassionate and effective ally to a peer with an eating disorder through the peer-led Embody Carolina training.
North Carolina State University Wellness Coaching	Wellness coaching at NC State aims to provide students the space to explore their well-being, the knowledge needed to be proactive, and accountability to practice skill-building in a supportive environment.
Fayetteville State University "Be Present Empowerment Model® (BPEM®)"	The Be Present Empowerment Model® (BPEM®) at Fayetteville State is led by campus Certified Peer Educators that have been used to assist students in developing peer led support systems to address holistic health. The Model is a social justice leadership program designed to build the capacity of participants and examine ways that social contexts such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and age impact the campus community and individual well-being.
Appalachian State University "WeCoach" Program	Appalachian State University's Department of Wellness and Prevention Services developed WE COACH, a peer to peer wellness coaching service, as a complement to other professional one on one services provided to students.
UNC-Chapel Hill Greek Life	A representative from a Panhellenic sorority on UNC-Chapel Hill campus spoke on behalf of their particular house, and on behalf of Greek Life at UNC-Chapel Hill as a whole.
UNC-Chapel Hill Club Sports	A representative from a UNC-Chapel Hill club soccer team was interviewed, and spoke on behalf of the basis for peer support specific to club soccer, and within UNC-Chapel Hill club sports in general.

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* Select descriptions from 2019 UNC-Chapel Hill Mental Health Task Force Report

APPENDICES A-C

Appendix A

Identifying Peer Support Resources on Campus to Advance UNC-Chapel Hill Campus Mental Health: Qualitative Phone/Email Interview Guide

Hello, my name is Hannah Barker and I am an RA with Peers for Progress, a program of the Gillings School of Global Public Health at UNC at Chapel Hill. Peers for Progress, along with the UNC-Chapel Hill Mental Health Coalition, is working to get a handle on the many, varied peer support groups and activities on campus and to identify what challenges they face. This might lead for example to something like a workshop to encourage peer support on campus. The information provided in these interviews would inform the structure of such a workshop or perhaps other activity.

Outreach Email: I'm reaching out today to learn more about [insert organization]. Do you have some time within the next week to have a phone conversation to answer a few questions? If yes, please let me know when you are available. If not, would you mind responding to some questions about your organization via email? I'll follow up with you within the next 24 hours. Thank you!

1) What is the name of your program?

2) What is your role in the organization?

3) When did the organization get started? How did the organization begin?

4) Can you briefly describe how the organization works?

5) What kind of services/events are offered?

6) Do you have any peer support initiatives or programs? Or do you incorporate peer support into any of your initiatives/campus services?

   a) If the organization has structured peer support programs…

      i) Who in your program provides peer support/is a peer supporter?

      ii) How do you recruit them?

      iii) Are they trained? What kind of training do they receive?

      iv) How are participants matched with peer supporters?

      v) What types of support do peer supporters provide?

      vi) What is the duration of the program?

      vii) Do you feel like you are reaching the students you intend to?

      viii) What are your goals for the initiative? What are the intended outcomes?

ix) Are there any major challenges or barriers you have come across with trying to utilize peer supporters?

x) What are your future plans for this program? What resources do you need to advance the program?

b) If the organization offers mutual support…

i) What are your goals for the initiative? What are the intended outcomes?

ii) How does peer support take place in your group – through meetings, individuals getting together, other ways?

iii) What are your future plans for this program? What resources do you need to advance the program?

7) Peer support can include social and emotional support; linkages to care or other resources; life skills-based; etc.. Do any of your initiatives/programs/services offer these kinds of benefits?

8) Are there any major challenges or barriers you have come across with trying to peer supporters?

9) What kind of assistance do you think your organization/program would benefit from?

10) Would workshops be useful to your organization? For example, sessions on different kinds of peer support; organizational readiness for a peer support program; collaborating on peer support with other organizations; etc.

11) What would you like to learn from other organizations addressing mental health on campus? In what ways do you think collaborations with other organizations are useful?

12) How might you envision your organization collaborating with other campus organizations to offer peer support programs?

13) Is there anything else you would like for me to know about your program?

14) Do you know of any other organizations that I should talk to that address mental health through peer support?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today! We really appreciate your input. I will be in touch soon and please email me with any follow-up thoughts, comments, or questions.

Appendix B

*Agenda for Webinar "*Building Peer Support Programs for Wellbeing at UNC-Chapel Hill" held on April 7th, 2020

Block	Guiding Questions	Details
Introduction ~7 min	• What are we going to talk about? • Who are we? • Who are you?	• Introducing the P4P team • Go over webinar agenda
People Helping People: Definition, Range & Application ~15 min	• What is "People Helping People (PHP)" • How to address mental health through PHP • What does PHP look like in different group capacities? • What are tangible examples of ways groups/individuals can utilize PHP?	• What is the breadth of MH concerns on campus? • Can these issues be addressed through PHP? • *PS in the aftermath of COVID-19* • Groups identified on campus to individual support outside of groups
Interview Findings *~8 min*	• *Share lessons from interviews* • *Ask for additional feedback*	• *Common barriers to successful programming* • *Desired education and resources* • *Future group goals and thoughts on coordination/collaboration* • *Ask for additional information*
Overview of Skills and Rules of Thumb *~10 min*	• *Areas of competency* • *General lessons learned*	• *What are the 5 key functions of successful peer support?* • *What are the frequent components of successful peer support programs?* • *Description of problem-solving and CBT approaches in context of PS*
Resources *~5 min*	• *What training is available for Peer Supporters on and off campus?*	• *Training resources* ▪ *Formal and informal skill development* • *Applying skills during COVID-19* • *What skills do you already bring to the table?*

Looking to the Future: Program Management & Development
 	
~12 min
	• How do we move forward?
	• How to support those providing PS?
	• How to fill gaps in implementation?
		• Program Management
		• Program Development
		• Collaborative learning network
		• *Look at example programs/curriculum*
		• Open discussion:
		  ▪ What programs would you like to see next year?
		  ▪ How can you prepare for that now?
		  ▪ What support are you looking for…?
		  ▪ How can P4P continue to support PHP initiatives? On the individual and group levels?

Closing ~3 min	• Where do we go from here? • Wrap-up	• Leave participants with some brainstormed plans for next semester • Share contact information • Answer unaddressed chat questions • Connect to extended discussion time
Extended discussion time Up to 1 hr. 15	• Any desired topics of discussion from attendees • Prepare for 1-3 topics	Possible Discussion Topics/Questions: • How to of community-specific tailoring • Connecting this to now - COVID-19 impact on future PS programs • How to have successful program recruitment & retention? • Supervision

Appendix C

Webinar Reflections

The Webinar titled "Building Peer Support Programs for Wellness at UNC-Chapel Hill" was hosted in Zoom and attended by mainly UNC-Chapel Hill faculty and staff. All interview participants from UNC-Chapel Hill were invited to attend. Two interview participants attended, and the rest of the participants have received the link to watch the webinar online on their own time. The webinar also remains publicly available to view on the [Peers for Progress website](#).

The webinar received positive feedback from participants expressing it was informative and inspiring for their own programming within their department. Since this webinar, some of the attendees have continued to collaborate with Peers for Progress on developing peer support interventions for mental health amid COVID-19.

The 1-hour duration for the webinar worked well on the Zoom platform. The agenda for the webinar was adapted from the original workshop agenda, and was shortened for time.

If future workshops are in-person, the duration should be extended to include more time for activities and participant discussion. Future suggested topics include: envisioning peer support programming; understanding programmatic leadership roles; facing challenges of recruitment and retainment; creating diverse and inclusive communities; and meeting community-specific needs without creating or perpetuating mental health stigma.