

Full Scale Implementation of Class Leaders within FYS – Initial Results

A report submitted to Dr. Kim Black, Director of Assessment
July 9, 2020 by

Angela L. Vaughan, PhD

Michael Graham

Alexis Hauck

Stephanie Persutte-Manning

Introduction

UNC's first-semester course, University 101, has retained program participants at significantly higher levels, both in the short and long term, and have earned higher GPAs as compared to nonparticipants (Vaughan et al., 2014). Additionally, these effects have even been greater for at-risk populations including first-generation (almost 50% of the program population), minority and male students (Swanson et al., 2015; Vaughan, Parra, & Lalonde, 2014; Vaughan, et al., 2019).

Research suggests that incorporating peer leaders, or class leaders, can support engagement, enhanced learning in the course, academic achievement, connection to the institution, and persistence (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015; Smith, 2008; Topper, 1998). Peer mentorship has been linked with positive college experiences as students learn from peer-to-peer interactions. Students often look to other students inside and outside of the classroom for guidance and instruction on how to navigate the world around them (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). In fact, Hall (2004) found that students who were struggling to transition into college utilized other students as resources for support more frequently than university supplied resources. The need to harness the effectiveness of the support within the peer-to-peer relationship for incoming students is apparent. Understanding this potential impact to freshmen student success, the UNIV 101 implemented a Class Leader (CL) program in the last three years in a limited capacity to further support students and their transition.

During the first two years of the program, Fall 2016 – 2017, a mixed-methods study was conducted to assess student achievement and impact of the CL program. The quantitative data showed that there were differences in persistence (up to 10% difference) and first-term GPA (up

to 0.4 difference) of students who had a CL during their first semester versus those who did not (including first-generation students). See Table 1.

Table 1

Persistence to Spring Chi-Square Results and First-Term GPA ANCOVA Results for All Students and First-Generation Students

	<i>N</i>	<i>Persist</i>		
All students				
CL group	385	332 (92%)		
Non-CL group	3815	3285 (86%)		
First-generation students				
CL group	172	332 (93%)		
Non-CL group	1667	1395 (83%)		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Adjusted M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
All students				
CL group	384	3.02	0.048	[2.93, 3.11]
Non-CL group	3790	2.64	0.015	[2.61, 2.67]
<i>R</i> ²		0.29		
First-generation students				
CL group	171	2.83	0.076	[2.68, 2.97]
Non-CL group	1644	2.41	0.025	[2.36, 2.46]
<i>R</i> ²		0.24		

The qualitative data included focus groups with students, CLs, and instructors. These focus groups led to specific programmatic changes each year such as increased team building between CLs and between instructors and CLs, refined training to clearly define roles and responsibilities, providing more lesson planning materials, specifying improved communication requirements, providing more time for students to be around class leaders, and refining the recruitment and selection process. See Table 2.

Table 2

Recommendations and Implementation

Recommendations after year 1	Implementation year 2
Increase clarity and transparency in expectations for CLs in the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CL’s were provided more training around roles and job requirements • Additional materials and specific weekly lesson plans were provided • Began relationships between instructors and CLs earlier
Increase frequency of CL presence in classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CL’s doubled the amount of time in the classroom
Improve avenues for communication between CL, CL team, and instructors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training began with a 4-hour team building exercise between all instructors and CLs • CL’s had monthly team meetings and were required to meet with their instructor weekly
Recommendations after year 2	Implementation year 3
Continue to clarify the role of the CL and support their skill development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will continue changes from year 2 and provide more role-playing and instruction around technology during training • Will provide additional reading resources prior to training • Will incorporate specific training for instructors to help them effectively communicate their expectations to CLs • Instructors and CLs briefly met prior to the summer to begin building their relationships • Will increase CL team meetings during the semester to support their roles
Provide opportunities for relationship development between CLs and CLs and instructors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors and CLs briefly met prior to the summer to begin building their relationships • Training will again begin with a 4-hour team building exercise between all instructors and CLs • Will continue weekly meetings between instructors and CLs • Will increase CL team meetings during the semester to support their roles
Provide resources for social activities and classroom activities to CL’s to promote connection to students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More role-playing will be included in training to support classroom interactions between CLs and students • Lesson plans will be expanded to include campus events and opportunities

Due to including each of the recommendations from the assessments completed in years one and two, year three was the most successful year for the program. As a result, we were ready to scale up the program and include Class Leaders for all students who participate in UNIV 101 in Fall 2019.

Purpose

This study provides follow up from the initial mixed-methods study of incorporating CLs in UNIV 101 and provides a more comprehensive examination. This was a program-level assessment.

Research Questions

The primary research question asks whether the success of year three can be replicated when scaled to serve the entire UNIV 101 program. In other words, were the elements of the program in year three the basis of the success or was it dependent on the group of CLs who participated?

- (1) Do incorporating Class Leaders affect students' first semester achievement (i.e., first-term GPA, and spring persistence) including first-generation students?
- (2) What are the experiences of CL program participants (i.e., instructors, CLs, and students)?
- (3) How do CLs skill and effectiveness change over the course of the semester?
- (4) What are students' perceptions of and engagement with the CL program?

Participants

Participants were first-time, full-time entering freshmen during Fall 2019 (N = 1722). During this semester there were 24 sections of UNIV 101 with 15 instructors and 15 Class Leaders. There were 402 students who participated in the UNIV 101 seminar. See Table 3.

Table 3

Demographic Information

	UNC Freshman N (%)	Class Leader Sections n (%)	Instructors	Class Leaders
All	1722 (100%)	402 (100%)	15	15
Female	1179 (69%)	262 (65%)	9	13
First Generation	713 (41%)	185 (46%)		
Students of Color	704 (41%)	169 (42%)	0	4

Instruments

A survey was developed to collect information about students’ engagement and students’ perceptions of the CL program. For example, these items asked students how many CL sponsored events they attended and what was their favorite events to perceptions of feeling welcomed and whether they would return in the spring.

Data Collection

Quantitative data (i.e., demographic information, first-term GPA, spring credits) from university data sets was collected after the Census date on Spring 2020. Other quantitative data include a short questionnaire that all UNIV 101 participants were asked to complete during the last class session in the Fall 2019 semester. Students were in the computer lab and the link to the Qualtrics survey was available on Canvas.

The qualitative data collection included three focus groups (i.e., UNIV 101 instructors, class leaders, and participating students) conducted at the end of the semester. Two of these focus groups (participating UNIV 101 instructors, $n = 6$ and participating students, $n = 7$) provided information about the efficacy of including Class Leaders. The third focus group (i.e., Class Leaders, $n = 8$) was primarily used to identify any gaps in the support, training and

delivery of their required tasks. The focus groups lasted about an hour and were semi-structured with open ended questions in order to allow the group to construct meaning out of their experiences. The same researcher conducted all three focus groups. Participation was voluntary and refreshments were provided.

The other data was observations of CLs in the classroom. Observations occurred during the first three weeks of the semester and once again during the last three weeks of the semester. The same researcher conducted all of these observations using a checklist rubric.

Key Findings

RQ1: Do incorporating Class Leaders affect students’ first semester achievement (i.e., first-term GPA, and spring persistence) including first-generation students?

The quantitative data showed that there were not differences in persistence; however, there were significant differences in first-term GPA (up to 0.4 difference) of students who had a CL during their first semester versus those who did not (including first-generation students). See Tables 4 and 5. As many students continue in the spring semester regardless of performance, it is likely that persistence differences would not be clear until the following fall semester.

Table 4

Chi-Square Test of Homogeneity to Assess Persistence to Spring

	<i>n</i>	<i>Persisted</i>	<i>p</i>
All			
Class Leaders	402	347 (86%)	.87
Non-Class Leaders	1320	1143 (86%)	
First-Generation Students			
Class Leaders	185	152 (82%)	.67
Non-Class Leaders	528	425 (81%)	

Table 5

ANOVA Results to Assess First-Term GPA

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>
All				
Class Leader Sections	402	3.0	0.82	.02
Non-Class Leader Sections	1320	2.8	1.10	
First-Generation Students				
Class Leader Sections	185	2.9	0.83	< .0001
Non-Class Leader Sections	528	2.5	1.15	

RQ 2: What are the experiences of CL program participants (i.e., instructors, CLs, and students)?

The qualitative data was collected through three different avenues. First, focus groups at the end of the Fall 2020 academic semester were conducted with students, CLs, and instructors to further understand the impact of the CL program. These focus groups provided evidence to how CLs interacted with students and instructors inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, the quotes listed in Table 6 display strong evidence supporting the continual refinement of the CL program.

Table 6

Quotes from Focus Groups

Student Quotes	Instructor Quotes	CL Quotes
<p>“I think my class leader definitely showed aspects of being successful, because she mentioned during the year that she had an injury her freshman year and she had to, not drop out of college, but leave for a few months and then had to catch all the way back up and everything. And that’s pretty hard to do, especially in college.”</p> <p>“My class leader, he used examples too, which was really helpful, especially because on the research paper he chose his own topic. He also, he did really well in the classes.”</p>	<p>Instructors appreciated the thoroughness and thoughtfulness that went into CL/Instructor Pairings.</p> <p>Instructors raved about CLs providing the student perspective and application of the course content that was relatable to students in the course.</p> <p>Instructors were grateful students picked up on the relational dynamics between CLs/Instructors that served as modeling for professional relationships.</p>	<p>“I just completely enjoyed the experience, and it’s so fun to watch them come in as timid freshmen and then grow as individuals and just know each other, and some of them are going to be roommates next year, and all kinds of fun stuff.”</p> <p>“I had such a close connection with my students and my instructor, and I really valued my time in the program. So, if I had the opportunity, I would 100% without even thinking do it again.”</p>

RQ 3: How do CLs skill and effectiveness change over the course of the semester?

Observational data was utilized to provide more understanding around the professional development of CLs from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester. Table 7 provides evidence of the developmental progression CLs experienced over the fall semester.

Table 7

Observational Results of CL Development

Beginning Semester Observations	End of Semester Observations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role confusion as they were not sure where to be during class time. • Relational dynamics with instructors of not knowing when to speak up. • Unsure of what role in classroom management they play. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfortable and confident in their classes. • Better relational dynamics with instructors. • Professional, engaged, and openly sharing with students.

RQ 4: What are students’ perceptions of and engagement with the CL program?

Survey data was collected to provide further understanding around the impact that CLs had upon students within their classes. This data was collected through an online Qualtrics survey that was distributed to all courses and both instructors and CLs encouraged students to complete the survey. Specifically, survey data collection was designed to get a better understanding of who attended CL sponsored events outside of class time, what type of events had the most attendance, and how CLs impacted students’ beliefs around feeling welcomed and valued as a student at UNCO. Also, the survey data presented in Table 8 provides strong evidence of campus engagement and community building.

Table 8

Survey Participants and Event Participation

Survey Respondents (n = 373)	n	%	UNIV 101 (n = 402)	n	%
Female	249	67	Female	262	65
First-Generation	161	41	First-Generation	185	46
Colorado Resident	322	88			

At Least 1 Event Attended	n	%
Female	141	57
Male	67	54
First-Generation	102	63
Student of Color	57	63
Colorado Resident	186	58
Lives on Campus	185	58

Additionally, survey data collection included correlational items to gain a better understanding of the impact CLs had upon students’ beliefs around feeling welcomed at UNCO, efficacy as a college student, pursuing leadership opportunities on campus, and whether or not they felt UNCO was a home for them during their undergraduate degree (i.e., persisting to

graduation). The survey data presented in Table 9 displays strong evidence that CLs had significant impact on students’ beliefs that they are at the right university.

Table 9

Correlational Matrix of Student Beliefs

<i>n</i> =364	Welcomed	Belief in Ability	Spring Persistence	Graduation
Other Leadership	.342**	.434**	.571**	.257**
Welcomed		.633**	.381**	.143**
Belief in Ability			.504**	.168**
Spring Persistence				.308**

** Significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

These initial results from our fourth-year assessment of the CL program demonstrate that year four was the most successful year for the program. Important to note, from the third year to the fourth year, our primary objective was to enlarge the scale of our CL program and gauge effectiveness at a larger scale. Previous years have provided refinements to get to this point. As a result, we are now ready to assess the replication of the larger scaled CL program. New components for Fall 2020 based on these results can be seen in Table 10. With ongoing assessment each year, UNC’s UNIV 101 Class Leader program has effectively supported students and will continue to do so over the long-term.

Table 10

Changes for Fall 2020

Fall 2019	Fall 2020
Bi-Monthly Meetings	Weekly Team Meetings
1-day Summer Training	8-hr Spring & 4-hr Summer Training
Social Media Presence	Increased Presence beginning in the Summer
Unstructured Event Planning	Identified Committees for Planning Specific Events (e.g., homecoming)

References

- Colvin, J. W., & Ashman, M. (2010). Roles, risks, and benefits of peer mentoring relationships in higher education. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 18(2), 121-134.
- Hall, R. (2004). *Peer mentoring programs for first year undergraduate students* (Faculty papers, No. 2). Sydney, Australia: The University of New South Wales, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.
- Rieske, L. J., & Benjamin, M. (2015). Utilizing peer mentor roles in learning communities. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2015(149), 67 – 77.
- Smith, T. (2008). Integrating undergraduate peer mentors into liberal arts courses: A pilot study. *Innovative Higher Education*, 33(1), 49 – 63.
- Swanson, N. M., Vaughan, A. L., & Wilkinson, B. D. (2017). First-year seminars: Supporting male college students' long-term academic success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 18(4), 386 - 400. doi: 10.1177/1521025115604811
- Topper, K. (1998). The Effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: A typology and review of the literature. In S. Goodlad (Ed.), *Mentoring and tutoring by students* (pp. 49–70), London, England: Kogan Page.
- Vaughan, A. L., Lalonde, T., & Jenkins-Guarnieri, M. A. (2014). Assessing student achievement in large-scale educational programs using hierarchical propensity scores. *Research in Higher Education*, 55(6), 564-580. doi: 10.1007/s11162-014-9329-8
- Vaughan, A. L., Parra, J., & Lalonde, T. (2014). First-generation college student achievement and the first year seminar: A quasi-experimental design. *The Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 26(2), 53-69.
- Vaughan, A. L., Pergantis, S. I., & Moore, S. M. (2019). Assessing the difference between 1-, 2-,

and 3-credit first-year seminars on college student achievement. *The Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 31(2) 9 – 28.