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Promoting Holistic Wellness in Honors Students through Peer Coaching

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Abstract: While the conversation in honors about the mental health of students has persisted for over two decades, authors identify a marked increase in the need for student mental health support since the first Generation Z students entered college in 2015. A review of literature in honors indicates upticks in discourse relating to mental health ($n = 66$) since 2004, and content analysis shows peaks in publication for 2018 and 2021 ($n = 11$, respectively). This study describes a peer coaching program that focuses on the holistic wellness and support of honors students. Authors observe a decrease in Behavioral Intervention Team meetings and suicide attempts since the program's inception in 2015. Programmatic details, including application and selection, training, expectations of peer coaches, assessment, and improvement initiatives are included so that similar programs can be implemented in and beyond honors.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; mental health of college students; peer counseling; well-being; University of Central Arkansas (AR)—Norbert O. Schedler Honors College

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Many of our honors students are struggling. The mental health challenges of honors students have been well documented in numerous National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) publications and in presentations at the annual meeting. A search of “mental health” on the DigitalCommons site yields 66 NCHC results ranging back to 2004, with 2018 and 2021 being peak years of eleven publications each year. The first Generation Z students entered college in 2015, after which we have seen a fourfold increase in the number of publications concerned with mental health. Generation Z students

say they are stressed, overwhelmed, depressed, and anxious at rates significantly higher than previous generations (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). They report that they are anxious about their futures in light of a changing climate, gun violence, sexual assault, discrimination, and persistent inequality (Collisson et al., 2021). Demographically, Generation Z is the most racially diverse, with only 52% being non-Hispanic whites followed by 25% Hispanic, 14% Black, 6% Asian, and 5% a different race or two or more races (Parker and Igielnik, 2020), and we are seeing increasingly diverse honors students as a result. With a more diverse population of students, we are seeing a wider range of lived experiences, traumas, and other major stressors that lead to an increase in mental health concerns as well (Liu et al., 2019).

Research shows that while higher percentages of Gen Z report mental health challenges, they are also more likely than previous generations to seek out mental health support (Brenan, 2022; Brown, 2016; Collisson et al., 2021). On college campuses, campus counseling centers report struggling to meet the demand of students requesting appointments (Donadel, 2023). The Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) 2021 Annual Report shows that anxiety is the most commonly reported reason for seeking counseling services, followed by depression (CCMH, 2021). Also on the list are a range of other concerns, including body image issues, family problems, eating disorders, and housing/food insecurity. While suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are still regularly reported by students, the prevalence of suicide-related counseling is declining.

In addition to the challenges that the Gen Z population are struggling with, honors students are often at even greater risk as a sub-population. Beyond perfectionist tendencies and feelings of being an imposter within a high-performing academic community (Rice et al., 2006), honors students often struggle with executive functioning skills. According to the Davidson Institute (2022), gifted and twice-exceptional children often develop “asynchrony,” meaning that their emotional development may be delayed due to an advanced cognitive development. Challenges with time management, organization, and ability to focus often further frustrate high-achieving honors students. Learning to navigate these challenges independently as young adults adds an additional layer of stress for many.

To proactively start a dialogue about mental health in our honors community and assist students before their struggles escalate to a suicide attempt, the Norbert O. Schedler Honors College implemented a peer counselor program for the 2015–2016 academic year. Research that indicated rates of

self-reported mental well-being had fallen to a 25-year low and that honors students were found to have significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression than the rest of campus populations (Brenan, 2022; Cuevas et al., 2019) informed our decision to develop the peer counselor program. Through an application and interview process, we selected three student volunteers to serve as our first honors peer counselors. We trained the peer counselors in several areas including the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) as well as diversity and inclusion, de-escalation strategies, and when to refer students to the campus counseling center in an emergency capacity. The campus counseling center and the Department of Psychology and Counseling partnered with us in the training. In the beginning of the program, a psychology and counseling graduate assistant met weekly with the peer counselors for ongoing training, debriefing student interactions, and role-playing potential future interactions. The peer counselors were provided a room in the honors residence hall to use as an office, and they regularly held office hours during which students were encouraged to drop in and talk.

Housing and Residence Life liked the idea of peer counselors and wanted to implement a similar program in other residence halls. One of the honors peer counselors suggested a name change to peer coach because he thought the name sounded more accessible. Around the same time, the Office of Student Success (OSS) implemented a similar though more academically focused program. Honors, Housing and Residence Life, and the OSS all liked the name peer coach, so that name was adopted around 2016. Most residence halls received a dedicated peer coach, and campus-wide peer coaches operated out of the OSS and were primarily tasked with coaching academically at-risk students on academic probation. The OSS proposed a partnership with honors in which honors peer coaches were paid as student workers for a maximum of ten hours per week. The honors peer coaches began participating in beginning-of-year training with the OSS peer coaches while also receiving supplemental training from the honors associate dean and the counseling center to ensure that the honors peer coaches continued to be prepared to meet the special mental health needs in addition to academic concerns of the honors community.

Since the inception of the honors peer counselor program (hereafter referred to as the honors peer coach program), the number of suicide attempts within our community of around 400 honors students has dropped substantially. Prior to the inception of the program, honors administration

was routinely called on to assist the Dean of Students office with at least one Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) meeting with honors students each semester and typically assisted in responding to at least one suicide attempt per year. With the advent of the peer coach program, we have been able to normalize the conversation about mental health within our community, and now we have entire academic years without having a BIT meeting or responding to a suicide attempt.

Despite having the peer coaches readily accessible within the residence hall, holding regular office hours, and sponsoring programs within the hall, students were not necessarily using the peer coaches as much as we would have hoped. The decrease in serious mental health events within the community may have resulted primarily from the peer coach program's providing a natural reason for honors faculty and administration to openly discuss mental health with our students, thus reducing the stigma often associated with mental health challenges.

To increase student engagement with the peer coaches, in the spring semester of 2021 we broadened the mission of the peer coach program to focus not only on mental health and academic challenges but on holistic wellness. We also shifted the model of peer coach job expectations from "I am in the office, come talk to me if you need anything" to more active planning and engagement through the implementation of Active Hours. Each peer coach was asked to plan one Active Hour per week and advertise it, via flyers and announcements in the honors group chats, to the student body in advance. Active Hours are just what their name implies: doing something active as opposed to sitting in the office hoping students show up. The most common Active Hours included making healthy snacks such as green smoothies, overnight oats, and granola bites as well as taking walks in the campus nature reserve, building with Legos, and playing with Play-Doh. The peer coaches reported more student interactions in the spring semester than the previous fall. We also believe that the Active Hours helped raise the profile of peer coaches within the community as evidenced by receiving record numbers of peer coach applications for the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 academic years. Because of the number of applications we received, we changed our model from three peer coaches working ten hours a week to six peer coaches working five hours per week. This change allowed us to diversify the majors and classifications of the staff to better meet the needs of the student population. While we have done a good job of attracting applicants of diverse majors, classifications, genders, and sexual orientations, we have struggled to attract

applicants of color. We are planning to address this concern through targeted application invitations for the next application cycle.

For the 2021–2022 academic year, the honors administration also implemented the Honors Evaluation and Response Team (HEART) based on a Crisis Assessment Risk Evaluation (CARE) Team model that has been adopted in many student affairs divisions across the U.S. We have a Student of Concern Report (SOCR) linked on our website that anyone can submit on behalf of a student. Submission of a SOCR triggers an email to the honors associate dean, who reviews the report and determines next steps. Often the SOCRs are submitted by honors faculty for students who are struggling in class, having attendance problems, and/or missing work. Students have also submitted SOCRs for other students who are struggling with mental health issues, family concerns, poor academic performance, and suicidal ideation. If appropriate, peer coaches are called upon to reach out to the students of concern. We have even had a couple of students submit SOCRs for themselves, knowing submission of the form would result in someone from honors reaching out to them to offer assistance.

While Active Hours and HEART have increased student interaction with the peer coaches and alerted honors administration to potential problems before they escalated, we know that many of our students are still struggling, and many of them suffer in silence. To assess honors student awareness and usage of the peer coach program, we obtained IRB approval and conducted a short Google form survey. Fifty-seven students completed the survey, yielding a response rate of approximately 13%. Representation was good from all classifications, with 35% of the respondents being freshmen and 14% seniors. Only 21% indicated they had attended peer coach office hours while 42% indicated they had attended an Active Hour. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 representing “not at all likely” and 5 representing “very likely,” only 38.6% chose 3, 4, or 5 with respect to attending peer coach office hours in the future, while 65% chose 3, 4, or 5 with respect to attending an Active Hour event in the future. These results indicate to us that many students are more comfortable interacting with the peer coaches in a group rather than individually. When asked what would make them more likely to go to peer coaching, 50.2% selected “If I knew that others went” and 42.1% selected “If I could go with someone else.” Participants were also asked what kinds of activities they would like to see the peer coaches do, and the most common answers were arts and crafts (59.6%), walking in the nature reserve (57.9%), and making healthy snacks (56.1%).

Based on those survey results, we have tried to be more intentional about planning Active Hours, often choosing activities that will encourage groups of students to attend together while also providing opportunities for conversations between students and peer coaches. Some of the most popular active hours have been

- Painting Happy Rocks
- Puppy Therapy—students bring their ESAs for destressing
- Chalk and Talk—students make sidewalk art while sharing how they are doing
- Whine and Cheese—students share and workshop their college frustrations while sharing a cheese board and sparkling juice
- Sip, Study, and Spotify—students and peer coaches enjoy a coffee bar while studying

Several times throughout the academic year, peer coaches also print positive affirmations and encouragement on Post-It notes and place these on each door within the honors residence hall. In the spring of 2022, the peer coaches also planned an Easter egg hunt, in which positive affirmations and candy were placed inside eggs that were hidden around the honors residence hall and common areas. Students could bring up to three eggs to the peer coach office and turn them in for small prizes. In addition, three golden eggs were hidden, and finders of those eggs turned them in for Sonic gift cards; collecting the prizes resulted in some honors students visiting the office for the first time, which might lead them to return for Active Hours and office hours.

During the 2021–2022 academic year, the peer coaches and associate dean had weekly meetings in which peer coaches recapped the outcomes of previous Active Hours, planned future events, and discussed interactions with students from SOCRs or students who had sought out the peer coaches and might need additional follow-up and support. The peer coaches also all read *Helping People Change: Coaching with Compassion for Lifelong Learning and Growth* (Boyatzis et al., 2019), which gives real-world examples of how coaching assisted professionals and students through their next life change. One of the most helpful takeaways from the book was the application of the Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA) and Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA). The idea of the PEA and the NEA is that to make serious change, there must be positive emotions related to the desired change rather than only negative consequences if the change is not made. Boyatzis et al. (2019)

refer to this critical difference as *coaching with compassion* rather than *coaching for compliance*. Second, *Helping People Change* emphasizes the importance of crafting a vision or dream goal, causing peer coaches to help students think of and create their personal vision not for *what* they want to be but for *who* they want to be. Emphasizing *who* rather than *what* helps to activate the PEA by encouraging them to view whatever changes they are trying to make as desirable steps on their journey to becoming the person they want to be.

In the spring 2022 semester, the only peer coach to return from the 2020–2021 academic year asked to do an independent study on peer coaching to help continue improving the program. In tandem with the associate dean, the peer coach selected a wide range of readings that included books and academic journals. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Dweck, 2006) and *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (Clear, 2018) both led to changes in the honors peer coach program. Dweck's famous work focuses on embracing the growth mindset and dismantling the fixed mindset. In the most basic terms, the growth mindset holds that consistently dedicating time and effort into something will increase an individual's skill whereas the fixed mindset holds that skill sets are a trait that cannot be changed (Dweck, 2006). The growth mindset is closely related to grit, a skill our honors students have in decreasing numbers. Clear (2018) discusses ways to make new healthy habits routine and discard unhealthy habits. Clear's thesis is that tiny daily changes will lead to major results. *Atomic Habits* lays out four tenets of behavioral change to create good habits: make it obvious (cue), make it attractive (craving), make it easy (response), and make it satisfying (reward) (Clear, 2018).

These readings and others informed new peer coach trainings within a reference guide that included entries on boundaries, executive functioning, habit building, and grit. The guide was designed for use by peer coaches to provide resources to students struggling with these topics. Boundaries are discussed briefly in *Atomic Habits* since they are essential to building healthy habits. Maintaining a healthy balance is key to success in college, and setting boundaries helps prevent students from becoming overwhelmed. Our community has seen an increase of students who are neurodivergent and struggle with executive functioning. The guide includes Dawson and Guare's (n.d.) *Executive Skills Questionnaire* to identify strengths and weaknesses with respect to 12 categories of executive functioning skills: response inhibition, working memory, emotional control, task initiation, sustained attention, planning/prioritization, organization, time management, flexibility, metacognition,

goal-directed persistence, and stress tolerance. Other resource guide items focus on these aspects of behavioral change and growth mindset.

During the summer, the peer coaches and honors mentors, who are predominantly sophomore students tasked with aiding first-year students' experience and transition to college, attend training sessions via Zoom on an array of topics relevant to their jobs. Zoom trainings are recorded and uploaded to the leadership groups' Blackboard shells for those unable to attend. Following each training session, student leaders are required to participate in a reflective journal entry or discussion board to reflect on the content of the training and think about questions they may still have or new questions the training session may have prompted. The journals and discussion boards are read by the honors associate dean and faculty mentor coordinator to gather information for further discussion in the on-campus training sessions prior to the start of the fall semester. A schedule listing the topics covered, any readings associated with the training, and what online modules must be completed that week is shown in Table 1. Most sessions included a guest speaker from offices and disciplines across campus, including the campus counseling center, the university training office, student affairs, the director of the Gender Studies Program, and a member from the university LGBTQ+ Diversity Advisory Committee.

TABLE 1. SCHEDULE OF TOPICS, READINGS AND MODULES

Date	Topic	Reading Assignment	Vector Solutions Modules
May 17	Nuts and Bolts, Professionalism, and Confidentiality	Manual: Why Mentors Matter, Nuts and Bolts of Mentoring	
June 14	Diversity	Manual: Diversity and Cultural Awareness	—Diversity Awareness for Students
June 28	Navigating Difficult Conversations and Boundaries	Manual: Leadership Training and Conflict Resolution	—Stress Management —Communication Styles and Skills
July 19	Implicit Bias and Microaggressions	Readings on Blackboard	—Sensitivity Awareness for Students
July 26	Student Mental Health	Manual: Making Referrals	—Mental Health Awareness —Youth Suicide: Awareness, Prevention and Postvention
August 9	Needs of the LGTBQ+ student population		—Creating a Respectful Campus for LGBTQ+ Students

Our aim for the honors peer coach program is to foster an environment of wellness that leads to student thriving. “Thriving in College” (Schreiner, 2013) was another reading that shaped the reframing of the honors peer coach program. Thriving is more than succeeding; it consists of engaged learning, diverse citizenship, social connectedness, positive perspective, and academic determination (Schreiner, 2013). Cuevas et al. (2017) showed that honors students in particular struggle with the social connectedness necessary to thriving, in part due to mental health concerns with respect to perfectionism and lack of a sense of belonging. In addition to recommending building strong partnerships with the campus counseling center, they also recommend using peer mentors (peer coaches in our case) to offer positive, prevention-based programming to promote student well-being (Cuevas et al., 2017). Ultimately, we want students to thrive so that they leave our program as well-rounded individuals who are prepared for the adversity that life will throw at them, and we believe that a peer coach program can assist students in becoming the people they want to be.

We recognize that some people reading this essay may be concerned about placing too much pressure or responsibility on the peer coaches. To guard against burnout and contributing to mental health struggles among the peer coaches, we are very intentional about training them on setting and holding their own healthy boundaries as well as on when to refer students to the counseling center or honors administration for more substantive help. The weekly meetings between the peer coaches and the honors associate dean also provide a touchpoint so that we can discuss how the peer coaches are doing and address any concerns they have, including when a peer coach may need to step back for a week due to academic or personal demands on their time and attention. Despite those concerns, we believe strongly that the need and benefit of the peer coach program justify its existence. As the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) states, “One does not have to be a therapist to be therapeutic” (SAMHSA, 2014).

Honors has often been represented as a small university acting within the larger institution, with operations that extend far beyond those of a traditional academic college. Our students face the same challenges as the larger collegiate community, but their closer relationship to the honors community often means we are in a position to serve as a first line of contact when a student is struggling. With each new generation of students, we must continue to adapt to meet the needs of the population. Meeting the needs of today’s students calls for holistic support of their mental and physical health, and if

we are to continue to help our students to thrive in honors and in the larger academic community, then we must incorporate programs and activities that are intentional in design to meet these needs.

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