

## ***The First- Year Seminar: Designing, Implementing, and Assessing Courses to Support Student Learning and Success, Volume IV: Using Peers in the Classroom.***

by Jennifer A. Latino and Michelle L. Ashcraft

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Reviewed by

Joel Hanlon (jhdhanlon@radford.edu) is the Senior Assistant Director for New Student Programs at Radford University.

First-year seminars are a driving force in retention efforts across the country. These courses play a huge role in the transition of incoming students as they aid in acclimation to a new college environment and offer a variety of resources. One of the most important of those resources is the classroom peer mentor. While there has been much literature published on the importance of a course peer mentor, this volume provides a much needed blueprint of just how to select, train, and utilize peer mentors for maximum impact on first-year students. Latino and Ashcraft's *The First Year Seminar: Designing, Implementing, and Assessing Courses to Supporting Student Learning and Success, Volume IV: Using Peers in the Classroom* gives readers a framework to follow in all aspects of working with peer mentors. The authors demonstrate their mastery of the topic by including their respective application forms and interview questions, as well as providing national best practices.

Although Latino and Ashcraft provide adequate background and overview of theory, the main focus of the piece is practice. Clearly, the target audience is graduate students, new professionals, and seasoned student affairs professionals, as well as faculty members teaching a first-year seminar for the first time. This volume would be ideal for someone looking to revamp existing first-year courses or a professional who is looking to develop a first-year course. The authors provide a good overview and lay a good foundation for the relationship between the faculty and peer mentor. Easy-to-follow steps are provided so that any practitioner can achieve success with properly integrating a peer mentor into his or her classroom.

A more unconventional use for this volume would be as a resource for the peer mentors. As Latino and Ashcraft explain, very few peer mentors enter into their

position with a full understanding of their importance in the classroom; the use of examples and anecdotes helps both instructors and peer mentors comprehend best practices surrounding mentorship. Allowing peer mentors to use this piece as a behavioral outline would help them reflect on their experience, but it would also provide them a chance to generate ideas that may prove more practical for their specific courses. This volume also provides seasoned professionals a resource to stay current with best practices and theory that has emerged recently.

More than half the volume is spent focusing on the development of the relationship between the peer educator and professional instructor. Latino and Ashcraft have provided a valuable resource for any professional charged with a first-year seminar. They give some good points to help establish the importance of a peer mentor in the classroom and give said mentors credibility; the authors explain that a mentor's credibility can often be a challenge for some student affairs professionals when working with faculty members from the heavy academic side of house. However, if a reader is working within the terms of a well-established first-year seminar program, the first four chapters may seem superfluous.

The third chapter of *Using Peers in the Classroom* is entitled "Recruitment and Selection of Peer Mentors." This chapter provides a good basis for what qualities an incoming student mentor should possess. In addition to compiling a list of topics to discuss as a hiring staff, there are also national best practices and survey data which support the authors' claims. The authors do not leave a lot of room for confusion; Ashcraft provides her peer mentor application from the University of Kentucky. This chapter is especially helpful for any brand new peer mentoring program. The step-by-step instructions walk the reader through the conceptualization of the ideal peer mentor, the marketing and recruitment campaign, the interview process, and finally, selection of the staff. The combination of theory and best practices makes this an invaluable resource for professionals.

The final chapter of the volume focuses on evaluating the use of peer mentors in the classroom. Any program which utilizes peer mentors, not just academic courses, can benefit from this chapter. Multiple types of assessment are described, including details on timing, best practices, and examples of questions to ask. This chapter provides perhaps the most useful information to a professional new to a first-year seminar. Latino and Ashcraft detail the challenges in assessing a peer mentor in the classroom, but they provide detailed instructions for solutions. Both seasoned instructors and someone brand new to a first-year seminar can learn from this informative chapter.

All five chapters are set up with identifying headings and subheadings which allow the reader to smoothly transition from point to point. The appropriate use of charts, tables, and literary emphases display the information in an approachable, easy-to-implement manner. The material seems to be presented in checklist form, breaching the gap between scholar and practitioner. The chapters demand readers evaluate the theoretical purpose of a peer mentor in the classroom; does the peer mentor participate strictly for a future reference letter, or is there a greater purpose? As the reader self-reflects, one has the opportunity to become a better instructor.

Latino and Ashcraft don't just take readers through the entire physical sequence of hiring a peer mentor, but also through the conscious decision-making process.

In an increasingly more technological world, questions arise dealing with social media and the classroom. This volume tackles that issue and makes suggestions about how to engage students on the digital plane. Latino and Ashcraft detail tips for social media; incoming students value a digital connection, and student leaders should be trained properly. After reading this volume, even an instructor without an online footprint can help set expectations to help first-year students engage with social media. In addition to making broad suggestions, the authors also provide some great resources from other institutions. Instructors of varying degrees of experience can take something away from this volume.

While an incredibly appropriate resource, it might have been helpful to see an overview of the first-year course before examining the peer mentor selection process. The authors claim the purpose of the volume is "both the rationale for designing an instructional model for the first-year seminar...and the tools to create or refine such a model" (p. ix). One could argue that in order to properly utilize a peer mentor in the classroom, the syllabus or outline must be also be effective; providing a syllabus and walking a reader through details would make a more logical transition for a professional in terms of the overall big picture. Currently, it feels as though the authors assume readers are satisfied with their current seminar syllabi.

The authors' writing style is very straightforward and unobstructed by technical terms. Readers of any skills level can appreciate Latino and Ashcraft's knowledge base on the subject of peer mentors and can follow their suggestions to improve an existing program. The authors do assume, however, that all readers appreciate the benefits of a first-year seminar. There is no literature cited, which explains the need for an introductory course. One might argue that the volume then is not for "designing an instructional model for the first-year seminar" as stated in the previous paragraph, but rather for adding a peer mentor component to an already standing seminar. A reader looking to start a seminar from the ground up could profit from some meta-analysis on first-year programs.

Additionally, the effectiveness of the volume could be increased by the addition of some best practices for returning peer mentors. When students return to similar leadership roles, it is important for the faculty instructor to keep challenging peer mentors. Replicating the experience from the previous year can prove ineffective. One might have benefitted from seeing some resources dedicated to that concept and what best practices are for motivating peer mentors in a returning role. Utilizing returning peer mentors can greatly aid the new peer mentors and provide first-year students with an exceptional experience. Providing returning students with coaching for their unique position can help generate a culture of exponential leadership.

Overall, Latino and Ashcraft have provided the entire student affairs community with a great resource about the selection and training of peer mentors. While the text focuses on peer mentors in a first-year seminar, the recommendations and examples can benefit any program which employs peer

mentors. This easy read does not assume previous in-depth study of the utilization of peer mentors, but rather lays a foundation so that any instructor can successfully utilize a peer mentor in his or her classroom. This book could benefit anyone who is involved in the first-year course, including new professionals, graduate students, seasoned student affairs professionals, and even peer mentors.