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Paraprofessional programs in higher education: Advantages and disadvantages

Abstract

Faced with increasing enrollments and tight fiscal policies, many directors of college student services departments have found it necessary to revise and enlarge their programs. For many, this revision includes employing upper class undergraduate students and graduate students to work as paraprofessionals. Employed as an aide to professional staff members, paraprofessionals have been used to complete basic clerical duties such as typing, copying and filing, do research, or process routine departmental paperwork. Others have been employed as "peer counselors", interacting with the student population in residence halls and counseling centers. Some student workers have administered "mini programs" within a department. Examples include administering intramural programs or special student activities events. Paraprofessionals most generally serve in an outreach capacity by informing the student population of policies and procedures specific to the department in which they are employed.

PARAPROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

A Research Paper
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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Brian K. Fegley

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Faced with increasing enrollments and tight fiscal policies, many directors of college student services departments have found it necessary to revise and enlarge their programs. For many, this revision includes employing upper class undergraduate students and graduate students to work as paraprofessionals. Employed as an aide to professional staff members, paraprofessionals have been used to complete basic clerical duties such as typing, copying and filing, do research, or process routine departmental paperwork. Others have been employed as "peer counselors", interacting with the student population in residence halls and counseling centers. Some student workers have administered "mini programs" within a department. Examples include administering intramural programs or special student activities events. Paraprofessionals most generally serve in an outreach capacity by informing the student population of policies and procedures specific to the department in which they are employed.

While the concept of utilizing student paraprofessionals is not new, the employment of paraprofessionals by college student services departments has increased in the past three decades. Resident housing, academic advising, placement and career services, development, and financial aids are just a few of the college student services departments now employing paraprofessionals in an outreach capacity. Even with the diversity of departments utilizing student workers, there are advantages and disadvantages common to all programs. This paper will explore these advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

Administration

The greatest advantage of paraprofessional programs is that they have been proven effective through the test of time. Stegura and Olson (1978) reported that paraprofessional financial aid counselors were better able to offer a personal touch to other students than were professionals. Because of the paraprofessional's student status, many other students reacted more favorably to them. They also found that many new students appreciated the "student touch" rather than the formal approach from professional staff members. Brown (1974) stated that paraprofessionals instructing college level freshmen on methods to prevent or correct academic difficulties were found to be just as effective as professional staff members in all criteria of counseling effectiveness. The freshmen counseled by the paraprofessionals made more use of the information disseminated in the interviews, had a more significant increase in grade point average, and reported they were more satisfied with the quality of their counseling. Kenzler (1983) found that trained paraprofessionals were able to supplement or complement existing programs and could assume lower level professional tasks. They did an excellent job in intake career counseling, freeing professional staff members for more difficult follow-up sessions and program planning. Concerned with developing a supportive network for ethnic minority students, Crouse (1985) employed the "peer network therapy" in residence halls at Radford University. Crouse chose the peer network therapy because student paraprofessionals could better

create the supportive atmosphere in residence halls necessary to assist minority students in adjusting to the different environments of colleges and universities. As a result of this therapy, minority students felt significant increases in emotional support, were more involved in on-campus activities with other students, and they created an atmosphere conducive to learning within their residence halls. These studies support the contention that paraprofessional staff members can perform effectively in various carefully structured professional modes. It is equally clear that some students actually relate better to student counselors than with professional staff members. While these results are encouraging, it is important to remember that paraprofessional programs complement, but do not replace, professional programs already established within college student services departments.

Another important administrative consideration is cost. Paraprofessional programs are less costly than traditional programs. The yearly wage of a paraprofessional is substantially less than that of a professional staff member. Knerim and Stiffler (1979) noted that Peer Career Counselors (PCC) at the University of Virginia were not compensated for their efforts. The PCC's chose to volunteer their services in return for refinement of their personal skills, to gain valuable volunteer work experience, and to help their fellow students. Paraprofessional Counselors at Earlham College were paid an hourly wage for their work (Zehring 1976). Funding for the positions came from work study or campus employment programs.

The estimated yearly average payment per student professional was between \$500 and \$800 which was approximately 1/20th of a professional staff member's salary. Ash and Mandelbaum (1982) reported that peer counselors could receive academic credit in an independent study format in return for their residence hall counseling work. A hidden cost in the administration of a paraprofessional program is the supervisory and training time that departmental professional staff will need to invest in the paraprofessionals. Even with this cost figured in, paraprofessional programs are still less costly and have greater outreach potential than traditional programs.

Another advantage is that paraprofessionals have access to areas of the campus and groups of individuals inaccessible to professional staff members. Paraprofessionals are also more available to the student population than are professional staff members. They can be approached by other students at all times of the day or night. Zehring (1976) encouraged his peer career counselors to conduct their interviews with students wherever they felt comfortable. The snack bar, a residence hall lounge, or the campus lawn were popular settings for interviews. This practice not only saved limited office space, but gave the department a personal and caring image among the student population. Kendig (1985) created a Greek peer counselor program after hearing concerns that sorority and fraternity members did not have immediate access to trained peer counselors. After the program was created, each Greek house nominated a live-in peer counselor who

was trained to handle medical or psychological emergencies and refer individuals to college student services professionals as needed. An added bonus of this program was that relationships between the Greek houses and residence halls were strengthened. If it is necessary for paraprofessionals to hold interviews in the department office, they can be placed in high contact areas to promote their availability to the student population.

Through the paraprofessional staff, the department will have increased visibility among the student population. Zehring (1976) reported that 80% of the students served by their peer counseling staff left the interview with a good idea of what career planning programs were available and the potential uses of them. Twenty percent of these students regarded themselves considerably motivated and wanted more detailed help from the counseling center. These findings indicate that increased student interest comes through paraprofessionals' outreach efforts.

Paraprofessionals offer needed help to administer the programs of the department. Stegura and Olson (1978) reported that there were inadequate numbers of financial aid staff nationwide to administer the amount of funds available. Student workers were a contributor to staff support in many financial aid offices. Student workers can reduce the work load of professional departmental staff in various ways: answering routine questions, filing materials, copying information, researching topics, and other assorted duties. Zunker and Brown (1966) stated that paraprofessionals were valuable in giving freshmen early

attention. During peak times, such as the beginning of school, upper class students were used to help with the orientation process, pre-registration process, or in student-to-student counseling. It is clear that student help is of value to professional staff in completing routine assignments throughout the year, especially during peak times.

An advantage generally not planned when administering many paraprofessional programs is the fresh perspectives paraprofessional staff members can give to professional staff members. Paraprofessionals often offer valuable advice on how to make departmental programs and resources better meet student needs. Knerim and Stiffler (1979) listed the following advantages of their peer counseling program. Students generated valuable ideas during staff meetings and offered suggestions on how various career planning programs could meet student needs more effectively. Knerim felt the energy, enthusiasm, and positive feedback made her job more enjoyable and beneficial. Ash and Mandelbaum (1982) reported similar results from the employment of paraprofessionals. They provided departmental staff with support and intellectual stimulation. They helped plan programs, design publicity campaigns, and offered suggestions on what resources they felt were needed in the resource library. Paraprofessionals are keenly aware of the problems other students face throughout the college environment. They can offer a different perspective which should be considered by professional staff when formulating departmental policies and procedures.

Students

To this point, all advantages have concerned the administration of departmental programs. Paraprofessionals derive some very important advantages as well. Astin (1975) reports that on-campus employment of students decreases the institution's drop-out rate. Students who have the jobs are more financially secure, tend to interact with their peers more often, and develop stronger ties to the college or university they attend than do students not working on campus. He further relates that students are most satisfied when they are working on-campus in an area related to their major. They have a chance to match work with information learned in the classroom. Student work experience, whether paid or volunteer, allows students to hone their communication, leadership, and organizational skills in a real life setting. Kendig (1985) reported that her Greek peer counselors had experienced an increase in personal confidence, patience, objectivity, sensitivity, and problem solving skills. In short, paraprofessionals experience considerable personal growth through their job duties.

Paraprofessional employment offers students a chance to learn about a career that may not be related to their major. The 1976 survey of the National Student Educational Fund indicated that a significant number of former peer advisors chose financial aid as a profession (Stegura and Olson 1976). Working with students in paraprofessional work settings offers student services professionals a chance to induct quality students into a meaningful and productive career.

Disadvantages

A major disadvantage is that paraprofessional staff members have limited abilities. Because of their limited knowledge of departmental policies and procedures, one should not expect them to go beyond their training. Brown (1974) warned that in a counseling setting, poorly trained paraprofessionals could project their own difficulties upon their clientele. While they created a successful program, Barrow and Heatherington (1981) advised that it is essential to develop carefully structured programs and train paraprofessionals thoroughly before placing them into counseling positions. If allowed to deviate from items covered in their training program, workers could display a lack of objectivity in their counseling. Therefore, professional staff must invest a great amount of time developing and revising training programs and training manuals specifically geared to paraprofessionals if the program is to be successful. To limit student subjectivity, training materials should contain components on how to terminate interviews successfully and how to refer students to professionals.

Professional staff members must invest a great deal of time in student workers. Paraprofessional staff members need to be trained, supervised, and evaluated on an ongoing basis. Because of their limited knowledge, paraprofessionals require more supervisory time than professionals. Most often, professional staff members assume this supervision. In reviewing the results of a survey regarding the use of student counselors, Zunker (1975) reported

that professionals raised serious concern over whether or not professional staff members could find time to supervise peer counselors adequately. It is important that professionals realize they may be trading time spent in direct contact with clientele for time spent in training and supervision of paraprofessionals.

Staff turnover is a disadvantage common to paraprofessional programs. At best, student workers are likely to have a two-or three-year tenure in the work setting. Professional staff time may be spent hiring and training paraprofessionals on an annual or semi-annual basis. A common complaint received from professionals in the National Educational Fund's 1976 report concerned staff turnover in paraprofessional programs (Stegura and Olson 1976). One way to minimize professional time spent due to turnover is to allow selected senior and graduate level students to do some of the program training. If one is fortunate to have a large department, funding may allow for a professional to supervise paraprofessional staff exclusively.

In some departments, hiring a number of paraprofessionals will create a shortage of office space. It is important for administrators to think of alternative methods to alleviate the space problem. Some methods include offering staggered work schedules to paraprofessionals or having peer counseling sessions conducted outside of the office.

Summary

One has much to consider when weighing the pros and cons involved in creating a paraprofessional program. On the positive side, journal articles contain many examples of successful programs

from various college student services departments. These stand as evidence that the programs are effective. The articles also are a good source of ideas when planning a new program. Probably the greatest advantage of paraprofessional programs are that they are less costly and have a greater outreach potential than traditional programs. Student workers often bring new ideas and enthusiasm into established departmental programs. Finally, paraprofessionals are an excellent source of flexible manpower. Their help can be especially valuable during peak work times.

Paraprofessional programs have their limitations. Professional staff members may find themselves investing considerably more time in administrative duties than in student outreach. The administrative duties include: creating or revising programs, hiring new staff members, and supervising, training, and evaluating paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals have limited knowledge of departmental policies and procedures. They may possess a lack of objectivity in counseling sessions and interviews if not trained properly or thoroughly. In short, paraprofessionals can be excellent additions to departmental programs as long as professionals invest the training and supervisory time necessary to make the program work.

Whatever decision is made, college student service professionals administering paraprofessional programs must realize the considerable time and effort necessary to develop and maintain a successful program. If one's motivation is to reach and serve the student population of their institution more effectively, and giving up student contact time for

administrative duties is not a concern, then a paraprofessional program may be the answer.

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