CREATING CLASSROOM BASED LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FIRST YEAR

NORMAN BETHUNE COLLEGE AT YORK UNIVERSITY (TORONTO, CANADA)

York University is Canada's third largest university with almost 47, 000 undergraduate students. To encourage student engagement, and provide orientation, transition, academic and social programming York has a College system. Every incoming student is assigned to a college based on degree/program and their college will serve as a "smaller" home within the larger university.

Bethune College (bethune.yorku.ca) is the college of the Faculty of Science and Lassonde School of Engineering. Bethune has close to 6700 students with an entrance class of 1500 – 1800 students. Several Peer Leader based support programs are housed within the college.

CLASS REPRESENTATIVE (CR) PROGRAM

Class Representative program is a classroom-based program that successfully builds communication skills, mentorship capabilities, and increases faculty-student interaction in the first year. CRs are recruited from all first and second year courses within Science and Engineering. CRs are students within the class that:

- Foster communication with the professor
- Serve as examples of good communication strategies
- Create and organize study groups
- Connect students to resources
- Make announcements
- Write summary reports of semester for professor/lecturer

In a year approximately 100 courses are targeted, 200 applications are received and 90 students serve as CRs. CRs are trained in a day long Basic Peer Leadership training, and additional CR Training before assuming their role (more training information: bethune.yorku.ca/sos/training/). They also receive ongoing training during biweekly meetings. With most CRs being first year students certain unique challenges have been faced leading to specialized training and more-hands on support.

The Class Representative program helps CRs engage with their professors and gain transferable skills in a safe supportive environment. The professor and class also benefit from the presence of a Class Representative. The class benefits from having a peer that can provide information, make referrals and help facilitate communication with the professor. The professor benefits, mainly, from having another avenue of communication with the class

Class Representatives have consistently described their experiences as positive and transformative.

> "The Class Representative program shaped my university experience by building my skills, confidence and sense of community. Being a class representative allowed me to conquer my fear of public speaking, a vital skill I have used in every aspect of my life. I developed a confidence in myself as a leader, which inspired me to go on and seek further leadership positions. Most of all, it gave me a space on campus to call home, where I felt a part of the community."
>
> - Ella Pesah (5th year double major – Kinesiology and Biology)

For further information please contact Tanya Da Sylva (Academic Coordinator; bcadvisr@yorku.ca) or John Amanatides (Master Bethune College; amana@yorku.ca).

Presentation slides can be found at: bethune.yorku.ca/pdf

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Creating Classroom Based Leadership Opportunities in the 1ˢᵗ Year

Tanya Da Sylva and John Amanatides

bethune.yorku.ca

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- Why leadership?

- Why not target opportunities to first year students?

Our Context – York University

- 3rd Largest University in Canada

- Large first year courses; no first year seminars

- 46 900+ undergraduates

- Commuter campus

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Our Context – Bethune College

- Making a large university seem smaller
  - Providing orientation, co-curricular & extra curricular events, academic and social support
  - 6700 students; 1500-1800 incoming class

Our Context – Bethune College

- Students assigned a college based on degree/ program or residence
  - Bethune College is the college of the Faculty of Science and the Lassonde School of Engineering

- Allows specialization of academic programming

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Bethune College

- Master: John Amanatides (75% load)
- Staff: 2.75 FTE
- Writing Tutor: 0.4 FTE
- Academic Coordinator: Tanya Da Sylva (50% load)

S.O.S

- **Class Representatives**
- Peer Mentors
- Peer Tutors
- Supplemental Instruction
- Student Ambassadors
- Graduate Peer Mentors

Ombuds
Student
Services
S.O.S.
A Community of Learning

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S.O.S

- Each program has senior student leader serving as coordinator

"As a first- or second-year student, it's easy to get lost in schoolwork and the transition to university life. In my first year, the CR program gave me a constructive way to get involved with my community and focus on making connections with people I wouldn't have normally interacted with. Through the program I gained a great understanding of how Bethune College works and what my place could be, and it served as a valuable stepping stone to further involvement in college academic life!"

-Sahar Panju (3rd year, Biology)

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Class Representatives (CRs)

- CRs
  - Foster communication with the professor
  - Serve as examples of good communication strategies
  - Create and organize study groups
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  - Make announcements
  - Write summary reports of semester for professor/lecturer

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Class Representatives (CRs)

- ~100 targeted courses a year
    - 1st and 2nd year Science and Eng. Courses
    - Over 4 semesters

- Receive ~200 applications, place ~90 students

Recruitment Process

- Program introduction sent to instructor
- Announcements made, recruitment letter put online
- Applications uploaded online (resume, cover letter)
- Applications vetted, top applicants chosen for each course

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Training

- Basic Peer Leadership Training
  - Zero credit course, full day (Sunday)
    - Peer Leadership 101
    - Communication skills
    - Connecting with professors, staff, other leaders
    - Campus resources
    - Boundaries
    - Resiliency

Training

- How to be an Awesome CR Training
  - ~4hrs
    - Administrative information
    - Semester timeline planning
    - Communication skills

Training

- Ongoing training during bi-weekly meetings (multiple sessions)
  - How to increase buy-in from professors
  - How to run a study session
  - How to be "professional"
  - Email and social media etiquette
  - How to train others
  - How to write an effective summary report
  - Conflict management
  - Communication, communication, communication

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Training

- Training is flexible and quickly responds to student feedback

- Recent additions include CR-Peer Tutor "buddy" sessions and more communication scenario role playing

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Why leadership?

- Transferable skills
  - Communication

"My professor's accent is too thick and I can't understand what they are saying…"

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Why leadership?

- Transferable skills
  - Public Speaking

"I enjoy making class announcements…"

"SOS helped me become a leader , to stand in front of people with confidence and speak. Thank you"

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Why leadership?

- Transferable skills
  - Interpersonal Skills

"My Co-CR doesn't do anything…"

Why leadership?

- Transferable skills
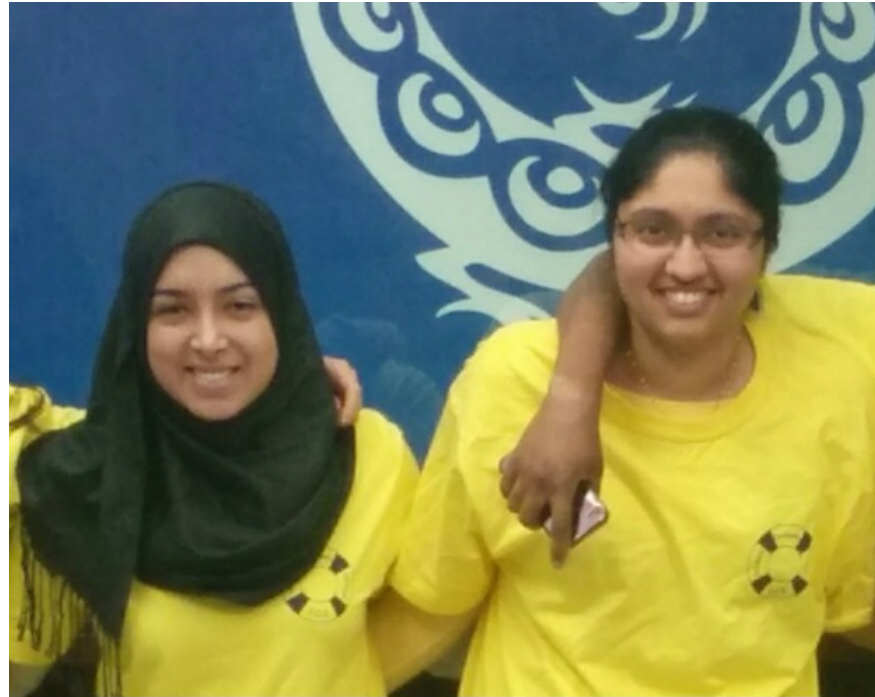 - Problem Solving

"No one is attending my study sessions"

Why leadership?

- Building relationships with professors
  - Reference letters
  - "…I feel it will open more doors for me in the future."

- Helping fellow students

- Co-curricular record

Why leadership?

- Sense of Community
  - "I like helping people. Being a CR gives me a sense of belonging, especially to Bethune which has awesome people."

Why leadership?

A cool T-shirt

"The Class Representative program shaped my university experience by building my skills, confidence and sense of community. Being a class representative allowed me to conquer my fear of public speaking, a vital skill I have used in every aspect of my life. I developed a confidence in myself as a leader, which inspired me to go on and seek further leadership positions. Most of all, it gave me a space on campus to call home, where I felt a part of the community."

- Ella Pesah (5th year double major – Kinesiology and Biology)

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Benefit to class

- Peer to provide information, referrals and facilitate communication with professor

- Study groups!

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Benefit to Instructors

- Fosters communication in the classroom
- Makes students feel safe in expressing concerns
  - May defuse potential conflict situations
- Point of connection with class, especially in very large courses
- Summary sheets provided by CRs provide a student view of the course
- Source of connection to college

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Benefit to Bethune

- Our voice in the classroom
- Increases engagement in our programing
- Builds our leadership pool

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Lessons Learned

- Professor and Administrator buy-in is crucial
  - Easily lost
  - Facebook?
  - Summary Sheets
  - Professional communication skills training

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Lessons Learned

- Staff resources needed for recruitment & study sessions

- Space needed for study sessions!!

Lessons Learned

- CR relationships with other PLs must be nurtured
  - Especially 1st year students need to feel a part of something bigger
- Balance CR expectations and program goals
- Best success in 1st year

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Lessons Learned

- Every semester will bring a surprise

We'd love to hear from you

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Slides at: bethune.yorku.ca/pdf