The Experiences of Volunteers After Taking a Peer-Support Experiential Training

Workshop and Delivering Peer Support in an On-Campus Pilot Program

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1. Abstract

The current study explores the impact of participating in a structured peer-support pilot program on the career aspirations, skill development and motivation of psychology undergraduates at Capilano University. After attending several experiential training workshops, Undergraduate student volunteers in the Psychology program took part in several pilot peer support sessions and filled out a mixed-methods survey to examine their skill development and future goals. Quantitative results, derived from Likert-scale self-assessments, showed that students felt highly confident in their interpersonal and ethical abilities, while self-awareness and boundary-setting received slightly lower scores. Through qualitative thematic analysis, four key themes emerged: recognized inherent strengths, boundary complexity, motivational clarity, and emotional gratitude. These findings indicated that peer support programs not only provide valuable mental health resources for campus communities, but also serve as meaningful learning experiences that promote the formation of a pre-professional identity. The study discusses the implications for curriculum development, ethical training, and long-term professional growth.

2. Introduction

In response to the evolving needs of mental health services, there is a shift towards training models that go beyond traditional approaches, which have typically emphasized lecture-based instruction and passive knowledge transfer from an expert to a learner. In contrast, peer support, which is the emotional and practical support provided by individuals with lived experience to those facing similar challenges (Riessman, 1965), has gained traction as a crucial, professionalizing component in mental health care. While there is evidence supporting the clinical effectiveness of peer support for its recipients (Cooper et al., 2024), the developmental impact on those providing peer support, especially students preparing to enter fields related to peer support (e.g., clinical psychology, social work, counselling), is less explored.

In this thesis, I examined a peer-support pilot program at Capilano University, where undergraduate psychology students were given structured training through a series of workshops before offering one-on-one support to fellow students. As a result, three workshops were carried out over the Fall/Spring semesters in the 2024-2025 academic year by the Psychology Department. The pilot program ran over a two-week time frame in which peer supporters were available over a 2-hour block - operated out of the Capilano University Student Lounge. Students were not required to make an appointment and could drop in freely; they were expected to fill out a confidentiality form after which they spoke with the peer supporter in a semi-private space for approximately 15 minutes.

The main aims were to assess whether involvement in the program helped develop fundamental counselling skills and to evaluate whether it influenced participants' career motivations and goals in clinical psychology or related areas.

It was hypothesized that student peer supporters would report personal growth in professional skills, particularly in empathic listening, emotional regulation, professionalism and maintaining ethical boundaries. Furthermore, it was expected that this growth would be linked to a clearer understanding and increased interest in pursuing psychological practice. This study aims to enrich the existing literature by combining skill-based evaluations with narrative analysis, highlighting the educational value of structured peer-support experiences.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Peer Support Foundations

The theoretical basis for peer support is anchored in the *helper-therapy* principle, as introduced by Riessman in 1965 (Riessman, 1965). This concept suggests that individuals who provide assistance can experience psychological and social benefits that may be as significant as, or even greater than, those conferred upon the recipients of their help. Peer support has seen application in a variety of mental health settings, such as inpatient psychiatric units, addiction recovery programs, and emergency response teams. Recent years have witnessed increased emphasis on the inclusion of peer-support in youth-oriented and educational environments (Cooper et al., 2024).

3.3 Developmental Impacts on Peer Providers

De Beer and colleagues (2024) presented a six-domain framework for understanding the roles of youth peer support workers. These domains included: engagement, emotional support, navigation, advocacy, educational activities, and involvement in research. Each domain played a crucial part in fostering a comprehensive view of recovery processes from having trouble in their

academic standings. In youth-focused environments, peer supporters are viewed as essential to increasing both the approachability and credibility of services (Goldfarb et al., 2022).

Recent research highlighted the developmental benefits of adolescents and young adults taking on peer support roles. For instance, Tisdale et al. (2021) reported notable enhancements in communication abilities, emotional intelligence, and self-confidence among young peer support workers. Similarly, Richard et al. (2022) identified advancements in psychological resilience and clearer vocational aspirations in people taking on peer support roles. These peer supporters frequently report a heightened understanding of ethical practices, better emotional self-management, and a deeper dedication to therapeutic fields.

3.4 Implementation Challenges

While peer support roles offer numerous advantages, they also present specific challenges, particularly for individuals new to these positions. Common concerns include the potential for unclear role boundaries, the emotional demands of the work, role tension which would be like stress related to being in the role of both a student and a confidant for other students, and insufficient institutional guidance (Ser et al., 2024; Von Peter et al., 2023). Successful peer support programs address these challenges by providing thorough training, structured oversight, and clearly defining the distinction between peer and professional responsibilities.

3.5 Peer Support in Higher Education

Peer mentoring and student advising are widespread in higher education, yet formal mental health peer support remains relatively unexplored. Research by Lauridsen et al. (2022) highlighted the effectiveness of student peer support initiatives in alleviating anxiety and

enhancing self-efficacy for both the participants and the volunteers. Nonetheless, there is limited research on the educational and developmental outcomes for student volunteers who provide this support, especially within formally structured and ethically managed programs. My thesis aims to address this research gap.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

This research utilized a mixed-methods, cross-sectional, online survey approach, collected using Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Quantitative data were collected through structured Likert-scale items assessing skill acquisition and development. Qualitative data were obtained via open-ended narrative prompts designed to explore participants' lived experiences, reflections, and perceived transformations from having participating in the peer support program.

4.2 Participants

The study sample included four senior undergraduate students majoring in psychology (N = 4) at Capilano University. These students participated in a structured peer-support training workshop that ran from…, followed by a chance to provide peer support to student on campus for a two-week pilot that ran in the month of March 2025.

4.3 Instruments

The survey was conducted at the conclusion of the program and was divided into two main sections:

Quantitative Measures: This section featured nine items evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not Effective at all, 2 = Slightly effective, 3 = Moderately effective, 4 = Very effective, 5 =

Extremely effective), focusing on key skills such as maintaining confidentiality, demonstrating professionalism, and managing emotions effectively.

Qualitative Prompts: Included five open-ended queries aimed at exploring participants' perceptions of the ease or difficulty encountered in applying the skills, the impact of the program on their career aspirations, and broad reflections on their personal and professional development.

4.4 Procedure

Upon the conclusion of the pilot, online survey links were administered using Qualtrics. The collected data were collected and analyzed using SPSS software for quantitative insights, while qualitative narratives were examined through thematic analysis.

4.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics reported below include the Mean (M), Median (Mdn), and Mode (Mo). The qualitative responses were examined using the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis model by Braun and Clarke (2006), which encompasses familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, theme review, defining themes, and generating the final report.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Counselling Skill Development

Skill	Mean (M)	Median (Md)	Mode (Mo)
Boundary Setting	3.50	4.00	5

Time Management	3.75	4.00	5
Professionalism	3.75	4.00	5
Emotional Control	3.75	4.00	5
Self-Awareness	3.50	4.00	5
Building Trust	4.00	4.50	5
Active Listening	3.75	4.50	5
Information Recall	3.75	4.50	5
Confidentiality	3.75	4.50	5

Interpretation: The participants reported the highest perceived competency in building trust ($M = 4.00$, SD = 0.66) and maintaining confidentiality ($M = 3.75$, SD = 0.83), representing strong confidence in relational and ethical practices. Conversely, boundary setting and self-awareness scored lower ($M = 3.50$, SD = 1.0), indicating these areas might benefit from increased training.

5.2 Qualitative Results

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Narrative Responses

Theme	Description
Natural Strengths and Familiarity	Students identified empathy, listening, and confidentiality as skills they accessed intuitively.
Boundary Complexity	Participants struggled with maintaining relational boundaries, particularly in disclosure management.

| Career Validation and Aspiration | Volunteering affirmed students' career goals and clarified their interest in counseling psychology. |
| Personal Growth and Reflective Gratitude | Reflections emphasized emotional maturity, increased self-awareness, and appreciation of impact. |

Exemplar Quotes:

- *"Listening felt natural—I realized I didn't have to fix things to be helpful."*

- *"Sometimes I didn't know how much to share… It blurred the line between peer and friend."*

- *"This experience made me more confident that counselling is where I belong."*

6. Discussion

The findings supported the conceptualization of peer support program in post-secondary learning environments not only as a service delivery modality but as a developmental pedagogical tool for building the confidence of emerging mental health professionals. The high ratings for relational and ethical competencies align with foundational literature on the efficacy of lived experience as a basis for support (Cooper et al., 2024; Riessman, 1965).

Boundary-setting and self-awareness, while still positively rated, emerged as topics to build on. These domains often require not only instructional but experiential refinement, supporting the need for ongoing reflective supervision (Ser et al., 2024). The thematic results provided compelling evidence for the formative power of peer engagement, reinforcing the importance of experiential training in mental health for professional identity construction.

Limitations included the small sample size and potential for self-selection bias. Nonetheless, the richness of qualitative responses and alignment with existing research provide

meaningful insights. Future work should explore longitudinal impacts, including effects on academic achievement, graduate program admission, and eventual clinical practice.

7. Conclusion

Peer support initiatives represent a dual-benefit strategy in mental health and educational domains. For psychology students, they offered structured opportunities to translate theoretical learning into ethical, relational, and professional practice. This study underscores the value of such initiatives in preparing students for future careers while also highlighting key implementation considerations, including ethical training, boundary development, and institutional support. Providing more peer support opportunities to students may not only enhance service access for students in need, but also foster the development of competent, reflective, and motivated future clinicians.

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