

# Peer possibilities

## Addressing student well-being through peer programming

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Youth and young adults are experiencing a mental health crisis.<sup>1 2 3</sup> BIPOC students in particular face institutional and societal barriers, making accessing support services to thrive in school more out of reach.<sup>4</sup> Data is limited on where and how students are experiencing care on campus. There are college-based programs where students find refuge from the crises they face daily. Programs where students know one another's stories, disclose challenges, strategize how to resist and recover, exchange advice and affirmations, attend art performances together, share laughs and meals, ultimately, caring for one another. With nearly 16 million undergraduates enrolled in post-secondary education nationwide<sup>5</sup>, it is imperative we invest in programs fostering care practices and holistically addressing the emotional well-being of college students.

We are in a critical moment to tap into a reimagining of care on campus; one that is not in a narrowed or empty definition of care. One that doesn't frame student well-being as solely within the framework of individual trajectories requiring one-on-one assistance such as counseling or therapy on an as-needed basis. This moment calls for wider practices of care on campus that are rooted in student power and community, fulfilling all kinds of needs in students' lives, especially in helping them to feel less alone and to feel, with confidence, that they belong in college. As active agents in students' lives, colleges not only provide physical infrastructure but also can work with and not against

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<sup>1</sup> The White House. (2022, July 29). Fact sheet: Biden-Harris administration announces two new actions to address youth mental health crisis [Press Brief]. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/29/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-two-new-actions-to-address-youth-mental-health-crisis/>

<sup>2</sup> United States Surgeon General. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/youth-mental-health/index.html>

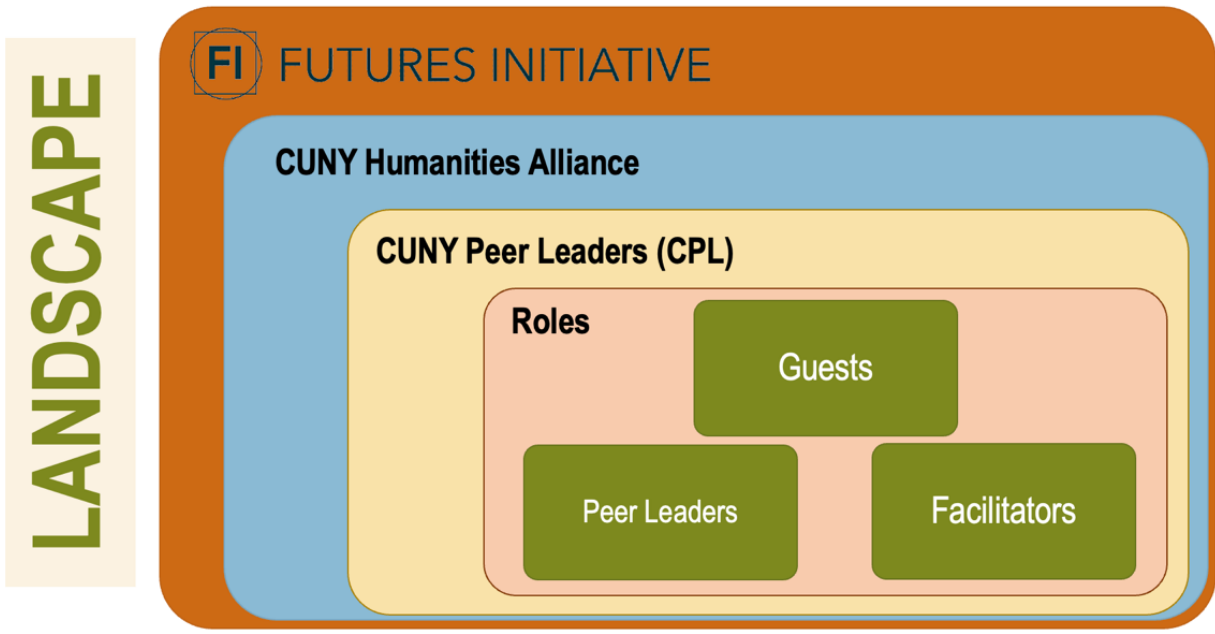
<sup>3</sup> Lipson et al. (2022). Trends in college student mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity: Findings from the national Healthy Minds Study, 2013-2021. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306, 138–147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.03.038>

<sup>4</sup> Suresh, R., Karkossa, Z., Richard, J. (2021). Program evaluation of a student-led peer support service at a Canadian university. *Inter J of Men Health Syst*, 15(54) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-021-00479-7>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Fast facts: Back to school statistics*. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372#Postsecondary-enrollment>

students in constructing, implementing, and sustaining emotionally responsive, equity-oriented programs and practices on campus. Peer programs, like the CUNY Peer Leaders, provides sites to invest in that vision, with students taking the lead. The CUNY Peer Leaders (CPL) is housed within the Humanities Alliance, a project at the CUNY Graduate Center funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that connects doctoral students to humanities teaching and learning experiences at CUNY's community colleges. The CPL's principles are created by the Futures Initiative (FI), a program founded in 2014 at the Graduate Center that promotes a new model for graduate education – one that is interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and advances equity and innovation across research, teaching, and public service.

The CUNY Peer Leaders program is facilitated by Graduate Center staff and graduate fellows from the Futures Initiative and convenes undergraduate students from across the CUNY colleges – bridging the divide between graduate and undergraduate levels. The program grew out of two former college student serving programs, the CUNY Humanities Alliance LaGuardia Mellon Humanities Scholars program and the Futures Initiative Undergraduate Leadership and Democracy Fellows Program. With a shift in the Futures Initiatives' structure, the vision for what a new program that stands out from the previous iterations became possible.



Founded in 2020, the CUNY Peer Leaders program continues to uniquely foster a culture of care <sup>6 7</sup>, in every sense of the word. The program brings together 30-40 undergraduates from the two- and four-year CUNY colleges and 2 facilitators biweekly. Each gathering engages students through programming on student wellness (e.g., check-ins, informational sessions on burn out and well-being), professional development (e.g., project workshopping, collaborative oral and written communication activities), and cultural enrichment opportunities (e.g., group outings to a theater performance). Participants also receive a stipend (\$1000) and support for transportation. By minimizing barriers of engagement and offering varied and inclusive programming, the program's culture of care is more accessible for all.

To understand how this culture of care is constructed and molds to each new cohort, being in community - as the interwoven care mechanisms work together - is critical. Those convening - Peer Leaders, Facilitators, and guests - make this space their own. They are creating new ways to connect their needs, feelings, supports, and challenges. The CPL program has constructed an actionable routine around BEING with one another every other week.

During the 2021-2022 cohort, with the support of the three primary facilitators, I, at the time, a fellow in residence with the Futures Initiative, was able to share space and be with the program. What began with a hope to provide an outsider/observational perspective on the program quickly turned into profound learnings and reimaginings of what collegiate level programming can be. Early meetings consisted of observing and taking notes, with the goal to understand the programs' structure and activities, peer-to-peer and peer-to-facilitator interactions, and ways the program works toward goals. Beyond this, facilitators held space in December 2021 for me to host an activity on care and mapping out social supports. Reflections from planning and conducting this session prompted gathering additional program artifacts (e.g., FI Annual Reports, CUNY Peers Leaders mission statements, agendas, student blog posts and, later - responses to one additional hosted activity) that reflect the programs' past, present, and future.

**One primary question became the focus of my time with the program: How are they creating a program that centers care?**

The program fosters a culture of care through three mechanisms:

- (1) co-construction of programming

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<sup>6</sup> Futures Initiative. (2022). *2021-2022 Annual Report*. <https://futuresinitiative.org/annual-report/>

<sup>7</sup> CUNY Peer Leaders (n.d). *We are CPL*. CUNY Peer Leaders. <https://cunypeerleaders.commons.gc.cuny.edu/we-are-cpl/>

- (2) active peership engagement, and
- (3) a culture of emotional social sharing.

While Peer Leaders are empowered by each mechanism independently, they receive further support as each is closely interwoven with the others. The alignment and reinforcing nature of these three care mechanisms create a culture for students to not only develop professional development skills but also build meaningful socioemotional connection (e.g., building trust, belonging, inclusion).

## Culture of care in action: Co-construction of programming, active peership, & emotional social sharing

The CUNY Peer Leaders program is described as a near peer community – made up of graduate fellows who serve as facilitators in the space; peer leaders who are the undergraduate students, and, from time to time, additional FI fellows, staff, and guests. With each new cohort, the space shifts and molds to meet the needs and imagination of all members. This is reflected in the earliest meetings of the program, where the Peers are in community and in dialogue with one another. The first meeting, called a kickoff meeting, creates space for peers to work together to establish a set of community agreements. The agreements provide collective input on the shared values of the group, examples include personal responsibilities, setting boundaries, addressing harm, and respect. The community agreements serve to set the tone of the program as well as serves as a living breathing reminder that care is rooted in shared principles. Most notably, the agreements established by the Fall 2021 cohort, note the importance of emotional care and responsibility of harm in peership.

*Examples of CPL community agreements:*

- *Listening to others, and giving them the space to speak vulnerably and honestly*
- *Attempt to be kind in correction; Understand that when a comment hurts or disrespects someone, that they may not be able to be kind in the moment / Try to support each other*

With these community agreements in place, the peers move to develop a cohort theme and brainstorm types of activities they would like to work on throughout the year. The

2021-2022 cohort voted to shape their work around the theme, "Activism and Advocacy". Students also suggested activities that would later be incorporated into sessions, such as ones centered on public speaking, coalition building and leadership, and recovering from harm. In late Fall 2021, students spoke to the high levels of stress and burn out they were experiencing, which prompted a collective decision to dedicate a full session to healing and emotional well-being. Activities in this session included checking in with each student in the group, guided meditation, mapping out social support networks, and learning about best ways to navigate burn out and mental health fatigue.

Care in this sense operates through co-constructive programming. This care-centered programming empowers Peer Leaders to decide how the program will meet their emotional and physical needs. The space is responsive and shaped by the peers needs and interests. By actively engaging with one another and the collective, shared visions, values, and boundaries are created to guide care in their program. It changes to meet the emotional needs of the community and allows each person equitable contribution in activities which shape to those needs. This access challenges our traditional understanding of college student mental health support by positioning students as active agents who share their stories and strategies for navigating college, pouring positivity and strength into one another, and contributing to the construction and implementation of emotional responsive practices on campus. This element of the program's culture of care also serves a unique purpose for students from historically excluded communities. For BIPOC CPLs, being able to steer programming creates ways to meet their needs by addressing the systemic barriers they face, countering deficit frameworks, and divesting from the narratives that have historically excluded them from academic spaces.

*"...That time in my life was challenging for me to overcome, but the CUNY Peer Leaders program helped me to **decompress my emotions and realize that I'm not alone** in this journey called life."*

*- Peer Leader*

Care requires that emotions need to be acknowledged in programming. The CPL program, for Facilitators and Peers Leaders, normalize emotions as living, breathing, and transforming. Every meeting begins with a check in, where a facilitator asks, "How are you doing this week?" or "How do you come into this space?". When we move about in the world, perhaps we may want to deflect vulnerability offerings, with an "I'm

fine" response, but the peers have chosen to make sure THEIR space resists the status quo. For example, students often bring up challenges (e.g., emotional lows, stress from life transitions, academic challenges, triggering experiences on campus) they may be experiencing in their outside of school to the group. These responses have been received with words of affirmation and positive support, as well as concrete resources and possible next steps to assist with navigating such challenges.

Emotions are allowed in this check-in - they are appreciated with hearts in the chat, "congrats", "thank you for being vulnerable with us", and many times offered words of encouragement and upliftment, especially in the face of struggle. Emotions are cared for, not erased, in their space. This aspect of the culture of care works hand-in-hand with their progress toward completing a program project as well. Nearing the end of the program, the students spend time in small groups as well as in the larger group, brainstorming, presenting project drafts, and rehearsing for their annual showcase. This sharing time provides students an opportunity to develop their public speaking

*"...we try to always hold space. How many times do you go to a space, and they don't know who you are. Like a very large classroom, it's a blur and it can't always be that. So, the spaces where it can be other than that, we celebrate, and we appreciate those spaces."*

*- Facilitator A*

**When I am experiencing a challenge, I feel comfortable to bring it to Peer Leader members/Facilitators, because:**

*"they have been amazing helpful and inspiring."*

*"[it's] a **safe space** where I step away from reality and am clear minded ♡."*

*"I always find so **much love and reassurance** here, it's a judgment-free space :)."*

*"the guidance and reassurance throughout this program has **provided me with so many external opportunities and achievements** :) grateful for everyone"*

skills as well as receive direct feedback, advice, and resources from the facilitators and their peers. Peers also utilize this time to disclose challenges and successes they are experiencing with their project.

Various reasons were cited for why students feel comfortable to bring something they want to disclose, project related or otherwise, to the larger group. In this sense, **social sharing, disclosure, peer learning, and advisement drive project progress and peer connectedness**. We should consider the power of emotional social sharing between peers in programs. The emotional social sharing and culture of disclosure fostered by those in the program build and strengthen bonds between the peers and facilitators as well as creates individualized moments of care.

*“The moment I have felt the most proud was when I actually used my resource. I don’t usually like to ask for help at all and it is something I am working on but when I asked [Facilitator] for a recommendation, [and] she gave it to me. It was awesome. So I am really just proud that I reached out and just used my resources and pretty much got what I wanted. And I really appreciate that [Facilitator].”*

*- Peer Leader*

## Moving forward from here

The CUNY Peer Leaders diverges from more traditional models of college programs by embedding a culture of care that interweaves peership, co-construction of programming, and emotional social sharing. Each of these mechanisms are interwoven, reinforcing and stretching its system of support. The CUNY Peer Leaders sees the college student as a whole person, recognizing who they are far beyond their role as academics. They see themselves and each other as made up of an amalgamation of intersectional selves. Moreover, the intentional focus on co-creation models could become an exemplary for peer-oriented programming where collective action results from collectively addressed needs. As we reimagine college supportive programming, programs like the CPL provide a case for what a local culture of care created by students can be. It reimagines care on campus by placing the construct of care in the hands of students. Participants are empowered because they empower one another. Peership in this sense creates new possibilities not only for themselves but also for

colleges and universities. Care on campus should be local, student-directed, and powered by students' imagination.



## Abstract

Current research suggests youth and young adults are experiencing a mental health crisis. (U.S Surgeon Gen., 2021) A failure to develop emotionally responsive supportive services, beyond traditional mental health services, may lead to worsening circumstances for our students. This report details how one equity-oriented, college-based program, the CUNY Peer Leaders (CPL), is fostering care on campus. The program roots its culture of care in their co-constructed programming, peer engagement and empowerment, and a culture of emotion sharing. To disrupt the downward trends in young adult well-being, universities should take steps to partner with students in building and sustaining care centered programs on campus.



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