

Re-Defining Collaboration Between
Orientation Leaders, Resident Assistants, and Peer Advising Leaders

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Problem Statement

Colleges and universities speak about the importance of community, yet they struggle to actually achieve it on many fronts. As a professional in student affairs I struggle with the poor working relationships between New Student Orientation Leaders, the Resident Assistants, and Peer Advising Leaders on our campus each fall during our Move-in Weekend. The primary issue is that each group perceives their positions as the most important during that time period, and they have a lot of negative talk about each other. This creates a hostile work environment, which leads to hard feelings between the groups. The challenge for me is to find a way to develop mutual respect between the two groups, and to lay a foundation of trust.

Expected Outcomes

The outcome I hope to gain from the application of the two methods outlined in this paper will hopefully result in the following changes:

1. Open communication between the Orientation Leaders, Resident Assistants, and Peer Advising Leaders.
2. Each group of student leaders supporting the efforts of each other, and understanding the roles of their peers.
3. Fewer incidents of negative talk being reported and a more supportive work environment.

We will follow-up with the Orientation Leaders, Resident Assistants, and Peer Advising Leaders after the program to find out if the activities helped to achieve the intended goals.

Methods

Mixed Methods:

“Blending methods requires skills for sensing into the underlying energies of a roomful of people, an organization, a community, or a culture. It involves knowing the principles that inform the individual methods so that resulting designs are an alchemical mix of the individual and collective, reflection and action, such that desired outcomes emerge.” (Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007, p. 45)

I have decided to use two methods to help meet the outcomes outlined previously in this paper. My decision for using two methods is so I can guide the group through the process with both conversation and an activity, which will result in a connection between the members. After reviewing the methods available I felt that PeerSpirit Circling will provide a valuable outlet for the Orientation Leaders, Resident Assistants, and Peer Advising Leaders to connect regarding their roles. Specifically looking at their commonalities and differences. After delving into their thoughts the goal is to get them to work together using JazzLab to create a communal experience.

PeerSpirit Circle:

The PeerSpirit circle activity gets its power from the form of a circle. As noted in The Change Handbook (p. 262), the circle is the “foundation of human social heritage.” “PeerSpirit circling, a modern adaptation and innovation of this ancient social and spiritual process, challenges the dominant ideologies based on concepts of hierarchy and individualism.” (McDougall, 2005, p. 2407)

Circles have been used as communication mediums for a long time. From cavemen circling around the campfire, to the Knights at the Round Table, Indians holding council with the “talking stick or feather” (Locust, 1997-2009), and people conducting literature circles. Circles help people to engage in conversation on an equal footing. In all of these examples there is a sense of community. Discussion is open and respectful.

What transforms a meeting into a circle is the willingness of people to shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening and to embody and practice the structures outlined here. Calling the circle is a simple idea. It emerges whenever it is invited. It doesn't have to be large and last for days. It can convene for an evening as a small intimate group. (Baldwin/Linnea, 1998)

As referenced at PeerSpirit.com (2001) the circle consists of specific practices and a structure. Here are the major components of a PeerSpirit circle:

- **Intention** – The first step necessary to convene a circle is for an individual to call the circle together. As part of this he/she solicits individuals to meet at a specific time and place. Also, this individual will set the agenda for the meeting.
- **Welcome Start-point** - Once the group is convened one of the participants needs to shift the attention from a social space to a council space. Reading a passage of a book, or listening to a song can accomplish this. Really anything that will help center the groups focus.
- **Center and Check-in/Greeting** – Setting up the circle is an important part of the process. It is important to place something in the center of the circle, such as flowers or a basket. As part of the opening each member should take a turn to share a brief story or experience.

- **Agreements** – A foundation for developing trust in the group is to set expectations that are equal among all members.
- **Three Principles and Three Practices** – The principles are that leadership rotates throughout the group, responsibility is shared, and members place ultimate reliance on inspiration, not personal agendas. The three practices are to speak with intention, listen with attention, and tend to the well being of the circle.
- **Guardian of process** – The guardian is a group member who helps to keep the conversation on track. This person also employs a gentle noisemaker that is used to pause the conversation. In addition to the Guardian, any other member can use this as well. Whoever uses it needs to explain why they stopped the dialogue.
- **Checkout and Farewell** – Closure is important in any process, and this is no exception. It is important to allow each member of the group to make a reflective statement. The last thing that should be accomplished is for a member to say a few inspirational words to finish the circle.

JazzLab:

The second activity that I plan to use is JazzLab. This activity requires no musical ability and provides an “exciting, enlivening, hands-on experience, using music as a way to transform your organization.” (Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007, p. 593)

The reason for choosing this activity is to promote synergy between the Orientation Leaders and Resident Assistants. As stated in *The Change Handbook* (p. 594), using JazzLab can help to answer the following questions:

- How can we communicate better?
- How do we have team, without losing individuality?

- How do we promote creativity?
- How do we have stability and stay flexible?

JazzLab uses the four elements of making music to help answer these questions. These elements are:

- **Listening** – Deepening and widening listening.
- **Being in Synch** – Getting the group to connect.
- **Diversity** – Everyone's input matters.
- **Synergy** – The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This activity is intended to open up the participants to the idea of working together in an improvisational experience. The outcome should be a heightened awareness of the group around you. Understanding how you are connected and unique all at the same time.

This experience is similar to a drumming circle. As noted by Drum Café (2008), an organization that promotes teambuilding through drumming, “Drumming is a universal expression that transcends all boundaries: personal, organizational or cultural. Drum Cafe teaches staff to increase productivity and efficiency through better teamwork.”

“Drum circles are designed to:

- **Break down barriers** to create a more open organization.
- **Align** to a common goal, mission or vision.
- **Improve Communications** through accurate feedback.
- **Accelerate Productivity** by motivating staff and getting them to listen to each other.” (Drum Café, 2008)

Here is a description of how the activity is conducted. “JazzLab begins with clapping and keeping a simple beat. A single, shared pattern divides into two, then into four parts. Voices

are brought into the mix with a rap song in four parts. Then the rhythm band is formed, with each group of instruments given their own part. Participants then get to conduct or play in an improvised symphonic “movement” with the large ensemble. Smaller groups are then formed, with participants creating and performing their own original compositions. Finally, “improv trios” are formed, where three players sit facing each other with an array of instruments and create a two-minute free improvisation on the spot. (Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007, p. 594)”

Delivery Method

The intention is to bring together the two groups by inviting them to a joint meeting as part of a training session before Move-in Weekend occurs. This training will be in two parts. The PeerSpirit Circle will be in the morning. The group will break for lunch, and then we will hold the JazzLab in the afternoon, followed by a closing activity. Because there are 80 students involved in this conflict, there will be four groups that will convene simultaneously. The program will be conducted in the following way (Baldwin/Linnea, 2001):

- **Prior to the meeting**, each group will be given an agenda, which they will be asked to participate in the activities.
 - Includes the intention for the session. Also, where and when the session would take place.
- **9 a.m. Check-in / Continental Breakfast**
 - This would be an opportunity for the three groups to get together and socialize before the session begins.
- **9:30 a.m. Welcome**
 - Each group will be brought together by the sound of a chime. The person calling the group to order will read a passage from a book of

leadership quotes.

- **9:35 a.m. Agreements**
 - This is an opportunity for the group to set expectations with each other. Be willing to listen and offer what they can to each other.
 - They will also select a group guardian to help the group to move on as smooth a path as possible.
- **10:00 a.m. Discussing the Three Principles & Three Practices**
 - Leadership rotates; responsibility is shared; and people place ultimate reliance on the greater good.
 - Speak with intention; listen with intention; and tend the well being of the circle.
- **10:15 a.m. Forms of Council**
 - The group will decide to use the three forms of council: talking piece, conversation and reflection.
 - During this dialogue the groups will be asked to reflect on their commonalities and differences as community leaders. The outcome would be the development of a Venn diagram, which would be used to clarify roles.
- **12:00 p.m. Check-out & Farewell**
 - At this time the group will take time to allow each member to share what they have learned/experienced during the session.
- **12:30 p.m. Lunch**

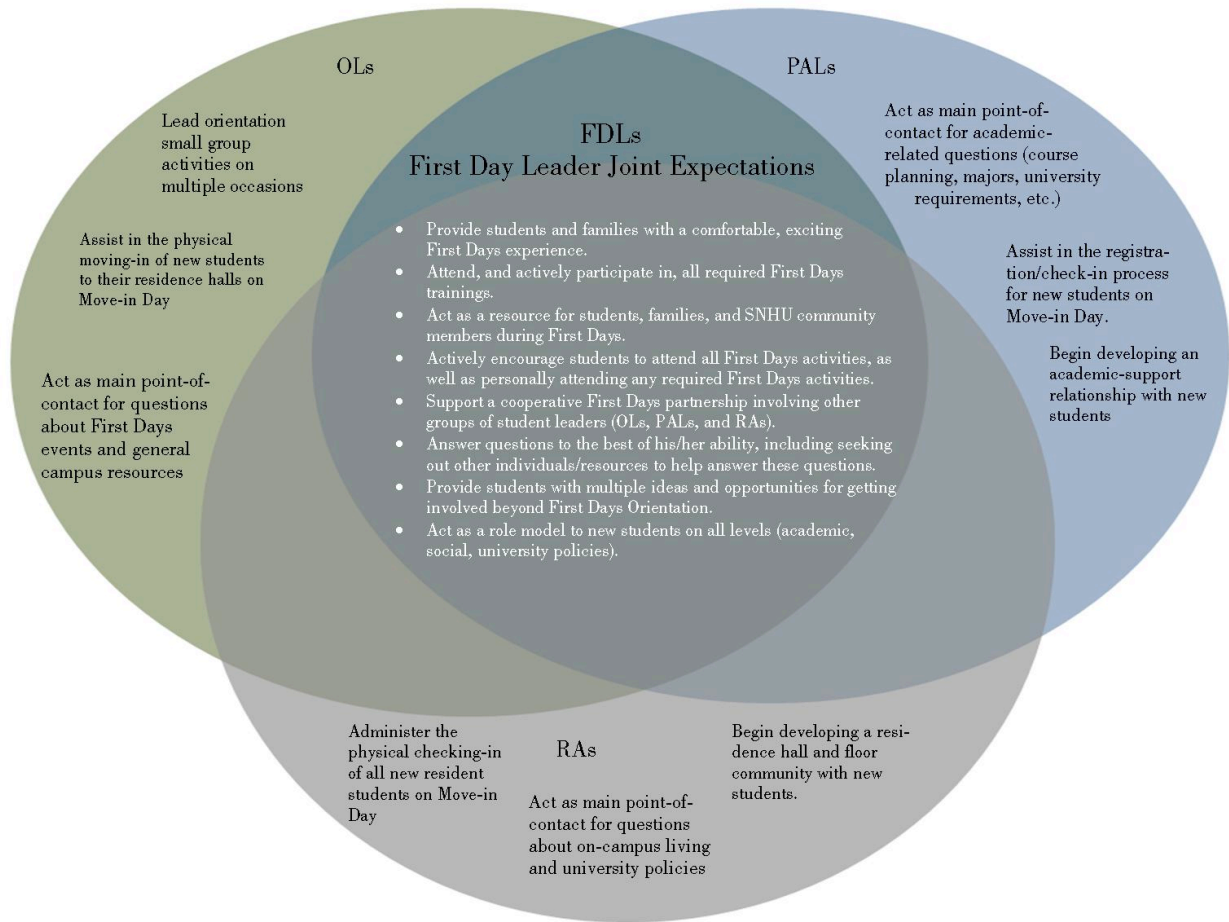
- **1:30 p.m. JazzLab**
 - In a large room the entire group will meet and be given the choice of instruments. There will be percussion, limited wind instruments (whistles, recorders, and harmonicas), and their voices. Each member will be asked to pick the instrument that resonates with his or her leadership style.

- **2:30 p.m./3:00 p.m. Wrap-up**
 - At this point the group will be asked to write a note to themselves highlighting how they will be successful working with the opposite group. This will be collected and distributed to the group the day before Move-in day for them to reflect on.

Conclusion

The ideal outcome would be that the groups would have a clear understanding of the other groups responsibilities and characteristics. Below is a product of their work together. The group developed their Venn diagram, which helped to clarify their roles. After the program was finished the members were asked whether they gained a new perspective about the other group. Also, they were asked if they worked any differently than they expected.

The group consensus was that they did have a renewed understanding of the responsibilities of the other group. They also felt a partnership with the other group that didn't exist in the past. Overall this training was a success.



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