A Proposal for Peer Mentoring at Northeastern

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Audience: Northeastern Counseling Services Director, Other colleges who are looking to implement peer support programs that have similar demographics to NU

Stance: Proposal to implement additional peer support to the mental health services at Northeastern.

Abstract
Northeastern University, as well as other colleges of similar scale, can dramatically increase their mental health services by investing in peer to peer support programs. Peer to peer support programs expand the current mental health services on college campuses by training students to be aware of the mental illnesses their peers face and provide meaningful support and resources to them. This proposal outlines the multiple benefits of a peer support program for individual students as well the larger school community.

Introduction
The student health center at Northeastern University (NU), like many colleges, have a challenging time serving all students as the demand can't be met by the health professionals. Along with a strain on resources, there is a stigma throughout the country in regards to mental illness, that prevents students from accessing care. Together, these two factors can unfortunately prove detrimental for students. As the resources of the university are stretched, one of the most strategic ways to address the mental health services gap is by investing in peer support programs.

According to the research peer support services are a beneficial way for students to easily access mental health support. This form of mental health support is beneficial for institutions as they do not have to hire additional staffing and allows individual students to become leaders on campus.

This proposal attempts to provide Northeastern with a plan to increase the access of social support and decrease the stigma of mental illnesses by putting into place a peer support program. Drawing from universities that have similar programs, Northeastern is capable of providing similar comprehensive services that will best assist students and help enhance the overall student body.

Background
Having students who are conscious of mental health issues can be extremely instrumental in helping those who dealing with issues of anxiety or depression. Research suggests that students are more likely to seek help from their fellow peers than to reach out and access student health services (Kraft, 2011).

Students who become peer support mentors can come from leaders across the student body, pulling from different student groups such as; Fraternity and Sorority Life, sports teams, religious groups, and other student clubs on campus. This will not only help students who suffer from mental illness, be able to relate to the peer mentors but will definitely foster a

compassionate student body through dialogue and discussion. By investing in the education of mental health issues, will change the overall school climate, making students who are having problems more likely to reach out for help.

Currently at Northeastern, there isn't any peer support program of this specific nature. Although the University Health and counseling Services (UHCS) does provide a wide array of mental health services:

- Scheduled and emergency assessment
- Short term individual therapy
- Group counseling
- Psychopharmacological treatment and referrals

Even with these extensive programs, peer support can only positively add to the services that Northeastern currently provides (Counseling Services 2015). It is important to note that peer support will not be a replacement for any of these services provided but rather would work in tandem, assisting UHCS by reach and serving the entire student body.

With more than 350 clubs at Northeastern (Admissions 2015) the peer support program will fit right into the environment of the diverse student body. The goal of Peer support not only being that, that the program will be able to help the individual on a personal level but also that peer support will be able to build a student body that has the courage to be compassionate to those in need, "veritas" (courage) is part Northeastern's motto, and that what peer mentoring wants to model in all aspects for the student body (New Logotype 2015).

Benefits
There are some large barriers why students don't access services, an unawareness of services provided at the school, and the stigmatization of the mental health services on campus.

With only 20% of students seeking services, having peers refer to peers is a beneficial way to share more comprehensive resources that are larger than peer support. Overall, with budgeting limitation, dedicated stakeholders, public eye, and strain of clinicians, more schools are opting into population-based models to help serve the mental health needs of the campus wide community. (Kirsch 2014)

Students don't seek services because they are not aware of them, only 26% of students were aware of their school mental health services (Kirsch 2014).With the Peer support program, it naturally provides a supportive environment fostered by the most natural of instincts, human contact. By tapping into the social need, and properly preparing peers to be able to provide support to those whom they interact with everyday, will create a resolution from the bottom up.

Research has shown that there has been overwhelmingly positive results with peer support programs. Students are increasingly going to their peers for support, and with the university implementing a peer support program on campus, it will be better equipped to provide the student body with additional services to help cope with challenging situations and assist with

stigmatizing mental health on the campus. This one program can address the two main concerns as to why students may not reach out for help in the first place. (Kirsch 2014)

Implementation
Analyzing strengths of established peers support programs at colleges and universities will be beneficial when creating a model for Northeastern. There are three different themes in the peer support programs from Harvard University, University of Reading, and Oxford University that Northeastern should consider when establishing their own peer support program.

Harvard University: Individualized and Accessible Care
Strengths of Harvard University's peer support programs are the specialized care and availability of services. For example, Harvard has five undergraduate peer counseling groups that "offer anonymous, confidential hotline and drop-in counseling" ("Peer Counseling- Harvard", 2015). The services offer one-on-one and group support to students specialized in the fields of gender and sexuality, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance abuse. As a new program, Northeastern can adapt the ideas of offering specialized care. Focusing training and advertising support around the popular themes will show the diverse areas peer support students can be helpful.

Northeastern can also utilize the theme of being extremely accessible from the Harvard program. The various peer support programs at Harvard are available at almost all hours of the day in the form of office hours on phone. As students can benefit from peer counseling after business hours or may be apprehensive about going in person, creating a phone line is a proactive way to distribute the care to students. As potentially creating a new telephone line or office hours may be challenging to initially set up, the peer support group at Northeastern can publicize various hotlines already established for individuals. The themes of having relevant care and being easily accessible are two main factors that should undoubtedly be implemented in the peer support program to ensure it is connecting to all kinds of students.

University of Oxford: Diversity
At the University of Oxford, "Each college has a panel of between six and 12 trained Peer Supporters, with new students trained each year to take the place of those who leave" ("Student-led support | University of Oxford", 2015). This component of the peer support program at Oxford is unique as it respects that students may face difficulties specific to their major, field, or interest. Having peer support students who are diverse allows students who come from a wide background feel more comfortable with the services. As Northeastern begins to recruit individuals to be peer supporters it is of the utmost importance to draw from all colleges, clubs, and activities. A primary reason for peer support programs' success is because students are able to connect with individuals who they can relate to. With Northeastern having a diverse student body, the members of the peer support staff should mirror that as well.

University of Reading: Positive Campus Climate
At the University of Reading in the United Kingdom, the peer support group not only focuses on being available to talk and listen with students, but they are also actively involved in spreading positive messages regarding mental health throughout their college campus. For example, part of the requirement for students when they become peer support is to "help to promote wellbeing on

campus" ("Peer Support - University of Reading", 2015). Through sponsoring events, such as the ongoing "Wellbeing Wednesdays", the group helps to spread information regarding mental health, the peer support program, and other resources to students, faculty and staff.

Creating an environment that is aware of the services available for mental health helps to reduce the stigma around it and directs people to the appropriate care. Considering to have the peer support leaders at Northeastern practice similar programing will help to promote the new service and spread education regarding mental health. Some examples of what this may be like is having tabling events at popular locations around campus such as Centennial Common and the Curry Student Center. Another alternative would be to coordinate programing with Resident Assistants in first year resident halls to promote mental health awareness techniques while also introducing the program to the students. The on campus events therefore can serve multiple purposes: provide tips and techniques on how to maintain a positive mental health, create an environment that encourages a discussion on positive mental health while reducing the stigma on mental illness, and promotes the peer support program for students to learn more about and to utilize the services. Overall, the effects of on campus programing may have small immediate reactions, but if done properly can help to establish a supportive campus community as a whole.

Next steps
As Northeastern looks into next steps for implementing this program, there are a few key players that need to be identified. These next steps can be acknowledged as the following:

- Establishing a faculty or peer advisor
- Creating a strong group of peer supporter
- Effective marketing

First, there should be a faculty advisor for the organization. This individual needs to have a significant background in counseling, college students programing, and other forms of mental health treatment. If there is no staff currently available, Northeastern may not have to hire someone with credentials but may be able to fill the position with someone pursuing a MSW or graduate student in the field of psychology. The key is for them to be dynamic, personable, and ready to lead peer support students. As the main part of a peer support program is lead by the students themselves.

Creating a strong initial group of peer supporters is essential to lay a solid foundation for the program. Having students who share characteristics of enthusiasm, optimism, maturity, and trustworthiness is important. As discussed earlier, it is important to have a diverse group in able to help a wide variety of students. Networking out to Resident Assistants, Human Services majors, and potentially previous Orientation Leaders are a strong starting off network to help build this core group of students.

In order for the program to be successful, there is a lot of upfront work that has to be complete. However, as outlined in this proposal, there are many resources Northeastern can draw from to help create a successful peer support program. With a solid foundation, the program will become self sustaining lead by the peer support students with direction from the advisor, almost like a club on campus.

Once the program is established it will be at the utmost importance for Northeastern to make sure they are marketing it correctly. This may include the school publishing information online or even distributing brochures to students on campus. Once the program is up and running, the student initiative will take the weight off the faculty and staff; allowing students on campus to have better access to mental health. With these steps in place, the approach is hopefully holistic and seems like an organic integration to the current services offered on campus.

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