Peer Program Toolkit

Starting, Coordinating and Evaluating Peer Programs at McGill University
This toolkit aims to be a comprehensive resource for the many different peer programs that exist at McGill, and anyone looking to develop a peer program at McGill. The toolkit was modelled after the development of a new peer program called COMunity: Commuters of McGill, and contains a number of the documents and resources that were developed for that program. Other program coordinators were consulted throughout the process; some of their tips have also been included in the toolkit for your reference. COMunity is a peer program designed to provide support to off-campus & commuter students at McGill by working to create a sense of community on- and off-campus for those students. A leadership team called Connectors consisting of undergraduate and graduate students is responsible for implementing the programming for COMunity.

The toolkit has been divided into seven different sections: Peer Programs in Higher Education, Starting a Peer Program, Coordinating a Peer Program, Evaluating a Peer Program, Program Sustainability, and Resources and References. The toolkit can be used either as a single document, or as a series of stand alone documents.

The Peer Programs in Higher Education section provides a brief introduction to the role of peer programs within post-secondary institutions.

The section on Starting a Peer Program is primarily intended for those looking to develop their own peer program at McGill, but could also be useful for coordinators of existing peer programs.

In Coordinating a Peer Program, strategies and resources for training and managing staff/volunteers within a peer program are discussed.

Evaluating a Peer Program focuses on data collection and analysis as related to coordinating a peer program. The section titled Program Sustainability delves into issues relating to the sustainability of peer programs, such as incorporating assessment data in an iterative process and succession planning.

The remaining sections of the toolkit are more for your reference as program coordinators. The Resources and References section provides a list of additional reading material for program coordinators, including some of the documents used in the development of COMunity, as well as a list of different sources that were consulted in writing the toolkit.

Please feel free to contact the Peer Programs Network at peersupport@mcgill.ca, if you have any questions, comments, or thoughts about the toolkit.
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Peer Programs in Higher Education

"Through opportunities for engagement, social networks define and reinforce meaningful social roles, which in turn provide a sense of identity, value, belonging, and attachment. In addition, social networks provide opportunities for companionship and sociability, and a source of social support" (Berkman et al., 2000).

The term “peer programs” is used as an umbrella to describe all of the programs that offer emotional, social, and/or academic support from one student to another on post-secondary campuses (i.e. peer counselling, peer education, peer helpers, peer tutors, peer mentors, peer coaches, etc.). Peer programs therefore play an integral role within post-secondary education as they encompass many spheres of student life. Moreover, being involved in a peer program during the course of a degree program often positively influences a student’s experience (Newton & Ender, 2010). Through peer programs, students are able to connect with their peers in meaningful ways and apply what they are learning in the classroom to real life situations. Students are also able to learn and develop new skillsets not traditionally taught in classroom settings that can contribute to their career paths. In other words, peer programs can act as a bridge between academics and personal and professional development.

There is an abundance of academic literature surrounding the benefits of peer programs on promoting student success in post-secondary institutions. Peer programs contribute to student success by promoting a supportive learning environment across post-secondary campuses. They are ideal for collaborative work across campus and help foster a sense of community by encouraging knowledge and resource sharing amongst peer program coordinators.

Working within a peer program exposes students to diverse points of view that will likely differ from what they are accustomed to, while also helping to create a space where individual and collective differences can be overcome through the establishment of a shared identity and purpose.

The shared social environment provided by peer programs can help to perpetuate a sense of belonging, purpose, and self-efficacy, all of which are significant components to both our success and sense of well-being as individuals (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Moreover, it is important to recognize that a “[student’s] peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development” (Astin, 1993). Through peer programs students can learn the powerful message that they are not alone by sharing their own knowledge and experiences, and being able to learn from the knowledge and experiences of their peers.

It is common for students to initially refer to their peer group for information and support over seeking help from professional services (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Rickwood et al., 2005). As a result, peer programs can be a way of connecting students to the many resources and services that exist at McGill by being able to reach more students.

Many institutions of higher education have recognized the importance of peer programs on their respective campuses. If you are reading this, chances are that you yourself are either already a peer program coordinator, or are looking to become one.
Starting a Peer Program

◆ Program Conceptualization: Designing a Peer Program

Designing a peer program starts with having an idea based on a need you’ve noticed on campus. However, before jumping right into developing a peer program, it is important to determine what kinds of peer programs already exist on campus, and whether or not your program fills an existing gap. Check out the following link for a list of 70 different peer programs at McGill that exist on campus (i.e. Healthy McGill, the Peer Support Centre, the Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students’ Society [SACOMSS], International Student Buddy Program, Cousins, etc.).

The design process for creating a peer program is iterative in the sense that it is ongoing. For instance, in developing COMunity: Commuters of McGill, the Off-Campus & Commuter Student Support (OCCSS) team decided to go with a grassroots approach to developing their peer program. Off-campus and commuter students were previously identified as a population without access to the same resources and supports that students living in University housing have access to. Using this gap, the OCCSS team surveyed commuter students on campus to see what their needs were, and followed up with extensive cross-campus research to see what other gaps existed with regards to support for off-campus and commuter students at McGill.

The next step was to reinforce the McGill-specific data with a literature review on off-campus and commuter students, and research into what other post-secondary institutions are doing to support that specific student population.

The OCCSS team then analyzed the data, identified gaps, and structured COMunity around addressing those gaps. The OCCSS team capitalized on the unique knowledge, experience, and skillsets each team member brought to the table. A guiding principle the OCCSS team used in developing COMunity was continuously answering the following questions: Who? What? When? Where? How? And Why? Answering these questions helped to create a program structure while using an innovative and iterative approach to program development. This allowed for them to continuously incorporate new feedback and research into the development and coordination of their program.

Corey the Coordinator Tip:
The Peer Programs Network offers consultation sessions to help you with this step, and will also facilitate networking across the university.

Corey the Coordinator Tip:
The OCCSS team used a process called asset mapping to identify their collective and individual strengths and weaknesses. This process allowed for them to see what their respective interests and skill sets were, while also learning where their experience and abilities could compliment those of their colleagues.

Program Design Checklist

- PURPOSE
- FOCUS
- PARTICIPANTS
- TYPE OF SESSION
- PLANNED GROUP DEVELOPMENT
- LOGISTICS
- DESIGN
- ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION
Proposal Development

Once you have the structure of your program, you’re ready to move to the next phase of program development: creating a proposal for your program. Program proposals are useful to have for a number of different reasons such as applying for funding, advocating for space, giving presentations, etc. The proposal stage marks the first step in your program moving from conceptual to concrete. Check out the proposal draft for COMunity as well as a template proposal.

Recruiting Staff / Volunteers

The recruitment process can be facilitated by having:

- A thorough understanding of what your program’s goals/objectives are
- A working structure of what your program entails, and what your program’s expected needs are
- Who you are looking for to staff your program
- Having a communications strategy
- Having thought about where you envision your program within the McGill community

The recruitment process for COMunity can be broken down as follows:

- Using the information obtained in the first sections of this manual to draft a detailed job description outlining the role and responsibilities for staff/volunteers. For a sample job description, check out the Connector application guide for COMunity.
- Using the job description to create an application guide for your program. The COMunity application guide included the following sections:
  - An “About” section describing the purpose of the program
  - Eligibility criteria for the program
  - Commitment requirements
  - Staff/volunteer responsibilities
  - A general “profile” of the kind of qualities and characteristics you’re looking for in a candidate
  - Learning outcomes and skill development
  - A high level overview of the application process
  - Contact information if people have any questions about the process
- Using the job description to determine what kind of screening and selection processes were going to be used for program recruitment, the OCCSS team used interviews based on a rubric created specifically for the interview process to uncover the underlying skills and competencies required for the program.
- The structure of the program was used to design the training curriculum for the Connectors.

Corey the Coordinator Tip:

Many people struggle with articulating what it is they have learned/developed from being in a position/role they have held, whether paid or volunteer. When writing job descriptions, it is helpful to get in the habit of not only talking about what you’re looking for in your candidates, but also to include what applicants can expect to gain from the experience. This practice helps people better reflect on their own learning and development.
"Communications" (i.e. email, social media) is an umbrella term that refers to getting a message out to the community in some way, shape, or form. There is a strategic component to communications because they help you with outreach and recruitment, can aid in keeping your audience engaged, foster a public presence, etc. This strategic component is based on having a proper understanding of what your message will look like and why it will look that way. The coordinators of COMunity used the following document to help determine their means of communication.

### 6 Points to consider while doing communications:

#### Your Time
- Understand when people will be most receptive to your message (i.e. time of day, time of the week, time of the semester, etc.)
- How your message coincides with different times
- Don’t send out important messages on Fridays
- There is a greater chance of follow up if you wait until Monday

#### Your Audience
- Tailor your message to your audience to elicit the greatest possible engagement from them
- Conduct focus groups/surveys to find out what people are looking for, their likes/dislikes, their knowledge about a particular topic, what they would like to know about a particular topic

#### Your Message
- Know your program and your content
- Understand how people could interpret your message
- Have concrete and simple actions items for people in your message
- Read through/watch content before posting
- Don’t repeat the same content more than once
- Provide content-warnings/disclosure statements for content that some people might find difficult to read about/watch
- Use language that everyone can understand and provide avenues where people can go to learn more about something if needed
- Highlight your message vis-a-vis what someone else’s message(s) is/are

#### Your “Space”
- The content of your message differs depending on where it’s located
- Craft your messages so that they are conducive to the space/medium being used
- Think about what kinds of people you will find in areas where print material is displayed and what kinds of messages they will be most receptive to
- Visit physical spaces before posting anything
- Understanding the different function of various social media platforms
- Use different venues and mediums to get your message out
- Have consistent branding on all communication materials

#### Your Allies/Communications Partners
- Establish a network of people to help you get your message out and to coordinate your approaches to better cross-promote
- Tap into different social networks to reach a larger number of people
- Have people like/share posts on Facebook and/or re-tweet on Twitter
- Make sure people know about your program (word of mouth, networking) to help advocate for your program

### Developing a Communications Strategy

The COMunity coordinators developed their communications strategy as follows. The first step was to establish a timeline, which for COMunity was based around Off-Campus Connects (OCX), the Orientation event for off-campus and commuter students. Their timeline was as follows: pre-OCX, OCX, post-OCX. Once the timeline was created, the COMunity coordinators wrote down all of the different communications that would be required for the program on one colour of post-it notes, and then using another colour, listed the communications platform that would be used to distribute the message. Afterwards, they used another colour post-it to designate where each communication would be directed (i.e. Facebook and emails being used to direct people to a central website). Towards the end of this process, the COMunity coordinators translated this into an Excel sheet.
**Graphics & Visuals**

Part of developing a peer program entails creating graphics and visuals for promotional materials. The COMunity coordinators worked with a graphic design team to create a logo, postcard, and template for their training manual. COMunity coordinators wanted to ensure that the design of their graphics accurately reflected the scope of the program. The graphic design team created several potential logos, and the COMunity coordinators conducted small targeted focus groups to narrow down which of the logo drafts was preferred.

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**Assessment Strategy**

When creating a peer program, it is important to incorporate an assessment strategy with each step in the development of your program. For COMunity, this involved deciding what information the OCCSS team wanted to collect from the individuals who participated in the program. The program coordinators for COMunity also used this time to strategically plan out touch points (i.e. check-ins) throughout the year in order to provide support to the Connectors in their program. Doing so promotes volunteer engagement, a sense of community amongst the Connectors and an environment of mutual support. The COMunity coordinators used a qualitative approach for their assessment with data collected from focus groups, feedback surveys from their student leaders after the training session, feedback forms for participants in the events, and monthly check-ins with the Connectors. The purpose of this was to gather explicitly anecdotal evidence to help better the program based on participant feedback. The COMunity coordinators also worked with the Manager of Assessment for Student Services to develop the surveys used for the program.
Coordinating a Peer Program

Coordinating a peer program involves training and managing staff/volunteers. There is no single best approach to training or managing staff/volunteers. However, there are a number of theories that can help you in developing training curricula and managing your team. One useful theory to keep in mind as a peer program coordinator is Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle is based on the idea that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (McLeod, 2013). Learning is an active process that encompasses a person’s entire experience in the learning environment as the basis for new knowledge to be developed. This theory is particularly relevant for developing training curricula for peer programs because at its core, experiential learning is about learning by doing, reflecting, synthesizing, and trying out what was learned.

The mark of a good training curriculum is that it successfully prepares your staff/volunteers for their role(s). For COMunity, the Connector’s work revolves around interacting with other students to help create a space where students feel they are able to make meaningful connections with other students. Core skills needed to accomplish this work are effective communication and facilitation skills. Consequently, the bulk of COMunity’s training is based around helping the Connectors hone and develop these two skillsets.

Corey the Coordinator Tip:
Be adaptable. Expect that things won’t always go as planned and that’s ok. Be prepared to adjust plans along the way and respond creatively.
The COMunity coordinators are bringing the Connectors into the process of consolidating the core responsibilities for the position to further give the Connectors a sense of agency in their work.

Below is the training outline for COMunity. If you would like to adapt part of this training for your own program, please send us an email at peersuport@mcgill.ca. It is also worth mentioning that the Peer Programs Network coordinates a series of workshops (active listening, workshop facilitation, resources and referrals, and public speaking) throughout the year to help students in leadership/helping roles on campus develop their knowledge and skills to better equip them for their roles. These workshops are free of charge to attend, and anyone with a McGill ID number can register for them. You can find a list of the workshops that are offered here.

**COMunity Training Skeleton**
- Welcome
- Icebreaker
- Debrief of icebreaker
- Provide context/background for COMunity
- Go over the Connector Manual
- Go over roles and responsibilities for the Connectors
- Lunch
- Asset mapping, goal setting, and personal reflection
- Communication skills
- Facilitation skills
- Working dinner: event planning
- Debrief of training day
- Closing remarks and next steps

As part of the training process, the coordinators for COMunity developed a manual for the students in the program (i.e. Connectors). This manual outlines all of the different components of COMunity while also providing the Connectors with worksheets, key points from the skill building portion of the training, and a list of additional resources if the students would like to continue to learn about particular topics that were covered during training. The worksheets were designed to help the Connectors reflect on their experience throughout the year. The worksheets also help connectors to identity and develop skills that are important to them by providing a platform for the Connectors to keep track of their reflections, as well as to set goals for themselves.

**Corey the Coordinator Tip:**
It has been shown that goal setting is effective in increasing motivation. One of the most widely used goal setting methods is SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound). You can work with your staff/volunteers to incorporate SMART goals into their work.

◆ **Managing staff / volunteers**

As a management style, the COMunity coordinators embrace an approach that allows for significant creative freedom and autonomy, while also establishing concrete roles within the program. There will be a high degree of contact between the coordinators and the Connectors throughout the course of the year via monthly check-ins and reflection sessions.

**Corey the Coordinator Tip:**
Set clear expectations for you and your team from the onset of the program as to how you will communicate with each other during the course of the year.
Coordinators of peer programs can be students, staff and/or Faculty members. There could be a significant age gap dynamic between program coordinators and their volunteers/staff as younger students could find themselves in leadership positions coordinating older students. Finding ways to manage your team regardless of differences in age/experience is important for your program’s success. The Community of Practice (CoP) within the Peer Programs Network can help with developing knowledge and skills in this area, as it is a means through which peer program coordinators are able to share best practices and learn from one another.

Corey the Coordinator Tip:
As peer program coordinators, a useful theory to keep in mind is Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development. This framework is based on the idea that we all have the potential to learn things just outside of our grasp by working with a more experienced peer. For more information on the ZPD, check out the following website.

Communications

As with any program, communication between members is crucial to program success. For COMunity, communication is done through e-mail and monthly meetings. The COMunity Coordinator and Connectors also have a private Facebook page to share ideas and feedback with one another in one central location. Connectors are encouraged to email, call, or visit the COMunity Coordinator at any time, for any reason.

Connectors are also asked to attend monthly meetings. These meetings are held to discuss COMunity program components (things that are going well, things that need revision, social media and event promotion, etc.), as well as to plan and organize upcoming events. Connectors are asked to facilitate a COMunity event at least once per semester, depending on their academic and personal schedules. Events are scheduled at monthly meetings and Connectors are given the autonomy to organize their event as they see best, with help from the Coordinator if necessary.

We at COMunity also believe that “communications” is more than discussing program events and components. As such, our monthly meetings include a “check-in” where Connectors are encouraged to share personal and academic experiences (both good and bad), issues and problems they are facing, as well as thoughts and feelings on current events. Connectors are also encouraged to privately share anything with the Coordinator so that we can help in any way.

The Coordinator’s Role

The roles of the coordinators include:

- Act as a positive mentor for Connectors throughout the planning and implementation of on- and off-campus events
- Provide logistical support throughout the planning and implementation of on- and off-campus events
- Provide feedback to Connectors regarding events and their roles during events
- Conduct monthly check-in meetings
- Inform Connectors of upcoming continuing education sessions each semester
- Strive to create a sense of community between coordinators and Connectors
◆ The Connector’s Role

The roles of the Connectors can be broken down as follows:

◆ Strive to create a sense of community for McGill’s commuter students in the program
◆ Connect commuter students to resources and support on campus
◆ Help students find different ways to get involved on campus
◆ Attend the training session at the end of August
◆ Attend team meetings/check-ins throughout the academic year
◆ Participate in at least two continuing education sessions each semester
◆ Plan and implement OCX (January & August)
◆ Plan and implement inclusive (off-campus) events for commuter students (minimum one per month) to foster a sense of community based on interests and commuter types/locations
◆ Assist with social media (Facebook & Instagram) and promote events through social media

◆ Continuing Education & Professional Development

The COMunity coordinators strongly believe that learning doesn’t stop once training is over. The purpose of incorporating continuing education and professional development sessions into a peer program is to provide your staff/volunteers with a chance to hone existing skills and/or develop new ones based on topics that will be useful to them in their role[s], as well as provide the opportunity for them to explore other topics they are interested in learning about. COMunity is also capitalizing on existing continuing education and professional development opportunities offered by the Peer Programs Network and the McGill community.

◆ Logistics

This section of the toolkit attempts to facilitate your logistical work by providing concrete strategies and resources you can use to deal with the logistics of your program.
McGill offers a wide variety of venues for booking including lobbies, conference rooms, external areas, and classrooms. While booking a venue for an event is relatively simple, it is important to book the room as early as you can. Venues fill-up fast and sometimes it can be difficult to coordinate the schedule for your event with certain venues. Some venues even require bookings a minimum of two weeks in advance. There is no central venue booking; all venue bookings are done by the various locations. If you are unsure who to contact, simply email or call the administrative department of your preferred location and they will be able to help you. Keep in mind other aspects of venue booking such as setting up your venue, alcohol permits, security, catering, etc. Not only do these things impact your planning process, there are also certain university policies and procedures that must be adhered to. Make sure to check with your venue regarding these policies, as well as any other policies they may have. For more information on venue booking, please refer to Events Bookings at McGill.

**Room Booking**

Tabling can be an effective way to engage with the McGill community. Instead of relying on people to come to you, it allows you to go to where people are on campus in order to get your message out there. There are many different areas where you can table on campus. However, there is no central system for booking tables at McGill. Each building and/or department will have their own requirements and procedures for booking tables on campus.

Some places require paying a small fee ($5-$10) for each table booking whereas others can be booked without charge. Or in the case of SSMU (Students’ Society of McGill University), the cost of booking a table for non-SSMU affiliated groups is quite expensive (roughly a few hundred dollars). Generally speaking, booking tables in Departmental/Faculty buildings is either coordinated through the Departmental/Faculty Student Association or the porter for that particular building. A quick Google search using keywords should get you to the right place (i.e. finding the process to book a table in the Leacock building would be done by typing “leacock table booking” into Google).
Evaluating a Peer Program

COMunity approached evaluating their program from the standpoint of collecting feedback from the individuals actively involved in the different components of the program: the Connectors and the participants. Intentional feedback mechanisms were built into the program to collect the qualitative data needed to continue to improve the program as part of an iterative design process. These feedback points included: Connector training, monthly check-ins and reflections, event feedback forms, and a critical reflection methodology.

◆ Action Research

The coordinators of COMunity used Action Research as a guiding principle for the development of their program. Action Research is a tool that can be used to foster practice-based evidence to help improve learning and development. It can be conceptualized as a spiral that facilitates research, planning, action, and evaluation as demonstrated in the diagram below.

The diagram was based off of content on the INFED website.

◆ Working with Data

There are many different approaches you can take while working with data from the research you have done. The coordinators of COMunity adapted their framework for working with data to best suit their respective learning styles. The result of their process in helping to write this toolkit is shown in the picture on the left.

COMunity coordinators printed off all of the information available to them using high-level category words, and cut and pasted them onto a large sheet of paper to create a visual outline of the toolkit. From here, they used different colours to theme and relate the sections to different ideas, resources, and theories.

Having the visual outline allowed for them to play with the structure and content of the toolkit before writing it.
**Review and Reflection**

In designing COMunity, the coordinators of the program used critical reflection as part of their evaluation strategy. This methodology is also known as the: WHAT, SO WHAT, and NOW WHAT approach. This diagram is modelled after the A “Critical” Reflection Framework by Reflective Practice (2007).

The purpose of using a critical reflection approach is to be able to reflect on both past and future courses of action by focusing on what has worked well, what didn’t work, and the reasons why they did or did not work.

**Succession Planning**

Succession planning is a really important part of program design, especially when working with students, as there is a high degree of student turnover within peer programs. Insofar as succession planning for COMunity, the coordinators of the program built in a number of different components.
to facilitate various forms of succession planning. **COMunity** is structured so that there are both Junior Connectors and Connectors. Junior Connectors are incoming first year students who go through the initial training process along with the Connectors, and help them with the planning and implementation of the events on- and off-campus. Having a junior-senior structure to a program allows for a mentorship component within the program and should ensure that there is sustained knowledge management. Moreover, there is also the possibility for the Connectors to be promoted to paid-student staff.

The coordinators of the program also reached out to the McGill School of Information Studies to look into creating a practicum opportunity for graduate students in the Information Studies program, who would help to create a sustainable system for knowledge management.

In addition, the coordinators will write detailed exit reports chronicling their time and involvement within **COMunity**, while also explaining the relevance of the various documents and files that exist within the program’s Google Drive.

Part of program sustainability stems from taking succession planning into account from the onset of program development, demonstrating a willingness to learn from the data brought forth during the program evaluation and incorporating various stakeholder feedback into improving the program.

**Community of Practice (CoP)**

There exists a *Community of Practice (CoP)* for peer program coordinators (i.e. students, staff and faculty) at McGill through the Peer Programs Network. The CoP strives to help peer program coordinators at McGill be able to share knowledge and resources with each other. The coordinators of COMunity are using the lunch and learn sessions offered throughout the academic year as a means of personal and professional development for themselves, as well as a way to network and build relationships with other peer program coordinators on campus. Content from the lunch and learn sessions will be added to this section of the manual throughout the year so that the knowledge and resources shared within those sessions are widely accessible.
Resources & References

◆ Resources

Writing a Job Description
Sample Guiding Questions for Developing a Peer Program
Peer Program Proposal Template
Sample Peer Program Proposal: COMunity
Recruitment Planning Document
Communications Planning Document
Sample Application Guide: COMunity
Sample Connector Interview Rubric & Questions: COMunity
5-Stage Model of Debriefing
3-Stage Model of Debriefing

◆ Additional Reading


◆ References


