


Evaluation of a Pilot Peer Advising Program for University Students: Voices from Advisees and Advisors

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Abstract

This program evaluation study aims to investigate the peer advisors' and advisees' perceptions regarding a pilot peer advising program designed to facilitate the orientation process of newly-registered university students. The study was based on qualitative data gathered from participants in the academic year of 2018-2019 at a foundation university in Turkey. Findings suggest that the program offer several benefits such as smoother university adaptation, peer-to-peer communication, effective advisor support, meeting new people, communication skills, and increase in self-confidence. Suggested improvements in the program are; more advisee participation, better promotion of the program, more meetings and social gatherings, advisees assigned per advisors, advisor training, and advisor selection, and continuing advisor support.

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INTRODUCTION

Transition from high school to university is a major turning point in many individuals' lives. University is different from high school in many ways and adjusting to life at college can be quite challenging and stressful for many (Brooks and DuBois 1995). Among the causes of stress are living apart from parents, learning how to function as independent adults, making new friends, and acquiring academic study skills (Parker et al. 2004). If not properly dealt with, these stressors might result in a sudden decline in academic performance, or high drop-out rates (Yelten et al. 2018).

Advising is an indispensable part of students' university experience as it plays a key role in the academic life of all students. Universities offer support to first-year students in different ways and forms to tackle adjustment problems; academic advising provided by faculty members and peer support provided by existing students. Peer support aims to complement faculty support since it is believed that faculty may fall short of empathizing with students and look at issues from their perspective as a result of the fact that they are not students any longer (Diambra 2003).

In the most general sense, peer advising can be described as peers helping peers. Dennis (2003) defines peer support as the informal, natural, emotional, and informational support provided and received by people who share similar experiences. Although this definition pertains to a health care context, it has been equally applicable to educational settings. Peers offer support and guidance on issues that do not require professional support or at times when professional support is out of reach.

Peer advising provides students not only with information about academic issues such as scheduling, course registration and selection, but also with counseling about students' individual needs. It also helps create bonds among existing and new-coming students. The relationship between those equal parties serves to close the gap between faculty and students whose relationship is based on an unequal power relationship (Biaggio et al. 1997).

Peer support mechanisms are variously called "peer advising", "peer support", or "mentoring", yet serve to provide undergraduates with informal support about issues such as course selection, campus resources, extra-curricular activities on campus, and etc. "Peer advising" will be used throughout the paper to refer to peer support or mentoring programs at universities. "Peer" in this study refers to a university student who is nearly the same age, and has the same social position as other students.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are several studies related to peer advising focusing on the strengths of the program in terms of advisors and advisees. Studies also recommend modifications to improve the efficiency of future peer advising programs. For instance, Johnson et al. (2000) point out that peer advisors might serve as an accessible network of support for students and this form of support is easier to reach when compared to support provided by administrative staff or faculty members.

Program benefits for advisors were listed as networking, gaining leadership skills and confidence, developing career skills, learning about personal strengths and weaknesses, and being aware of personal talents (Rawana et al. 2015). As pointed out by Chambliss and Takacs (2014), when students establish a strong and healthy relationship with their peers and faculty, they will not only become more involved with the subjects they study but also be more successful in their coursework. Posa (2011) contends that peer advisors improve students' academic success, increase collaboration among peers, as well as problem-solving and decision making skills. Peer advising also paves the way for personal reflection.

Diambra (2003) underlines the fact that peer advisors adopt different roles such as leader, mentor, guide, facilitator, role model, and listener, so they grow personally, hence professionally. They also help build a sense of kinship with fellow students as they listen, encourage, support, and observe

advisees. Similarly, Griffin et al. (2015) assert that peer advisors develop leadership, communication and organizational skills thanks to the peer advising program, which also establishes a sense of community among advisors and advisees involved. Peer advisors also reported that they felt proud of themselves because they made a positive difference in advisees' lives. They added that their knowledge about university in terms of the academic resources provided and departmental issues had increased as a result of their participation in the program.

The advising process requires time and commitment. Diambra and Cole-Zakrzewski (2002) suggest that peer advisors take ownership of the program and show initiative in organizing appointments with their advisees. This service is becoming increasingly popular as faculty gets more and more busy and falls short of addressing students' advising expectations. Advising services are considered to play a key role in the excellence of faculty as well. Support from advisors help students have a clearer idea about faculty expectations, thus positively affecting student retention and academic success. A skillfully planned advising program will, undoubtedly, produce favorable results for faculty and advisors, yet it is the advisees who will benefit most from such a program.

In their study, Rosenthal and Shinebarger (2010) underline that there is a gap between what students need and what the advising programs provided by faculty members offer students. They claim peer advisors may help bridge that gap and offer help in non-academic issues causing trouble for most first-year students. One advantage of peer advisors is that it is easier to access them and keep in touch with them on a regular basis. The support received also helps students have higher college GPAs.

This support is crucially important when different populations of students are in question. In a recent study by Ames et al. (2015) a mentorship program for students with special needs was designed and its effectiveness was evaluated. The results of the study showed that students were highly satisfied with the program and they reported that it helped them to reach their personal goals. In addition, Johnson et al. (2000) underline that peer advising play a crucial role in providing a network of support for non-traditional students such as adult women students in community colleges who have access to limited social support. Peers help women new to university feel less stressed and worried by addressing their concerns immediately. Waghel et al. (2017) designed a mentoring program for pharmacy students and it was reported that students benefitted from the program in terms of gaining new perspectives into their major, yet they faced challenges such as scheduling, and communication between both parties.

Despite several benefits, Diambra (2003) however, warns us about the challenges of the program. He remarks that peer advisors need to be constantly guided and supported. To provide them with such support, we need supervisors who have sufficient amount of time for planning and devoting ongoing attention to advisors.

One of the challenges that needs to be addressed is the fact that more students need to benefit from the program and this requires persistence and time invested in advertising (Rosenthal and Shinebarger 2010). It is expected that the popularity of the peer advising program will result in an increase in the number of advisees because through word-of-mouth recommendations more students become aware of the program. On the other hand, advisors complain about low attendance rates in advising meetings and sessions, yet they also report that they cannot respond to all the questions posed by advisees. A solution to this dilemma needs to be worked out (Griffin et al. 2015).

As indicated by the findings of international studies, the literature suggests that there are positive outcomes for both parties, and if challenges are addressed, more students will continue to benefit from peer advising. In Turkey, universities such as Koç (<https://kuakran.ku.edu.tr/>), Ankara (<http://pdr.education.ankara.edu.tr/akran-danismanligi-programi/>) and Özyeğin (<https://www.ozyegin.edu.tr/tr/ogrenci-yasam-ofisi/akran-danismanlik-programi>) offer peer advising services to their students. However, program evaluation studies about regarding these services are scarce. In one study, Aladağ (2009) evaluated the peer advising program designed for students enrolled

in Education Faculty at Ege University. Results of the study indicated that advisees had positive feelings about the program for four reasons; advisors' friendly attitudes, being listened to, constant and regular meetings, being informed about academic and social issues. Advisees also stated that they wished there were more meetings, meetings were held in a more comfortable atmosphere, and it was easier for them to arrange meetings. Aladağ (2009) recommends that the program needs to be more widely publicized throughout the university and more support from faculty members is essential. Advisors also asked for a more sustainable advising program to be carried out in all the faculties of the university.

Albayrak-Kaymak (2008) designed a peer advising program for prep school students at Boğaziçi University and piloted it for a semester. She found out that participation was low, and this decreased the motivation of advisors. To remedy the situation, it is recommended that advisors take a more active role in promoting the program such as visiting the classrooms in person to encourage more advisees to participate, paying evening visits to dormitories, and cooperating with student representatives to increase the number of social and academic departmental events.

This study was carried out bearing in mind the fact that there needs to be more studies evaluating the effectiveness of peer advising programs taking into account the perspectives of advisors and advisees. The researcher wanted to investigate whether the pilot peer advising program was a viable form of support that would prove beneficial for first-year university students. The study was carried out to shed light on the following research questions;

1. How often and why do advisees seek help from advisors?
2. What do advisors and advisees think of the pilot peer advising program in terms of its strengths?
3. What do advisors and advisees think should be improved in the implementation of the peer advising program?

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

Case studies focus on a single unit to arrive at a detailed description and understanding of the case (Ary et al., 2010). Cases are commonly associated with people; yet, a program, an institution or an event can also be regarded as a case (Dörnyei, 2007). The case in this study is the Pilot Peer Advising Program. This study was designed as a case study aiming at evaluating the effectiveness of the Pilot Peer Advising Program in a descriptive manner. Qualitative evaluations of peer advisors and advisees participating in the Pilot Peer Advising Program in the fall semester of 2018-2019 academic year at a foundation university in Turkey were employed as the main data collection tool in the study.

PILOT PEER ADVISING PROGRAM

Pilot Peer Advising Program, which was carried out in the fall semester of 2018-2019 academic year, was a one-semester program designed to offer guidance to prep and freshman students in their transition to the life at the university where this research was conducted (Diambra, 2003). It was delivered and overseen by the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Program aimed to help new students feel welcomed and supported as they started a new life in a university setting (Albayrak, 2008). Peer advisors were students who had completed at least one year of study at their department, and were supervised by CTL. They were chosen among volunteers committed to help newly registered prep and freshman students. They received compulsory advisor training before they started to offer advisory support. The training included seminars on university services and procedures, campus resources, advisor roles and responsibilities and basic communication and leadership skills (Rosenthal & Shinebarger, 2010). Faculty from the department of guidance and psychological counseling was

consulted in the organization and implementation of the training program. Advisors who completed the whole training were considered eligible to assume advising roles.

Peer advisors were assigned groups of incoming students (between 15 to 20) preferably in the same faculty. They provided general support by sharing their experiences at the university and/or directing the student to the correct point of contact when needed (Aladağ, 2009). They met their advisees either as a group or individually throughout the academic term. A meeting could be a social one, like a meal out, or it could be more focused on any concerns or questions students have. The relationship between a peer advisor and their group of students were informal and non-academic. Peer advisors were requested to provide non-judgmental support and advice about being a student at the university. They were expected to spend 1 to 2 hours per month to keep in contact with the incoming students. They were advised not to provide any kind of academic tutorial assistance, assessment advice and counselling, promote themselves as experts to their fellow students, review assignments, and meet with advisees off campus. The timeline of the program is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Peer Advising Program Timeline

<i>Date</i>	<i>Action</i>
August,2018	Advisor application and selection
September,2018	Advisor training
September,2018	Advisees are assigned to advisors
September,2018	Advisors send introductory emails to advisees
October,2018	Advisor-advisee Meeting 1
November,2018	Advisor-advisee Meeting 2
December,2018	Advisor-advisee Meeting 3
January,2019	Evaluation Surveys & Closing

PARTICIPANTS

Participants of this study were 34 advisors who volunteered to provide support to newly registered students. Peer advisors were selected according to the following criteria: (1) being a 2nd, 3rd or 4th grader at the university where this research was conducted, (2) having a GPA of 2.00 and above, (3) having no prior disciplinary record, (4) participating in the advisor training program, (5) participating in the orientation program, (6) voluntariness to take part in the Peer Advising Program for the duration of an academic term. Peer advisor profile is set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Advisor Profile

<i>Faculty</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Education	12	35.3
Arts and Sciences	9	26.5
Economics and Administrative Sciences	2	5.9
Architecture	6	17.6
Engineering	5	14.7
<i>Gender</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Female	29	85.3
Male	5	14.7
<i>Age</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
20	7	20.6
21	10	29.4
22	15	44.1
23	2	5.9
Total	34	100

In addition to advisors, 26 advisees participated in this study as well. Peer Advising Program was introduced to all the newly registered students. In the academic year this study was conducted, 852 students had registered and constituted the entire advisee population. Among 852 students, 71 stated that they wished to benefit from the Peer Advising Program. Out of 71 advisees, only 26 volunteered to take part in this study. Advisee profile is set out in Table 3.

Table 3. Advisee Profile

<i>Faculty</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Education	9	34.6
Arts and Sciences	3	11.5
Economics and Administrative Sciences	3	11.5
Architecture	5	19.2
Engineering	6	23.1
<i>Gender</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Female	15	57.7
Male	11	42.3
<i>Age</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
18	10	38.5
19	12	46.2
20	3	11.5
32	1	3.8
Total	26	100.0

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In order to examine the viewpoints of advisors and advisees participating in the program, two sets of evaluation forms were designed and administered. Items in the forms were developed by the researcher based on literature on peer advising. Forms were shared with a faculty from the guidance and psychological counseling department to seek expert opinion. Items in the forms were also piloted with one advisor and advisee through cognitive interviews in which the participants were asked to think aloud while responding to the items (Wills, 2005).

Peer Advising Program Evaluation Form for Advisors: Upon the completion of the program, advisors came together to collect their certificates and fill in the evaluation form. Forms were filled in anonymously and returned to the researcher in an envelope. The evaluation form was comprised of two sections. In the first section, background information about advisors such as their age, gender and faculty was collected. In the second section, advisor viewpoints regarding the program were asked with questions such as; (1) What do you think was positive about the program?, (2) What do you think needs to be improved about the program?, (3) Please share your comments and suggestions to improve the program.

Peer Advising Program Evaluation Form for Advisees: As soon as the program was completed and advisors and advisees met for the last time, advisees were contacted through e-mail and asked if they wanted to participate in the study. The link of the online evaluation form was sent to advisees who accepted to take part in the study, and their replies were anonymously recorded. The online evaluation form was comprised of two sections. In the first section, background information about advisees such as their age, gender and faculty was collected. In the second section, advisee viewpoints regarding the program were asked with questions such as; (1) How often did you seek support from your advisor?, (2) In what areas did you seek support from your advisor?, (3) What do you think was positive about the program?, (4) What do you think needs to be improved about the program?, (5) Please share your comments and suggestions to improve the program.

Data collected from responses to open-ended questions were coded by the researcher under themes. Research questions constituted the main themes, and codes were eventually grouped according to research questions. Responses were read several times to detect the recurring themes. Those themes were categorized systematically and later assigned specific codes. Codes were derived inductively from the data set. The cyclical data analysis model proposed by Wellington (2000) was employed to analyze data. The model is comprised of six steps; (1) reading the data several times and taking notes, (2) reflecting on data before actual analysis, (3) analyzing data and identifying codes and categories, (4) checking and revising codes and categories, (5) linking the study with prior research studies and (6) reflecting on the study as a whole. After the initial analysis was completed, another round of coding was carried out two months later to check for coding consistency (Gibbs, 2007).

FINDINGS

ADVISEES' EVALUATIONS OF THE PEER ADVISING PROGRAM

FREQUENCY AND REASONS FOR SEEKING ADVICE

Results showed that 34,6% of the advisees received help from their advisors once a month, followed by 19,2% of them who reported they asked for help whenever they felt they needed help. However, 23,1% of the advisees also reported that they never did so.

An analysis of the reasons for seeking advice showed that advisees mostly wanted to learn about university resources such as facilities, centers, communities and etc. (28,3%), and their faculty and department (21,7%).

Table 4. Frequency and Reasons for Seeking Advice as Reported by Advisees

<i>Frequency</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Once a month	9	34.6
Twice a month	3	11.5
Three times a month	3	11.5
Whenever I needed	5	19.2
Never	6	23.1
Total	26	100.0
<i>Reasons for seeking advice</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Faculty and departmental issues	10	21.7
Faculty staff issues	5	10.9
Course related issues (registration, schedule, content etc.)	7	15.2
University resources (social facilities, centers, et.)	13	28.3
IT issues	4	8.7
English language school	7	15.2
Total	46	100.0

STRENGTHS OF THE PROGRAM

The strengths of the program as reported by advisees were categorized under three codes: university adaptation, effective advisor support, and meeting new people.

Table 5. Strengths of the Program as Reported by Advisees

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Strengths of the program	University adaptation	14	43.8
	Effective advisor support	11	34.4
	Meeting new people	7	21.9
	Total	32	100

As displayed in Table 5, advisees reported that they found the program beneficial in that it helped them to adapt to the university context in a shorter time period. One advisee commented “my advisor took me around and showed me the campus facilities such as the library, the sports center, and

she also told me about the common abbreviations used in the university.” He also reported that without this support “it would have taken him quite more time to learn about these.” Similarly, another advisee said “it made my job easier in getting used to the life on campus.”

Another strength of the program was reported to be the effectiveness of the support provided by advisors as can be seen in the comments of one of the advisees “my advisor was very caring and knowledgeable. He helped me whenever I felt lost, and provided me with quite handy information about the school. He guided me in critical issues such as course registration.” Another advisee reported “my advisor emailed me regularly and invited me to meetings and social gatherings. Seeing the school from a student’s perspective was also great. I found this very useful for not feeling like an alien.”

Meeting new people and making new friends were considered as a positive effect of the program. One advisee said “I usually can’t approach people easily to be friends with them, but this program made it possible for me to make friends with the support of my advisor.” Another advisee said “Since I was a freshman, I didn’t know anybody at first. In the meetings, I had the chance to see new people and socialize with them.”

SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE PROGRAM

Improvements suggested by advisees fell under 3 categories as listed in Table 6: more advisee participation, more meetings and social gatherings, and continuing advisor support.

Table 6. Suggested Improvements for the Program as Reported by Advisees

Theme	Codes	f	%
Suggested improvements for the program	More advisee participation	11	42.3
	More meetings and social gatherings	9	34.6
	Continuing advisor support	6	23.1
Total		26	100

An improvement suggested by the advisees was related with participation levels. An advisee commented as follows: “I think it is a common problem that not many people show up in the meetings. This was also the case in our advisory meetings a well. I think more people should attend to create a better and more motivating atmosphere.” The reason why they could not attend was mostly attributed to the busy schedule of advisees as underlined by one of the advisees in the following way “Just because of my schedule, I couldn’t attend some of the meetings. I wish they could have been held after class hours.”

Although advisees thought that participation was an important issue, they also wanted to have more meetings and social gatherings. One advisee commented “I think having more meetings would be great. Seeing my advisor more often would make me feel relieved and more motivated.” Another advisee pointed out “Meetings were OK, but I think we needed more social activities with music and food. That would definitely motivate more people to come.”

Advisees also stated that the program should continue when they start their undergraduate courses. One advisee commented “I think the program should not end after a term. It would be better if it could continue for a year or even two years.” They thought they would need further help from their advisors, because “prep school and department is very different from each other. I know I will have many issues to resolve when I start my major, so an advisor’s support will be necessary.”

ADVISORS’ EVALUATIONS OF THE PEER ADVISING PROGRAM

STRENGTHS OF THE PROGRAM

Strengths of the program as stated by advisors were categorized under 5 codes: university adaptation, peer-to-peer communication, meeting new people, communication skills, and increase in self-confidence.

Table 7. Strengths of the Program as Reported by Advisors

Theme	Codes	f	%
Strengths of the program	University adaptation	25	44.6
	Peer-to-peer communication	12	21.4
	Meeting new people	11	19.6
	Communication skills	5	8.9
	Increase in self-confidence	3	5.4
	Total	56	100

As displayed in Table 7, advisors were in the opinion that peer advising program enabled the incoming students to feel welcome and make a smooth transition to university life. They stated that *“the fact that a peer who went through similar stages in the past could talk to the new students proved extremely beneficial in terms of getting to know the university context”*. One advisor also reported that *“thanks to the program, newcomers had the opportunity to ask everything that bothered them to an advisor who was more knowledgeable and experienced than them. This made it easier for them to feel like a part of the community.”*

With regard to peer-to-peer communication, an advisor commented that *“I know from myself that it can be very challenging for a freshman to get used to university. There might be many things unfamiliar to newcomers. I think it is much better to talk about such issues with a former student rather than a faculty or administrative staff.”* They also stated that *“it was easier for them to reach us through email, WhatsApp or meetings”*. In addition to that advantage, advisors reported that *“since we were peers, nobody felt ashamed or nervous to ask simple, silly questions.”*

Advisors reported that they also benefited from the program as it helped them make new friends on campus. One advisor said *“meeting new people was a great experience for me. It helped me gain new perspectives, and most importantly the excitement that newcomers felt motivated us as advisors.”* Another advisor said that he found the program useful because he *“could meet people from diverse backgrounds such as advisors from different faculties and advisees coming from various cities around Turkey.”*

Improving advisors’ communication skills was reported as one of the benefits of the program. One of the advisors reported that peer advising program helped her *“become a better listener and give clear responses to the questions posed by advisees”* One advisor commented that *“I tried to put myself in their shoes by thinking back on my feelings and experiences as a prep student. This helped me provide better feedback to my advisees.”* Another advisor also reported that *“I’m a psychology and counseling student, and this program was great in that it showed me how important it was to build trust and rapport between people if we want an effective communication to take place.”*

Advisors thought that the program made them more self-confident as pointed out by one of the advisors *“Being responsible for 15-20 advisees is a big responsibility, and seeing that I can guide people and meet them in person, answer their questions made me trust my own abilities.”* Another advisor said *“Before being an advisor, I used to be scared of talking in front of even a small group of people. But taking this chance and helping others as their peers helped me realize my potential as a guide.”*

SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE PROGRAM

Improvements suggested by advisors fell under 5 categories as listed in Table 8: more advisee participation, better promotion of the program, advisees assigned per advisors, advisor training, and advisor selection.

Table 8. Suggested Improvements for the Program as Reported by Advisors

Theme	Codes	f	%
Suggested improvements for the program	More advisee participation	31	44.3
	Better promotion of the program	25	35.7
	Advisees per advisors	7	10
	Advisor training	4	5.7
	Advisor selection	3	4.3
	Total	70	100

Advisors thought that more advisees should benefit from this program. Monthly informal meetings organized by the advisors could not attract the attention of as many advisees as expected. Advisors had a difficult time trying to reach advisees through their emails, which eventually decreased the number of participants during meetings and gatherings. One of the advisors comments are as follows: *“Very few people came to the meetings, and some of the new students did not reply my emails at all.”* Advisors thought that this was mostly because of the fact that *“new students usually were not in the habit of checking their university email accounts.”* Arranging common meeting hours presented another challenge since *“students we had to advise were scattered at different levels at prep school”* which meant that their courses ended at different hours, hence finding a suitable timeslot was an issue for advisors.

It was also reported by advisors that the number of advisees attending meetings and seeking help would have increased if the program had been better promoted both before the university started and throughout the whole semester. One advisor commented *“I remember incoming students were informed about the program during the orientation, but we saw that this wasn’t enough. We should have done more than that.”* Advisors’ suggestions were as follows: *“We could shoot mini videos telling about the program.”* *“We could spread the word through flyers, brochures.”* and *“Why didn’t we try asking for help from the faculty to promote the program among freshmen?”*

Another challenge the advisors had to face was the number of advisees assigned to them. Each advisor had to take care of 15 to 20 advisees, and this was found to be too many to handle for a single advisor. *“Trying to reach 20 people at a time was very demanding. If this number were no more than 10, I could have handled many things more properly.”* Another advisor commented that *“having to deal with many people made me anxious. I couldn’t bring them together and even follow who replied my email and who didn’t.”*

Advisors thought that trainings offered to them before the program started could be improved in content and number. One of the advisors commented as follows: *“We could have received more trainings on how to communicate more effectively with our peers.”* Another advisors requested trainings on *“sharpening advisors’ leadership and organizational skills.”* They also wanted to receive more informative trainings on the university procedures and campus resources so that they could direct their advisees in a better informed manner.

Last but not least, advisors thought that they should have gone through a more rigorous selection process as pointed out by one of the advisors in the following way; *“The selection of advisors need to be more competitive. There could have been a committee of prior advisors, faculty and program coordinator that evaluated the advisor in an interview-like exam.”* Another advisor also suggested that *“advisors should be selected a lot earlier so that more time could be allocated to their selection in a more careful way.”*

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Results of this study showed that advisors and advisees find the peer advising program helpful in several aspects. Not only the advisors but also the advisees think that the program facilitates the

university adaptation process for first-year students. University adaptation has been highlighted in previous studies as a strength of peer advising programs (e.g. Biaggio et al. 1997; Johnson et al. 2000; Aladağ, 2009). Another strength of the program reported by both advisors and advisees is that it enables students to meet new people. A similar result has been reported in other studies conducted by Diambra (2003), and Waghel et al. (2017).

Advisors found the program helpful in that it provided them with a structured context in which they can communicate with their peers on an equal basis. Student interaction is reported to increase the satisfaction level of university students (Tahoon, 2021), and peer-to-peer communication has been documented as a positive aspect of peer advising initiatives (Biaggio et al., 1997; Dennis, 2003; Diambra, 2003;). Instead of asking their questions to faculty or administrative staff, students could address them to other students who are almost the same age or have similar social status. Asking questions such as “which instructor should I take this course from? or where can I get my transcript?” to their peers was perceived to be less threatening by advisees.

In this study, it was found out that advisors benefitted from the program in terms of sharpening their communicative abilities by becoming a better listener, empathizing with others, and building rapport. This was considered to be a unique opportunity for advisors as it will directly affect their personal and professional lives. Diambra (2003) and Griffin et al. (2015) underline the different roles advisors perform within the scope of a peer advising program. Acting as a leader, mentor, listener and facilitator, advisors strengthen their communication and leadership skills, and gain self-confidence as well. A perceived increase in advisors’ self-confidence was also among the findings of this study. Advising approximately 20 students, helping them get better accustomed to university life, and receiving positive feedback regarding their advising capacities benefitted advisors in terms of confidence building. An increase in advisors’ problem-solving skills (Posa, 2011) could have positively affected their self-confidence as well.

In addition to better adapting to university and meeting new people, advisees also reported that they considered the program to be successful because of the effective advisor support they were provided with. Diambra and Cole-Zakrzewski (2002) suggest that advisees will benefit from the program most when advisors take ownership of the program and respond to issues causing concern for advisees especially when they can’t receive sufficient support from faculty members. Similarly Rosenthal and Shinebarger (2010) also highlight that there is a gap between the sort of advising incoming students need and the one offered to them by faculty. Peer advisors help close this gap by providing the kind of support advisors most require in an informal and easy-to-reach manner.

This study revealed that the existing peer advising program needs to be modified in some important aspects. One of the downsides of the program as reported by advisors and advisees was that not many advisees were willing to participate in the program. This echoes what other studies report as a challenge that needs to be overcome (Rosenthal and Shinebarger 2010, Griffin et al. 2015). As also suggested by Aladağ (2009) and Albayrak-Kaymak (2008), advisors in our case recommended that better promotion of the program might encourage more advisee participation. The dilemma is that although advisees did not show up to the meetings, they asked for more meetings and social gatherings to be organized as part of the advising program. Another surprising finding of the study was that despite low attendance rates, advisors complained about the number of advisees assigned to them. They suggested limiting the number of advisees per advisor to 10 so that they can take care of each of the advisees more properly and effectively. Griffin et al. (2015) report a similar challenge and points out that precautions need to be taken to remedy this situation.

Research shows that advisors need constant guidance and support (Diambra, 2003). Advisors in our study drew our attention to the type of guidance they needed by recommending that they need to receive trainings about communication and leadership skills. In addition, they asked for special sessions to be organized to inform them about the university with regard to its academic and

administrative procedures, and resources and facilities on campus. As the results of this study suggested, advisees mostly sought advice in issues regarding faculty members, departments, courses, facilities, IT, and English language school respectively. Therefore, more informative sessions about those subjects could be offered to advisors. An advisor manual could also be of great help for future reference.

They also emphasized that to pick the right advisor, and increase the quality of the program, there is a need for a more comprehensive selection process, which should start at least a few months before the program starts. In her study, Albayrak-Kaymak (2008) reports that she carried out one-to-one interviews with potential advisors, read through their transcripts, and checked whether they fulfilled certain criteria such as being flexible, social, willing to spend time for the implementation of the program, personal traits and so on. This could be an example future program organizers can follow.

In Aladağ's study (2009), it was the advisors who asked for a more sustainable program. In our case, however, advisees underlined that they are in need of continuing advisor support, and they felt unhappy about the fact they would be deprived of advisor support in their second semester and/or year at university. This was especially the case with prep students who were expecting different challenges in their transition to departmental studies.

Universities attempt to provide assistance to newly-registered students in various ways. Peer advising is one of these attempts and is critical for stimulating the adaptation process of new-coming students to a university context. It is an acknowledged fact that students who are new to life at university have specific needs that can easily be identified by fellow students who had gone through similar experiences in their own transition period (Diambra, 2002). For students to successfully integrate into university, they should engage in academic and social settings. Otherwise, it is most likely that they will suffer from feelings of isolation, resulting in a possible decrease in student retention (Tinto, 1993).

This study shows the strengths and challenges of a peer advising program in a Turkish university setting, and even in its most immature form such a program can help university students overcome feelings of loneliness, build a strong sense of community, utilize campus resources, and thus meet their immediate advising needs. Developing lasting relationships and sharpening interpersonal skills are among the perceived benefits of the program.

However, as is the case in every program, the pilot peer advising program needs to undergo modifications based on the feedback received from advisors and advisees. This will result in an ongoing improvement and produce better results for the participants.

Studies suggest that participation in peer advising programs has a positive effect on advisees' academic success (Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Posa, 2011). This study did not investigate whether there was an increase in the GPA's of the advisees' taking part in the program. Future research studies may investigate the effectiveness of the program taking this fact into account.

As suggested by the advisors in this study, advisor selection needs to be handled carefully. Having a set of criteria for advisor selection, and a committee to interview candidate advisors should be compulsory. The committee may consist of faculty members, administrative staff from student counselling centers and an experienced advisor. The training of advisors also needs special attention. Advisors should be trained in university procedures and resources as well as basic advising skills. An advisor handbook might also prove very useful as a reference book.

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