The Peer Education Program: What it's like and what it has to offer
Written by a Behavioral and Community Health student who was a peer educator

What is the Peer Education Program?
Basically, the Peer Education Program is a program hosted by the University Health Center where student educators help inform and educate the campus community on four key topic areas:
• Sexual Health (SHARE)
• Power-Based Violence (CARE)
• Alcohol and Other Drug Use (SUPER)
• Stress and Mental Illness (HEALTH Works)

Who Are Peer Educators?
Peer educators are undergraduate students, of any major, who are passionate about helping and educating other students on healthy behaviors. Peer Educators get three credits per semester and give presentations and host community events pertaining to their topic area across campus. Additionally, all peer educators, regardless of their topic, area give bystander intervention training to freshmen classes and student organizations using the Step UP model.

Typical Week as a Peer Educator
This is a question we get asked a lot and the truth is that no two weeks are exactly the same! Some weeks, peer educators have up to three presentations, but others they have none. It really depends on the demand for presentations that week and all of the peer educators’ availability. But, every week, peer educators have class for two hours (which is honestly really fun!)

What it Really Means to Be a Peer Educator
Peer educators are kind, respectful and compassionate people who have the desire to help enhance the lives of their fellow peers. The main role of a peer educator is to help facilitate behavior change. A peer educator is not someone who goes and preaches the “right” way to do something or the “right” choices to make, but rather someone who enhances knowledge, attitudes and skills in order to facilitate healthy behavior change. A good peer educator is a good listener who refrains from judgment and is empathetic.
Why the Peer Education Program is Phenomenal for Behavioral and Community Health Students

Experience Presenting to an Audience in a Health Education Setting
All peer educators attend a weeklong training prior to the start of the fall semester. During this training, peer educators get to know each other and all the program coordinators, as well as learn content specific to their topic area, presentation skills, health behavior change theories, how to facilitate behavior change and professionalism. By the end of the week, I felt very knowledgeable about sexual health, my content area.

The first semester of the peer education program focuses on getting you comfortable with the content and presenting to audiences. Prior to entering the peer program, I did not consider myself to be a good presenter, so I was very nervous about my first few presentations. But my program coordinator, Jenna, gave us all the tools and help necessary to excel during presentations. She made sure we were comfortable with the content and answered any questions and concerns we had. So, the real trick was just getting comfortable presenting, which just takes practice.

I definitely was pushed a bit out of my comfort zone by having to give 50-minute presentations, but by the third presentation, I was genuinely enjoying presenting. At the end of the following semester, my program coordinator told me I was a natural presenter, which was something I would have never expected to hear – especially from a health education professional.

I took HLTH420 during my second semester in the peer education program and the two courses complimented each other wonderfully. I felt that each course enhanced my experience in the other course and provided me with excellent learning opportunities. The peer program allowed me to take some of the knowledge I had learned in HLTH420 and apply it in a real-life health education setting. I gained experience in dealing with shy/reluctant audiences, dealing with misinformation and how to talk about sensitive subject matters.

You Create Real Health Education Programs
In the peer education program, you not only give presentations, but you are also involved in the creation of health programs. During the second semester in the peer program, we partnered with one or two other peers to create an interdisciplinary program. We were all applying for a hypothetical grant that would allow us to put our program into practice on campus.

The program coordinators are amazing health professionals who are extremely knowledgeable in the realms of health education and promotion, as well as health behavior change. Using the knowledge and skills they taught us, along with my pre-existing knowledge of health programming from my BCH classes, we created a logic model for our proposed program, designed marketing efforts and created a formal evaluation plan. At the end of the semester the groups from all four-topic areas came together in one classroom and presented their proposed programs. The best part is – some of these programs are actually going to be put into practice in the coming year.

Employers and Graduate Schools Love It
When I was applying for internships in HLTH490, organizations loved hearing that I had experience with facilitating health behavior change, program development and public speaking. I was able to get my top choice internship, and I truly believe that the knowledge and skills I gained as a peer educator were critical reasons I was chosen for the intern position.

The program strongly enhanced my communication skills with peers and audiences. I was also consistently working with my fellow peer educators and became quite comfortable working effectively as part of a team. Being in the peer program gave me the experience of immersing myself into the campus community as a leader. Peer educators talk to hundreds of students about difficult topics such as STIs, consent, power-based violence, mental health and drug abuse. I believe this definitely set me apart from other candidates when I was applying for internships. I have also heard from previous peer educators who eventually went to medical school that during their medical school interviews, the interviewers loved hearing they had this type of experience talking about difficult subjects.
So, How do I Become a Peer Educator?

Applications to become a peer educator open up every spring semester for the following academic year. Applications and more information on the peer education program can be found on the University Health Center’s website:

health.umd.edu/peer-education

Meet the Author
My name is Caitlyn Nicholas and I was a SHARE (Sexual Health and Reproductive Education) Peer Educator for the 2016 – 2017 academic year. I am a senior Behavioral and Community Health major and have earned a specialization in Health Risk Behavior.

I have shared plenty about my academic and professional experience as a peer educator, but I want to share some of my personal experience. I met so many amazing people in the peer education program. My fellow peer educators came from diverse backgrounds and everyone brought something different to the table. One of my favorite parts of my week was my peer class. Although all of us were so different, I felt like we connected so well and shared so many of the same values, which were what ultimately brought us to the peer program.

Being in the peer program inspired me to pursue health equity and social justice, which led me to intern for the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault in the fall of 2017. Being a peer educator remains one of my favorite experiences at the University of Maryland and my only regret is waiting until the end of my junior year to apply.