

THE EFFECTS OF PEER INFLUENCE ON COLLEGE STUDENT DECISION MAKING

by

ELEANOR G. HAUGHEY


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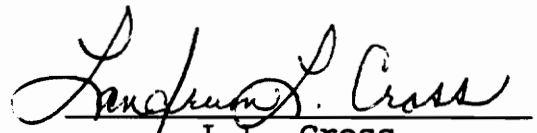
Approved:



D.G. Creamer, Chairperson



J.A. Muffo



L.L. Cross

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Eleanor Greene Haughey

Committee Chair: Don G. Creamer
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(ABSTRACT)

Studies of the effects of college on students illustrate the effects of peers on student attitudes and behavior. Likewise, college administrators view peers as a major source of influence on students. Despite awareness of peers as a significant source of influence on students, little research has been conducted to determine how such influence occurs.

The purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which selected decisions of first-semester Virginia Tech students are influenced by peers according to gender and race. An eighteen-item survey instrument was used to collect data about peer influence in student wellness and interpersonal relationships. Subjects for the study included 228 resident first-year students. Data were analyzed by two-way ANOVA procedures.

There were no significant differences between men and women, or between African-American and Caucasian students in the study. Although many students responded that they were

influenced by peers in the areas of trying new things and resolving conflicts with friends, students reported they were influenced little by their peers in areas such as the use of illegal drugs, diet, and their feelings toward persons with a sexual orientation other than their own.

[Findings from this study suggest that students did not depend on peers for help in decision making regarding issues of wellness and interpersonal relationships.] These findings should be useful to college administrators who structure out-of-class learning activities by increasing their understanding of the actual influence that students have on one another.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Many college and university administrators today consider peers as a primary source of influence on students (Brown, 1972; Giddan, 1988). Peer education programs have been designed to address problems ranging from health and wellness issues to tutoring programs (Brandwein & DiVittis, 1985; Ender, McCaffrey & Miller, 1979; Finn, 1981; Giddan, 1988; Steinhausen, 1983). These programs are assumed to be productive, but in fact there is little research to support or refute these ideas.

There is some evidence that peer influence plays a large role in alcohol consumption behaviors (Sherry & Stolberg, 1987; Shore & Rivers, 1986), and in some other areas of student behavior such as dating activities, sexual behavior, and misconduct (Brown, 1982; Clasen & Bradford, 1985; Erwin & Love, 1989; Williams & Hall, 1988). At this point, however, there is little research on the role of peer influence in other wellness issues or issues of interpersonal relationships. This is a noticeable gap in the existing body of literature. [Knowing the extent of peer influence in a number of crucial areas and understanding if gender and race play a role are important pieces of information for promoting student development] (Astin, 1993).

The purpose of this study was to examine to what extent resident Virginia Tech students are influenced by other Virginia Tech undergraduates on a variety of issues related to lifestyle, distinguished by gender and race. The hypothesis of this study was that there would be no difference in the effects of peer influence on students in the areas of stress management, alcohol and drug use, sleeping habits, assessment of physical appearance, nutrition, exercise patterns, tolerance of differences, peer relations, and emotional autonomy when considering gender and race.

Statement of the Problem

Much of the peer influence research in existence focuses on the influence on students' alcohol consumption patterns (for example, Sherry & Stolberg, 1987; Shore & Rivers, 1986). Other researchers have studied the influence of peers on other factors such as self-esteem and intimacy (Brown, 1982; Erwin & Love, 1989). While these studies are useful, research needs to be conducted on other related issues, such as wellness and interpersonal relationships, to add breadth to the current body of knowledge.

Insight into the adjustments of first-semester students will allow student affairs professionals to address issues specific to new students. The needs of new students are a

growing concern and research in this area will strengthen the ability of student affairs professionals to provide useful services (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). College and university campuses often implement programs based on assumptions regarding peer influence, especially in designing peer education programs (Whitman, 1988). More empirical research on this topic will help strengthen or refute the basis for these programs.

Research Question

This study provided empirical data to address the issue of peer influence on college students. Specifically, this study was guided by the following question: To what extent are resident, first-semester Virginia Tech students influenced by their peers on decisions concerning wellness issues and interpersonal relationships based on gender and race? Although students were to be surveyed during the beginning of their second semester, they were asked reflect on decisions made during their first semester.

Definitions and Variables

The following terms are defined as they were used in this study.

Peers - undergraduate Virginia Tech students who are not related to the participant by blood or marriage.

Peer influence - the impact of a student or group of students on another student's decisions.

First-semester resident Virginia Tech students - students who were enrolled at Virginia Tech for their first semester of undergraduate work, who were living on campus, and who listed freshman as their class status.

Wellness Scale - based on the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI) (Winston & Miller, 1987), this scale measured a student's lifestyle in relation to health and wellness practices. Questions addressed issues such as: sleeping habits, stress management techniques, exercise programs, a positive evaluation of one's personal appearance, the use of alcohol and drugs, and eating habits.

Interpersonal Relationships Scale - based on the SDTLI (Winston & Miller, 1987), this task measured, in part, how students respond to pressure to conform to group norms, the ability to maintain friendships across different cultures and races, and the ability to have an open, honest relationship with friends.

Race - students' races were classified as one of the following, according to their responses on the survey: African-American or Black, Asian American or Pacific Islander, Caucasian or White, Hispanic or Mexican American, Native American (Indian, Alaskan, Hawaiian), Caucasian or

White, or Other. Respondents who did not categorize themselves as African-American or Caucasian were dropped from this study.

The independent variables of this study were gender (male or female) and race (African-American or Caucasian). The dependent variables were the scores on the wellness and interpersonal relationships scales of the survey developed for this study.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations which warrant discussion. First, because this study was carried out with first-semester students at Virginia Tech, the generalizations that can be made are limited to that population. The results were framed in two comparisons: gender and race. The results cannot, therefore, be generalized outside of those groups. The results of this study may have some generalizability to other large state institutions, but may not be generalized to small or private campuses.

In addition, the results of this study are useful for today's professionals, but may not be as pertinent in later years. As trends in student characteristics change, we may see new types of students entering college in the future. If such is the case, the relevance of this study is reduced.

Another limitation of the study was that a singular, accepted definition of peer influence does not exist. There has been no operationalized construct of peer influence, nor an instrument which can measure it. Because of this, it is difficult to determine whether people within the study are using similar concepts, or if the use of peer influence within this study is similar to the definitions being used in the larger community.

Significance of Study

Although little is known about the effects of peer influence on students, many educational programs, especially in the area of wellness issues, are designed around this concept. Many college campuses use peer education programs for alcohol and drug use and abuse, and other wellness issues, but the effectiveness of such programs is not demonstrable in the research literature (Whitman, 1988). This study provided empirical data related to the underlying concepts of peer education programs, and how influential students were on one another.

This research also was significant to the Virginia Tech community in several ways. The data gathered here allowed for further analysis in other areas related to peer influence and established a relatively new knowledge base. More specific information was derived on peer influence in

[the area of alcohol abuse, a leading problem on college and university campuses, including Virginia Tech.]

This study also provided information regarding the transition students face when they enter college. [The transition away from the family as the primary support mechanism to the peer group as a student's primary support reinforces the importance of the effects of peer relationships] (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition, data from this study provided further information on residence hall dynamics concerning peer influence. This knowledge is useful for residence hall staffs in planning support mechanisms for new students.

The results of this study provided a foundation for further research. Peer influence research is a growing area, but still allows for new information. [Understanding the transitions first-semester students face is crucial to student affairs professionals because it is critical to students' development] (Boyer, 1987; Upcraft, Gardner & Associates, 1989). Knowledge in this area helps students face the transition of their first semester in college.

Organization of Thesis

Chapter one was an introduction to this project and contained the statement of the problem, the research question, definitions of variables, limitations and the

significance of the study. Chapter two was a review of the current literature on the subject. Chapter three contained the methodology for the study. The results of the study were presented in chapter four, and the limitations and implications were detailed in chapter five.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Peer groups are an essential element in the lives of students and identities are shaped, in part, by these groups (Astin, 1993; Chickering, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). According to Astin (1993), "The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (pp. 398). There has been little literature written, however, on the extent to which decisions made by college freshmen are influenced by their peers.

Instead, the literature available addresses the effects of peer influence through a number of related issues. First, the influence of peers can be examined through the effects peers and peer groups have on student development. It also is important to discuss the effects on students as distinguished by gender and race. Lastly, there exists a growing body of literature that examines peer influence in relation to alcohol consumption, as well as literature on peer pressure in high schools.

Developmental Changes

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have recently published an extraordinary study that synthesizes studies on college

students over the past four decades. They found that college students showed consistent gains in developing autonomy during college. [They also found that students move toward internalizing their locus of control and shift from a familial reference point to a peer reference point] (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

[Studies also showed that the level of independence from peers had no significant change during the undergraduate years and actually showed a small decline in the level of independence from peers during the first year] (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). All of these data point to the fact that first-year students are dependent on their peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Although students become more independent and autonomous before graduation, [the transition away from family into college enhances the importance and the effects of peer relationships, especially in the early part of the college experience] (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This further highlights the vulnerability of first-semester students to peer influence. Astin (1993) echoes Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) findings. According to his findings, much [significant growth in interpersonal skills can be related to student-student interaction.] Astin (1993) also suggested that the effects of the peer group in an

individual's development is the greatest effect of peers on one another. [The most important factors of the peer group in determining individual development are values, attitudes, self-concept, and socioeconomic status] (Astin, 1993).

Research by Long (1983) and Orlofsky, Marcia, and Lesser (1973) focused on the environmental factors affecting student development. Long's (1983) results showed that women with steady boyfriends had higher levels of self-esteem. Orlofsky, Marcia, and Lesser (1973) reported that men who had lower identity scores also had lower intimacy scores.

Erwin and Love's (1989) study revealed that scores on both the autonomy and the developing interpersonal relationship scales of the Student Developmental Task Inventory-2 (SDTI-2) (Winston, Miller & Prince, 1979) were associated with factors including dating and number of hours working.

Gender and Race Differences

It is important to assess if and how the influence of peers differs between men and women and students of different cultural backgrounds because these potential differences could influence efforts to address diversity issues (Astin, 1993). Some gender differences that exist upon matriculation tend to become exaggerated during the

undergraduate years (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) also found that "virtually every gender difference observed at input widens with time" (pp.406).

Women, for instance, have much stronger declines in psychological well-being than men during college (Astin, 1993). Men, on the other hand, become more committed to life goals (Astin, 1993). These gender differences are worthy of note because they also illustrate that women may be more likely to respond to peer pressure.

Another study also showed women as more susceptible to peer pressure or more concerned with peer acceptance (Hatch, 1970). Hatch (1970) found that only women saw a decline in peer independence during the freshman year. According to Brown (1982), more women felt peer pressure was the most difficult thing to cope with during high school than did men.

Although there has been a limited amount of research on the differences in the effects of peer influence on race, Astin (1993) found that the effect of the peer group's racial composition were almost indiscernible.

Alcohol and Drug Use

Peer influence also can be seen as a factor in decision-making concerning alcohol. According to Astin (1993), increased use of alcohol is directly related to the

effects of college. Shore and Rivers (1986) reinforce this vulnerability with their finding that resistance to drinking pressure is most acceptable to seniors. They also show that [women are more likely to resist peer pressure to drink than men.] This finding, however, contradicts the findings of Erwin and Love (1989) and Hatch (1970).

Sherry and Stolberg (1987) also looked at the factors affecting alcohol consumption by college students. They found that [peer pressure was the most consistent and potent predictor of frequency and consumption of alcohol.] This study also showed that [peer pressure in the form of friends' use was the most powerful predictor of hard drug use.]

One of their recommendations was to address the social context of substance abuse in educational programs (Sherry & Stolberg, 1987). These findings support the demonstrated need to target first semester students with [support to go against negative peer pressure] (Sherry & Stolberg, 1987).

Effects on Younger Students

Brown's work (1982) highlights the results of extensive research on high school students and the effects of peer influence on a variety of topics. This retrospective study conducted with college freshmen revealed that [peer pressure was the most difficult thing to face during high school for one third of the students.]

Brown's (1982) results are also differentiated by gender. Males felt less pressure concerning premarital sex than women and had more distant relationships with their parents than women. Women felt more pressure to conform to norms about physical appearance and the physical appearance of those one dated. The results of this study supported many of the traditional masculine and feminine stereotypes reinforced through peer pressure.

Guttmann (1981) studied fifth grade students' reactions in peer pressure, adult pressure and control situations to measure several areas of moral judgement. The results of this study showed that students were most influenced by their peers, even at this young age. No gender differences were found within the study. This study was based on an Israeli model of societal norms and therefore may not be easily compared to other studies reviewed here.

Conclusion

These studies provide a framework for peer influence research. There are many gaps, however, which demand attention. Only a few studies touched on gender and race differences or the impact of the living environment. These factors are important to student affairs professionals who serve college students. This study will provide more information on this topic.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which peers influence students on a variety of issues related to lifestyle and decision-making, distinguished by gender and race. Specific areas examined were stress management, alcohol and drug use, sleeping habits, assessment of physical appearance, nutrition, exercise patterns, tolerance of differences, peer relations, and emotional autonomy.

Hypothesis

The hypotheses of this study were: (a) there will be no significant difference, between men and women, in the effects of peer influence on students in the areas of stress management, alcohol and drug use, sleeping habits, assessment of physical appearance, nutrition, exercise patterns, tolerance of differences, peer relations, and emotional autonomy, and (b) there will be no significant difference, between African-Americans and Caucasians, in the effects of peer influence on students in the areas of stress management, alcohol and drug use, sleeping habits, assessment of physical appearance, nutrition, exercise

patterns, tolerance of differences, peer relations, and emotional autonomy.

Design of Study

This study was a quantitative description of the extent of peer influence on resident Virginia Tech students. The survey methodology was adopted to gain a significant amount of numerical data from a large population. A survey methodology was appropriate for several reasons. First, time available permitted that only a portion of the population be sampled. Using a quantitative method allowed for standardized measurement across respondents. In addition, staffing and time issues precluded the use of face-to-face interviews. For these reasons, a mail survey was the most appropriate method for collecting data (Dillman, 1978; Fowler, 1988). A two-way analysis of variance was used to examine differences in scores on the survey developed for this study in relation to gender and race.

The independent variables were gender (male and female), and race (Caucasian and African-American). The dependent variables were the scores on the wellness and interpersonal relationships sections of the survey developed for this study.

Instrument

The questionnaire developed for this study included several questions related to wellness and interpersonal relationships. Questions were developed based on the conceptual constructs of the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (Winston & Miller, 1987). The questions developed address the influence of peers in the decision-making process related to these two areas.

The survey used for this study was contained within a larger survey primarily developed by Dr. Steven Janosik, the Associate Dean of Students at Virginia Tech. This survey was used to assess the influence of several groups on Virginia Tech students in their decision-making (see Appendix A). In the development of this survey, Dr. Janosik consulted several sources, including Barnard (1986), Davies and Stacey (1982), Dielman, Campanelli, Shope and Butchart (1987), Downs (1985), Johnson (1989), Pearl, Bryan and Herzog (1990), and Rachal, Guess, Hubbard, Miasto, Cavanaugh, Waddell, and Benrud (1980).

The survey consisted of eighteen questions, 15 of which were answered on a five point Likert scale (1=Not at all to 5=A great deal) (see Appendix A). Eight of these questions related to wellness issues and seven pertained to interpersonal relationships. The survey yielded two scores.

One was a score on wellness issues and the other was a score on interpersonal relationships. Three demographic questions regarding gender, race, and class status were also included. Class status was used to verify that respondents were in their first year.

The survey developed for this study was tested on a pilot group of 50 first-year students to determine reliability and face validity. This pilot was conducted with the approval and support of the Office of Residential and Dining Programs. The instrument was administered to students during hall meetings and students were asked to participate in small group discussions facilitated by the author.

Two floors in West Ambler-Johnston Hall, one male and one female, were surveyed. The participants in the pilot study were asked specific questions concerning the clarity and appropriateness of the questions and students had an opportunity to ask any pertinent questions regarding the questionnaire.

Participants

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The sample consisted of 228 first-semester students, stratified by race and gender. Students were pulled from the student data base in a stratified random sample.

Approximately 30.4% of African-American students and 2.4% of Caucasian students were included in the sample. The gender breakdown of the sample was representative of the first-semester student population, and African-American first semester students were oversampled to ensure an acceptable response rate. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidential and was approved by the Virginia Tech Research on Human Subjects Committee.

The survey methodology was designed to approximate the total design method (TDM) described by Dillman (1978). This method helped to compensate for the inherent flaws mail surveys typically experience. Such flaws include low return rates, incomplete questionnaires, or confusing responses (Dillman, 1978). This study was designed to maximize the return rate by including a concise survey and two follow-up contacts.

Surveys were mailed to the sample group through campus mail and contained a business reply envelope that could be sent first class, postage paid. A cover letter was included which explained the purpose of the research and reinforced the voluntary, confidential nature of the project (see Appendix B). The surveys were coded with an identification number in order to track respondents. The coding system was used only for follow-up purposes. Respondents were not

identified in any other way. A postcard was included which allowed participants to indicate whether or not they participated in the study and contained a line for participants to check if they were interested in a copy of the survey results (see Appendix C). This postcard was returned separately through campus mail.

A reminder post card was sent to all subjects one week after the original mailing date. A second mailing to all students in the sample who had not yet responded was scheduled to take place two weeks after the original mailing date. This mailing was actually sent out five weeks after the original mailing date. This mailing included the original cover letter, stamped "final notice" (see Appendix D), the survey, and a slip of paper which indicated whom to contact if the participant was interested in a copy of the final results.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through two-way analyses of variance. These analyses were intended to determine if a significant ($p < .05$) difference existed between men and women, and Caucasian and African-American students on a variety of items. The data analysis included the two-way interaction of gender and race. Differences between African-American women and African-American men were

examined as well as the differences between Caucasian men and Caucasian women. The differences between African-American women and Caucasian women were analyzed, in addition to the differences between African-American men and Caucasian men.

Chapter Four

Results

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the study. The findings are presented first as a description of the respondents. Next, instrument properties are discussed. Following is a discussion of the summary statistics, and finally presented are the data analyses and a summary.

Subjects

Of the 228 questionnaires distributed in the mail survey, 123 (53.9%) were returned and usable. In terms of gender, 63 (48.1%) men responded and 60 (61.9%) women responded. In terms of race, 20 (30.8%) African-Americans responded and 103 (63.2%) Caucasians responded. Despite the efforts to oversample African-American students to ensure a higher response rate, this population was still underrepresented in the results.

Representativeness of the population was determined by Chi Square analyses (see Tables 1 & 2). The Chi Square value for gender was 4.25 with a probability level of 0.04, indicating that the respondents were not representative of the sample. The women had a high percentage of returned questionnaires, but the male respondents were not

Table 1

Chi Square Analyses by Gender

Group	Actual	Expected	Chi Square	p
Female				
Returned	60	52		
Not Returned	37	45		
Male				
Returned	63	71		
Not Returned	68	60		
			4.2	0.04

Table 2
Chi Square Analyses by Race

Group	Actual	Expected	Chi Square	p
African-American				
Returned	20	36		
Not Returned	46	30		
Caucasian				
Returned	103	87		
Not Returned	59	75		
			20.9	0.00

representative of expected values. The Chi Square value for race was 20.90 with a probability level of 0.000, indicating that the respondents were not representative of the sample based on race. The probability level can be attributed to the low return rate of African-American students in the sample. It is important to note that because the African-American population was oversampled, the Chi Square analysis may be misleading. This population was oversampled and underrepresented in the results. Thus, it is difficult to determine true representativeness of this group.

Instrument

The instrument used to survey the subjects was a questionnaire developed by the researchers. Chronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. Reliability was determined from the sample data instead of the pilot data. The wellness scale (items 1-8) coefficient was .72 and the coefficient for the interpersonal relationships scale (items 9-15) was .81.

Summary Statistics

The summary statistics for this study are displayed in Table 3. In order to examine item mean scores, the response scale was divided into three sections. Scores which fell between 1 and 2.67 were within the bottom third, indicating a lower level of reported peer influence. Scores which fell

Table 3**Means and Standard Deviations by Item**

Item	Mean	SD	Level of Influence
Stress	2.626	1.072	L
Beer	2.696	1.365	M
Drugs	2.043	1.441	L
Rest	2.278	1.260	L
Dress	2.330	1.303	L
Weight	2.304	1.488	L
Diet	2.130	1.246	L
Fitness	2.852	1.293	M
Time	2.704	1.139	M
See	2.235	1.353	L
Conflict	3.826	1.141	H
Express	3.035	1.242	M
New	3.652	1.035	H
Religion	2.565	1.446	L
Orientat	2.296	1.457	L
Wellness	2.407 (Scaled)		
Interpersonal Relationships (Scaled)	2.902		

Scale: 1=Not at all, 5=A great deal

between 2.67 and 3.33 were considered in the middle range. Scores which fell above 3.33 were within the top third, indicating a higher level of reported peer influence.

Two scores fell in this higher range. They were: [whom they consult when resolving conflicts with friends (CONFLICT) and decisions about trying new things (NEW)]. Approximately 66% of students responded with either a four or five on the Likert scale (scale: 1=Not at all, 5=A great deal) when asked if they consulted peers in resolving conflicts with friends. Approximately 59% of students responded in a similar manner when asked if they consulted peers in making decisions about trying new things. Conversely, first-year students reported [not being influenced by their peers in several areas]. Nine items had a mean score in the bottom third: decisions concerning stress (STRESS), the use of illegal drugs (DRUGS), how much rest one gets (REST), how one chooses to dress (DRESS), how much students' weight is influenced by peers (WEIGHT), decisions about diet and nutrition (DIET), decisions about who or how often you see someone (SEE), who influences students' relationships with people who have a different religious or cultural background (RELIGION), and who influences students' relationships with people who have a different sexual orientation (ORIENTAT). When asked about

consulting peers on decisions about the use of illegal drugs, 59% of students responded 1, the lowest possible rating (scale: 1=Not at all, 5=A great deal). This compares with 28% of students who responded similarly when asked about decisions concerning the use of beverage alcohol.

Almost one-half (48%) of students reported that peers did not influence them at all on how much they weigh. Related to that score is the response to peer influence on issues related to diet and nutrition. Approximately 46% of respondents reported that they were not at all influenced by other students. When asked if students are influenced by their peers in their relationships with people who have a different sexual orientation than their own, 48% responded not at all.

Scores on three other items (REST, DRESS, SEE) were more varied, but showed some influence. When asked about how much rest one gets (REST), 55% of students responded with a 1 or a 2 on the five point Likert scale. When asked about how students dress (DRESS), 56% of students responded in a similar manner. When asked about decisions concerning who or how often students see someone (SEE), 60% of students responded with a one or a two on the Likert scale. Although the item means for the two items remaining in the top third

(STRESS, RELIGION) were relatively high, the scores were fairly well distributed among responses.

Standard deviations ranged from 1.035 (NEW) to 1.488 (WEIGHT). Consistent with the findings detailed above, the highest mean score (3.826) was associated with resolving conflict with friends, and the lowest mean score (2.043) was found for decisions about the use of illegal drugs.

The raw scores were compiled into two scale scores: the wellness scale and the interpersonal relationships scale. Responses to questions one through eight (STRESS, BEER, DRUGS, REST, DRESS, WEIGHT, DIET, FITNESS) were combined to form a scale score for wellness issues. Remaining items, nine through fifteen (TIME, SEE, CONFLICT, EXPRESS, NEW, RELIGION, ORIENTAT) were included in the interpersonal relationships scale. Scale scores were determined by computing the mean of the means for the scores on designated items. The mean score for respondents on the wellness scale was 2.407, and the mean score for respondents on the interpersonal relationships scale was 2.902.

Data Analysis

The scale score data were analyzed using two-way analysis of variance. In the area of wellness, there were no significant differences between men and women, or African-American and Caucasian students using a probability

level of 0.05. The mean score for men on the wellness scale was 2.30 and for women it was 2.44. For African-American students, the mean was 2.39 and for Caucasian students the mean was 2.34, as displayed in Table 4.

In the area of interpersonal relationships, there were no significant difference between men and women, or African-American and Caucasian students, using a probability level of 0.05. The mean score for men on the interpersonal relationships scale was 2.98 and was 2.89 for women. For African-American students, the mean was 2.88 and for Caucasian students it was 3.00, as displayed in Table 5.

Summary

Although the respondent group was not representative of the sample, the results of this study supported the null hypotheses, which predicted there would be no significant difference in the effects on peer influence on students in the areas of stress management, alcohol and drug use, sleeping habits, assessment of physical appearance, nutrition, exercise patterns, tolerance of differences, peer relations, and emotional autonomy between men and women, and African-American and Caucasian students.

Table 4

Two-Way Analysis of Variance Assessing Extent of Peer Influence on Wellness Decision Making by Gender and Race

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	p
Main Effect					
Gender	0.326	1	0.326	0.50	0.481
Race	0.298	1	0.298	0.05	0.831
Interaction					
Gender/Race	0.771	1	0.771	0.12	0.732
Explained	77.68				
Residual	0.653				
Total	78.86				

Table 5

Two-Way Analysis of Variance Assessing Extent of Peer Influence on Interpersonal Relationships Decision Making by Gender and Race

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	p
Main Effect					
Gender	0.130	1	0.130	0.18	0.676
Race	0.251	1	0.251	0.34	0.561
Interaction					
Gender/Race	0.046	1	0.046	0.06	0.804
Explained	88.07				
Residual	0.740				
Total	88.40				

Chapter Five

Conclusions

Introduction

[Studies of college environments illustrate the effects of peers in student attitudes and behavior](Astin, 1993). Likewise, [college administrators view peers as a major source of influence on students](Brown, 1972; Giddan, 1988). Despite awareness of peers as a significant source of influence on students, little research has been conducted to determine how such influence occurs.

It is important to investigate the influences of peers on students because peer groups play such a large role in the development of students](Astin, 1993; Chickering, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which [first-semester Virginia Tech students were influenced by their peers on decisions concerning wellness issues and interpersonal relationships. Results were framed in comparisons between men and women, and African-American and Caucasian students.

Information derived from this study regarding alcohol and drug use as well as information about the transition from high school to college should be useful to college administrators in structuring out-of-class activities and programs.

This study was conducted using survey research techniques. The sample consisted of a stratified random sample of 228 first-semester Virginia Tech students, and was representative of the undergraduate first-year class based on gender and race. The independent variables were gender (male and female) and race (African-American and Caucasian). A questionnaire containing eighteen questions was developed for this study. Eight of the questions pertained to wellness issues, seven pertained to interpersonal relationship issues, and the remaining three questions concerned demographic information. The survey was mailed to all subjects in January, 1994 and two follow-up mailings took place during the spring semester. The survey used in this study was part of a larger instrument used to assess the influence of several different groups on students.

Although there were no statistically significant differences in scores between men and women, and between African-Americans and Caucasians, item score means did indicate slight differences in general peer influence effects. [Students reported more peer influence in the areas of resolving conflicts with friends and trying new things.] Students reported less peer influence in the areas of stress management, the use of illegal drugs, how much rest one gets, decisions about diet and nutrition, how one chooses to

dress, decisions about one's weight, who or how often one sees another student, relationships with people who have a different religious or cultural background, and relationships with people who have a different sexual orientation from themselves. In addition, the overall scale mean for wellness (2.407) was less than that of the interpersonal relationships scale (2.902) with both being at levels showing little peer reported peer influence.

Comparison to the Literature

The results of this study partially support Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) conclusions that students who enter college shift from a familial reference point to a peer reference point. While students do seem to be dependent on their peers for support (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), this study revealed that students report they are not as consistently looking to peers for help in decision making.

The findings of this study did not support the literature in terms of gender differences. The results of previous research, such as Astin (1993), Brown (1982), and Hatch (1970) revealed traditional feminine stereotypes in relation to peer pressure. Astin (1993) suggested that women may be more likely to respond to peer pressure because of a decline in psychological well-being, and Hatch (1970)

found that women were more susceptible to peer pressure. Brown (1982) found that women were more likely to feel pressure to conform to norms about physical appearance. The results of this study, however, showed men and women were similarly susceptible to peer influence in these areas.

The results of this survey, however, did support Astin's findings that the effects of the peer group's racial composition was insignificant. There were no statistical differences between African-American and Caucasian students on any of the survey items.

Another interesting result of this study was the reported effect of peer influence on decisions concerning the use of beverage alcohol and illegal drugs. The lack of gender differences on these items supported Erwin and Love's (1989) and Hatch's (1970) studies, but contradicted those of Shore and Rivers (1986). Approximately 63% of all respondents reported that they were not at all influenced by their peers in decisions concerning the use of illegal drugs. This contradicts Sherry and Stolberg's (1987) findings that peer pressure in the form of friends' use was the most powerful predictor of hard drug use.

One explanation for this finding may be that students are exposed to illegal drugs before they enter college. These students already have made decisions concerning

whether they want to use illegal substances, and therefore do not respond to peer influence. Another possible reason for this finding is that alcohol seems to be the illegal substance of choice at Virginia Tech. This possibility is supported by the fact that students in this study reported higher levels of peer influence in decisions concerning alcohol than in decisions concerning illegal drug use.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Although the African-American and male respondents were not representative of the sample, it can be determined from this study that men, women, African-American students, and Caucasian students are similarly influenced by their peers in the areas of wellness and interpersonal relationships. This influence was strong in the areas of resolving conflicts with friends and in trying new things. The higher level of peer influence in decisions concerning resolving conflicts with friends may be explained by several factors. First, students may have been misreading the question. If students considered the actual interactions with students that are required in resolving conflict as peer influence, the scores for this question would be skewed.

Secondly, there was no opportunity for students to clarify whether they were consulting peers outside those in conflict or those directly involved. Several students

supplied unsolicited comments indicating a small level of confusion with the questions. The researcher has no indication of whether this item was one of those that was confusing because quantitative research does not allow for follow-up interviews. These problems occurred despite the fact that the instrument was pilot tested. At the time of the pilot there were no questions as to clarity of any item on the survey.

Influence was limited in the areas of stress management, illegal drug use, weight issues, diet and nutrition decisions, amount of rest one gets, how one dresses, who one sees, relationships with people who have a different religious or cultural background, and relationships with people who have a different sexual orientation. The absence of influence concerning illegal drugs is important because it contradicts research that showed friends are a significant influence on students in that area (Sherry & Stolberg, 1987).

It is also important to note that expected gender differences did not exist in several areas. A lack of difference between men and women in the area of weight was surprising because society is very focused on weight, especially for women. This finding indicates that the women and men in this study are not as likely to depend on peers

for feedback and influence on issues of personal appearance. This same result was seen in the responses to the item dealing with diet and nutrition.

Although no statistically significant results were obtained, there are implications for practice. Students are influenced to a small degree by their peers. Providing support systems within first-year residences may help channel positive influences and help students build a support network within their peer group once they have left the familial base. The findings of this study also indicate that using broad types of peer influence programming may effect a large proportion of students. Several general areas where students felt a higher degree of peer influence, such as resolving conflicts with friends, trying new things, and expressing controversial thoughts were identified through this study. Providing general programs for first-year students in these areas may produce the same effect as programs targeted at specific gender or racial populations. Focusing peer education programs in these areas may be an effective way to utilize such influence.

Understanding the breakdown of topics which students were influenced on will enable administrators to focus the attention given to certain topics in terms of peer education. For topics on which peers were not influential,

administrators can also provide other types of support or resources for students. For instance, while there was a only a small degree of influence in decisions concerning the use of illegal drugs, there was a higher level of peer influence present in decisions concerning the use of beverage alcohol. Focusing peer education efforts on the use of beverage alcohol may effect student use of alcohol.

It is also important to have students reflect on findings such as these. Having students react thoughtfully to the results of the study will enable practitioners to gain insight as to whether or not students feel these results accurately communicate their thoughts.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The major limitation of this study was the fact that it was quantitative in nature. The length of the survey and the nature of the responses were adequate, but did not supply a tremendous amount of information. Quantitative research normally does not allow for in depth information, and therefore, it was not possible to probe students for more clarity in their answers. In addition, there is no guarantee that students were honest in their responses. The results reflect the data provided by the students, not necessarily their true level of peer influence.

Another concern was that there was no conventionally accepted definition of peer influence over research projects, nor a survey designed to measure this idea. There is no guarantee that those within the study were conceptualizing peer influence in a similar manner to those in the broader community. This makes it difficult to make any definitive statements about the effects of peer influence on students based on this study.

Also worthy of note is the low response rate from African-American students (30.8%) and lack of representativeness of men and African-American students in the sample. The differences in scores between African-American students and Caucasian students were not significant, but there may have had more meaning with a larger size sample. It is difficult to determine how meaningful the sample data are because several groups are underrepresented. Future researchers may concentrate efforts even further than the methods used in this study to try and ensure a meaningful response rate of all groups.

Another limitation of this study was the extended amount of time between the second and third follow-up measures. This unavoidable delay may have influenced the return rate, especially because the last mailing fell so closely to students' spring vacation period. Students may

not have responded to the questionnaire as they were preparing to leave campus.

A final limitation in the study was the low Chronbach's Alpha level on the wellness scale of the instrument. This low level indicates that there may have been a low level of reliability on this portion of the questionnaire. It also makes it difficult to make any definitive statements about the results based on this scale. Adding questions to this section may strengthen the instrument in the future.

Further research can be focused on a wider scope of peer influence. This study supported the idea that there is no singular definition or concept of peer influence. The findings of this study suggest that more research, especially qualitative, on the perception of peer influence may be helpful in the future to operationalize the concept.

Conducting similar research at different types of institutions may provide meaningful comparisons. Because this research was conducted at a large, research oriented, land-grant, public institution, it would be interesting to see results of similar research from a small, private, liberal arts institution, or perhaps a single-sex institution. Qualitative research on this topic also would add depth to a topic that has had little attention or depth up to this point. In addition, this study was conducted on a

traditional age population (18-24 years old). Comparisons between these data and results from a commuter institution would provide a different perspective as well because commuter institutions generally have a slightly higher average student age.

In addition, examining why students are influenced by one another, or on which topics they are influenced by their peers may provide important information to shape future research. This study focused on very specific questions regarding peer influence. Examining the broader issues involved may provide meaningful information on the overall picture.

There also may be room for exploration in the area of peer educators and peer education programs. The results of this study suggest that peer education models may not be the most effective or efficient way of reaching students on wellness or interpersonal relationship issues. Further research could focus on alternative model for educating students.

Additionally, this study focused only on the recipients of peer influence. There is also merit in studying the benefits of a peer education experience on the peer educators themselves. This aspect of a peer education program may be the most beneficial.

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Survey Resources

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Appendix A: Survey Instruments

1. Student Influence Questionnaire (used in the study conducted by the Virginia Tech Division of Student Affairs Research and Development Committee).
2. Peer Influence Survey (portion of the survey used in this study).

Student Influence Questionnaire

Please respond to the following questions candidly by circling the appropriate answer. All of the information provided will remain **STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL**. The number on the questionnaire will allow us to track our mailings. Your name will **NOT** be attached to your responses. Return your questionnaire in the envelope provided. Thank you for your help.

Response Scale: (1 = No, 2 = Probably Not, 3 = Probably So, 4 = Yes, DK = Don't Know)

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1. If a group of your friends are going to a movie and you had planned to study for a test, would you go to the movie anyway? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 2. If a friend offers you a beer, would you drink it if you had no intention of drinking? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 3. If you are at a party where your friends are drinking alcohol, would you feel left out if you were not drinking too? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 4. If a friend suggests that you wear a different shirt with a certain pair of slacks because it looked better, would you change? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 5. If your closest group of friends starts playing a drinking game, would you join them even though you knew the activity could get out of hand? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 6. If a friend was to dare you to tear a page out of a library book or some other minor act of vandalism, would you do it? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 7. If you are asked by a group of friends to go out to dinner and you had planned to spend your money in some other way, would you go with them anyway? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 8. If you are at a party and your friends encouraged you to dance with a person you did not know, would you dance with that person? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 9. If your friends are all having their hair cut in a certain style, would you get the same type of haircut? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 10. If your friends are signing up for an elective class because it was an "easy A", would you sign up for it because they were? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 11. If your best friend is cutting class, would you cut class if he or she asked you to? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 12. If the group of friends you were with start to knock out street lights in a parking lot on the way to your car as a prank, would you help? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 13. If you were driving a friend back to campus and this person encourages you to drag race another friend at the traffic light, would you do it? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 14. If your friends start exercising more regularly to get in better physical shape, would you join them? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 15. If your friends encourage you to be more physically intimate with the person you are dating, would you? | 1 2 3 4 DK |
| 16. On a scale of 1 to 4, to what degree do you believe you are influenced by your fellow students? (1 being not at all; 4 being a great deal). | 1 2 3 4 DK |

In the section on the following pages, please indicate to what degree have your decisions made in the past six months on the following topics been influenced by the individuals listed below (**Students** - other Virginia Tech undergraduates who are not related to you by marriage or blood, **Parents or Other Relatives** - persons related to you by marriage or blood, **University Staff** - faculty, administrative, and support staff including student employees, **Others** - please define in the space provided. The response scale is 1 = not at all, 3 = somewhat, 5 = a great deal. Please respond to each group in every item.

(over please)

Not at All → → A Great Deal

1. Decisions about managing academic or personal stress.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

2. Decisions about the use of beverage alcohol.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

3. Decisions about the use of illegal drugs.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

4. Decisions about how much rest you get.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

5. Decisions about how you choose to dress.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

6. How much is your weight influenced by:

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

7. Decisions about diet and nutrition.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

8. How much is your level of exercise and physical fitness influenced by:

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

9. Decisions about time management (balancing class, social, and study time)

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

10. Decisions about who or how often you see someone.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

(please continue)

Not at All → → A Great Deal

11. Whom do you consult most often to resolve conflicts with friends.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
12. The manner in which you express your thoughts and opinions when they might be controversial.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
13. Decisions about trying new things and experiences.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
14. Your relationships with people who are culturally or religiously different from you.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
15. Your relationships with people who have a different sexual orientation than you is largely influenced by:

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
16. Decisions about which elective courses to take.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
17. Your choice of academic major or area of academic concentration.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
18. Diligence about completing class assignments and class projects.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
19. Concern/interest in gaining practical experience in the work area you plan to pursue after college.

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5
20. To what extent are your study habits influenced by:

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

(over please)

Not at All - - A Great Deal

21. To what extent are your plans after you graduate from college influenced by:

Students	1	2	3	4	5
Parents or Relatives	1	2	3	4	5
University Staff	1	2	3	4	5

Please check one item in each category or provide the information requested

Gender ☐ Male ☐ Female

Class Status ☐ Frosh. ☐ Soph. ☐ Jr. ☐ Sr. ☐ Other

Current Place of Local Residence ☐ On-campus ☐ Off-campus

Age (enter number of years)

Race ☐ African American or Black ☐ Asian American or Pacific Islander
☐ Hispanic or Mexican American ☐ Native American (Indian, Alaskan, Hawaiian)
☐ Caucasian or White ☐ Other

Number of Other Brothers and Sisters in Family (enter total number)

Number of Student Organizations in Which You Are Involved (enter number)

Your Cumulative Grade Point Average (enter three digit number)

Father's Highest Educational Level

☐ No high school ☐ Some high school ☐ Finished high school
☐ Some college ☐ Finished college ☐ Some or finished graduate school

Mother's Highest Educational Level

☐ No high school ☐ Some high school ☐ Finished high school
☐ Some college ☐ Finished college ☐ Some or finished graduate school

Estimated Family Income

☐ under \$20,000 ☐ \$20,001 to \$40,000 ☐ \$40,001 to \$60,000
☐ \$60,001 to \$80,000 ☐ \$80,001 to \$100,000 ☐ over \$100,000

Please return this questionnaire in the pre-stamped envelope that has been provided
by January 28, 1994

Thank you for your help with this important project.

Peer Influence Survey

In the section on the following page, please indicate to what degree have your decisions in the past six months on the following topics been influenced by other Virginia Tech undergraduates who are not related to you by blood or marriage. The response scale is 1 = not at all, 3 = somewhat, 5 = a great deal. **Please respond to every item.**

Not at all ----- Somewhat ----- A great deal
1 2 3 4 5

- ___ 1. Decisions about managing academic or personal stress.
- ___ 2. Decisions about the use of beverage alcohol.
- ___ 3. Decisions about the use of illegal drugs.
- ___ 4. Decisions about how much rest you get.
- ___ 5. Decisions about how you choose to dress.
- ___ 6. How much your weight is influenced by:
- ___ 7. Decisions about diet and nutrition.
- ___ 8. How much your level of exercise and physical fitness is influenced by:
- ___ 9. Decisions about time management (balancing class, social, and study time).
- ___ 10. Decisions about who or how often you see someone.
- ___ 11. Whom do you consult most often to resolve conflicts with friends.
- ___ 12. The manner in which you express your thoughts and opinions when they might be controversial.
- ___ 13. Decisions about trying new things and experiences.
- ___ 14. Your relationships with people who are culturally or religiously different from you.
- ___ 15. Your relationships with people who have a different sexual orientation than you is largely influenced by:



VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Division of Student Affairs

Office of the Dean of Students
105 Brodie Hall, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061-0255
Office phone (703) 231-3787 Fax: (703) 231-4035

January 14, 1994

Dear Student:

Improving student services at Virginia Tech is an important priority. The President, Provost, and Vice President for Student Affairs are committed to making Tech a more pleasant and productive place where students can grow and learn. To that end, we want to know more about how students make decisions and to what degree they are influenced by others.

To help us with this task, we would like to ask you to complete the attached questionnaire. It will only take 10 minutes of your time. Your responses will remain totally confidential. The questionnaire is numbered to help us track on mailings but your name will not be attached to any of your responses.

Since only a very few students have been asked to participate in this survey, your response is critical! Please complete this questionnaire and return it in the business reply envelope enclosed in this mailing. Don't miss out on this important opportunity to affect the campus community in which you live. If you would like to receive a copy of our findings, please return the response post card separately at your convenience.

We know this is a busy time but we hope you will decide to participate in this research project. Please make every effort return your questionnaire by January 28, 1994. Thank you for your consideration and your time.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Steven M. Janosik".

Steven M. Janosik, Ed.D.
Associate Dean of Students

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ellie Haughey".

Ellie Haughey
EDSP Graduate Student

___ I have returned your questionnaire and would like to receive
a copy of your results.

___ I have returned your questionnaire.

___ I do not wish to participate in your research project.
Please remove my name from your mailing list.

Name: _____

Address: _____



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Steven M. Janosik, Ed.D.
Associate Dean of Students

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ellie Haughey".

Ellie Haughey
EDSP Graduate Student

Vita

I. Courses/Seminars

Fall, 1992:

1. EDAD 6074 Higher Education Law (S. Janosik)
2. EDAE 5604 Graduate Seminar in Education (D. Ostroth, L. Cross)
3. EDRE 5404 Foundations of Educational Research and Evaluation (B. Sgro)
4. EDSP 5304 Student Development in Higher Education (D. Creamer)
5. EDSP 5314 Theory and Appraisal of College Student Development (C. Engstrom)

Spring, 1993:

6. EDSP 5324 Program Intervention for Promoting Student Development (T. Goodale)
7. EDSP 5334 College Students and the College Environment (E. Creamer & C. Engstrom)
8. EDSP 5284 Practicum Seminar (C. Engstrom)
9. EDAE 5604 Graduate Seminar in Education (D. Ostroth, L. Cross)
10. EDAE 5994 Research and Thesis (D. Creamer)

1st Summer, 1993:

11. EDAE 5604 Graduate Seminar in Education (S. Komives)

2nd Summer, 1993:

12. EDAE 5604 Graduate Seminar in Education (D. Creamer, C. Engstrom, S. Janosik)

Fall, 1993:

13. EDAE 5604 Graduate Seminar in Education (D. Creamer)
14. EDAE 5994 Research and Thesis (D. Creamer)
15. EDSP 5284 Practicum (C. Engstrom)

Spring, 1994:

16. EDAE 5994 Research and Thesis (D. Creamer)
17. FCD 5324 Marriage and Family Relationships (G. Bird)
18. FCD 5984 Special Study; Contextual and Interactionist Perspectives on Multiculturalism (V. Fu, A. Stremmel)

II. Work Experiences

1. Graduate Assistant: Orientation, August 1992 - May 1993
Primary responsibilities: Coordination of student staff selection and training for 30 students, student conference coordinator for the National Orientation Director's Association Region VIII conference, coordinator of newsletter distributed to all students offered admission.
2. Practicum Student - MAPs Program, Spring 1993
Primary responsibilities: serve as advisor to current peer educators on general programs, assist in the development and implementation of a student organization cultural audit, assist in implementation of public relations materials.
3. Graduate Assistant: Orientation, August 1993 - May 1994
Primary responsibilities: Coordination of orientation publication, advertising efforts, revision of student handbook. Assisted with Family Weekend programming.
4. Practicum Student - Residential Life: Radford University, Fall 1993
Primary Responsibilities: Served on resident director selection and programming committees, assisted with needs assessment of new students and focus group interviews, participated in training of resident advisors and resident directors, participated in the daily functioning of the department.

III. Professional Association Activities

1. ACPA: member from August, 1992
2. NASPA: member from August, 1992
3. NODA: member from December, 1992
4. ASD (Association for Student Development): member from August, 1992.
Offices held: Historian, Forum Events Planning Chair

