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Editorial

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Editorial

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Welcome to Volume 11 of the *Journal of Peer Learning*. As the incoming Editor, I am deeply grateful to Dr. Jane Skalicky for her leadership of the *Journal* over the last six years. In this role, Dr. Skalicky worked tirelessly to ensure that the *Journal of Peer Learning* would continue to be recognised as the premier international journal in the field of peer learning. On a personal note, I am indebted to Jane for her patient mentoring over the last six months in helping me prepare to assume my editorial responsibilities. Additionally, I want to recognise Dr. Jarrod Green, who just finished his tenure as the Copy Editor of the *Journal*. None of the excellent scholarship published by the *Journal* in recent years would have made it to readers without Jarrod's keen editorial eye. We are also delighted to welcome our new Copy Editor, Chloe Higgins, who is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wollongong, and a former PASS Leader.

This volume is highly representative of both the international scope of peer learning research, as well as the diversity of the *Journal's* audience, with six peer-reviewed articles from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, Sweden, the United States, and Iran. In this body of research from across the globe, the respective authors explore a number of key issues in the scholarship and practice of peer learning. One prominent theme running across the volume is the value of the peer learning experience for the peer leaders themselves. Indeed, four of the articles in this volume explore the impact of the peer leadership experience beyond graduation, with particular focus on employability outcomes. Collectively, these articles point to the importance of both being more explicit with peer leaders about what they can expect to learn through their leadership experiences, as well as engaging them in regular reflection on how this learning positions them for success beyond graduation.

Additionally, the authors whose work is featured in this volume raise critical questions about the challenge of assessing the impact of peer learning programs, upon both peer leaders and those they lead. Finally, readers will be benefitted by thoughtful explorations of the impact of peer learning upon some of the most vulnerable students on our campuses, including first-year students and students from underrepresented populations.

In the study featured in the opening article, 'Exploring PASS leadership beyond graduation', Lucy Chilvers employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the impact of being a Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) leader upon PASS leaders' employment experiences. The study focused on the employment experiences of former PASS leaders who had graduated from a British university over the past three years. Survey data were collected from 62 respondents who reported on (a) the ways in which their PASS leader experience impacted the process of applying for jobs, (b) the particular employability skills developed through their PASS experience, and (c) the degree to which they use the skills developed as PASS leaders in their current employment. These survey data were used to identify 12 participants for semi-structured interviews. Interview questions

were informed by survey data and used to facilitate exploratory discussion of key themes that emerged through analysis of the survey data. The results of the study indicated that nearly all of the former PASS leaders who were surveyed had listed their PASS leader experience in their CV and felt confident articulating the benefits of this experience for employers in interview settings. Additionally, study participants reported that their PASS leader experience had equipped them with a wide range of skills used in their employment, most notably communication, confidence, and the ability to effectively work in teams. Chilvers concluded that, for the participants in the study, the PASS leader experience held significant post-graduation value, both in securing employment and in developing skills that allowed them to effectively fulfill their employment responsibilities.

In the second article, 'Perceived impact of PASS leadership experience on student leaders' transferable skills development', Deborah Laurs reports on a study of the experiences of PASS leaders at Victoria University of Wellington and the ways in which these experiences contributed to the development of transferable skills. Survey data from 185 respondents (all of whom were PASS leaders at Victoria University of Wellington between 2009 and 2013) were collected and analysed. Results suggested that participants' first trimester as PASS leaders had the largest impact upon the development of transferable skills, particularly in the areas of communication, initiative, and having the confidence to step outside ones comfort zone. Additionally, findings indicated that writing weekly reflective reports helped participants develop greater self-awareness surrounding their PASS sessions (i.e. what was or was not going well); however, these reflective reports did not seem to have a significant impact upon participants' ability to identify the transferable skills they were developing through these experiences.

In their article, 'Peer learning to employable: learnings from an evaluation of PASS attendee and facilitator perceptions of employability at Western Sydney University', Robert Carr and his colleagues examined the relationship between PASS participation (for both attendees and facilitators) and the development of employability skills transferable to other settings. The authors began by reviewing the literature on graduate employability and identifying 21 attributes that, based on the literature, seemed to be critical in evaluating the impact of PASS on employability. Next, they used a process of pattern-matching to develop six latent constructs (technical skills, organisational skills, social skills, professional and business acumen, mentoring, and critical thinking) that were used as the basis for their evaluation. Data collection consisted of (a) a survey of PASS attendees, in which they were asked to rate employability skills gained through PASS participation; (b) a similar survey of PASS facilitators; and (c) focus groups in which PASS attendees were asked questions that allowed the authors to more deeply explore questions related to the ways in which PASS facilitated the development and transfer of employability skills related to the latent constructs identified previously. Results suggested that both attendees and facilitators developed increased confidence in their interpersonal communication abilities, social skills, and collaborative work.

In the fourth article, Janet Liou-Mark and her colleagues at the New York City College of Technology reported on the findings of an evaluation of the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) Leadership Program for first-year minority science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students. This program recruits and trains second-semester first-year STEM students from underrepresented populations, who then serve as peer leaders in foundational

courses in chemistry, civil engineering, and mathematics. Results of the study demonstrated that being a peer leader in the PLTL was associated with increased confidence in the subject area to which they were assigned, deepened understanding of core concepts addressed in the assigned class, and improved leadership and communication skills. Additionally, the program resulted in a 10% increase in the academic success of students in the targeted STEM courses, as well as a 15% decrease in withdrawal rates. Ultimately, the study provided strong evidence that the PLTL is an effective means of retaining students in STEM majors at the New York City College of Technology.

In their article, 'Impact of supplemental instruction on dropout and graduation rates: an example from 5-year engineering programs', Joakim Malm, Leif Bryngfors, and Johan Fredriksson employed a rigorous quantitative methodology to explore the impact of Supplemental Instruction (SI) upon graduation and dropout rates. Beginning Master of Science Engineering students at Lund University in Sweden were divided into four groups based on their attendance at SI sessions (no attendance, low attendance, average attendance, and high attendance). Additionally, data were collected relative to students' prior academic achievements and whether they graduated from the program. This data set allowed the authors to determine whether attendance rates at SI sessions during students' first semester was correlated with graduation rates. Results suggested that SI attendance seems to have a significant impact on both graduation and dropout rates for engineering students at Lund University, particularly those students who enter the University with lower levels of academic preparation (defined as a student's high school GPA in mathematics). Indeed, students who attended more than ten SI sessions during their first semester in the engineering program were twice as likely to have graduated after six years, even when controlling for gender and prior academic achievement.

In the final article in this volume, 'Does peer education increase academic achievement in first-year students? A mixed-method study', Zarifnejad, Mirhaghi, and Rajabpoor, explored the impact of peer education on the academic achievement of second-semester students in the school of nursing and midwifery at the Mashhad University of Medical Sciences in Iran. The study employed an exploratory, sequential mixed-method design. In the first (quantitative) phase of data collection and analysis, an intervention group of students enrolled in either physiology or anatomy participated in bi-weekly peer education sessions during which they were engaged in instructing their fellow students on course content and challenging concepts. A control group of students received faculty instruction, but without any peer education component. A second (qualitative) phase consisted of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews exploring students' lived experience in the peer education program. Results of the study were mixed. While students in the intervention groups scored significantly higher than those in the control group on a post-intervention examination of course content administered by a third-party facilitator, there was no significant difference across groups in formal final examination scores. Qualitative analysis of interview data suggested that students in the intervention groups were more confident in their understanding of course content, had adopted more effective learning strategies, and had internalised their learning to a greater degree than those students who did not participate in peer education sessions.

On behalf of the editorial team at the *Journal*, we hope you enjoy this volume and its focus on employability outcomes for peer leaders, issues of assessment,

and the impact that peer learning can have upon some of our most vulnerable student populations. Additionally, we thank the authors who have submitted their work to the *Journal* and worked with the editorial team to prepare their manuscripts for publication. Finally, thanks to all of our readers for engaging in this scholarly dialogue with us.

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