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The Triple Impact of Peer-to-Peer Postsecondary Advising Programs

Narrowing Gaps in Guidance, Career Development, and Staffing

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College Access: Research & Action
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Executive Summary

Across the country, public education systems are focusing their mission on ensuring high school students graduate with a postsecondary plan that leads to long-term economic security, and that those who choose to go to college persist to graduation.

At the same time, these institutions are not resourced to meet these goals for all of their students. Counselor caseloads are too high to provide the individualized support students need, too few schools have a counselor dedicated specifically to postsecondary pathway support, and the pre-service training most counselors receive through BA and MA programs lack sufficient preparation in postsecondary guidance.

The students most impacted by this lack of support are from low-income communities. More than their middle- and upper-income peers who have access to additional outside resources, these students rely on their schools for the guidance and resources needed to make informed choices and to navigate their postsecondary journeys.

One cost-effective and powerful approach to address these inequities is peer-to-peer and near-to-peer postsecondary advising programs which train, pay, and position students to support other students through college and career planning and persistence. This report focuses on such programs, demonstrating that high quality ones reliably produce multiple powerful impacts, and arguing that they should be scaled.

Drawing on College Access: Research & Action's (CARA) many years of implementing peer- and near-to-peer postsecondary advising programs, as well as interviews with current and former near-peer advisors, counselors, and educational leaders, the report **defines best practice peer-to-peer postsecondary programs, demonstrates their triple impact, and issues a set of policy recommendations** to create the infrastructure and secure the resources needed to scale them.

One cost-effective and powerful approach to address these inequities is peer-to-peer and near-to-peer postsecondary advising programs which train, pay, and position students to support other students through college and career planning and persistence.

Components of Best Practice Peer-to-Peer Postsecondary Programs

- > **Comprehensive training** for near-peer advisors delivered by experts.
- > **Competitive pay and stable employment** for near-peer advisors with rates above state minimum wage and opportunity for yearlong work.
- > **Strong site-based supervision and evaluation** from an expert in the field.
- > **Structures that ensure that peer advisors' work is proactive, relational, and ongoing** throughout an educational transition process.
- > **Near-peer advisors working within their own communities**, i.e., at the high schools, colleges, and community-based settings that they themselves do or did attend, in order to act as role models and provide culturally relevant counseling.

The Triple Impact of Best Practice Peer-to-Peer Programs

- > **Increasing Postsecondary Planning Support for Students:** Peer-to-peer advising expands capacity in under-resourced public high schools and colleges, providing students with needed application and persistence support from “credible messengers.”
- > **Providing Career Development for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds:** Peer-to-peer advising provides meaningful career exploration and development to those who serve as advisors, who often have limited access to internships.
- > **Creating a Diverse Talent Pipeline for the Counseling and Advising Fields:** Peer-to-peer advising creates a talent pipeline of well-trained candidates for public high schools, colleges, and nonprofit organizations. These young people, for whom graduate programs are often cost-prohibitive, can fill open positions, provide culturally relevant support to students, and offer needed expertise to a developing field.

Policy Recommendations

To address the infrastructure and resource challenges to scaling best practice peer-to-peer programs, city/state government and private philanthropy should:

- > **Significantly expand peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs that are aligned to best practices.** CARA and a range of other organizations in New York City and around the country have already built the models to do this work well.
- > **Ensure adequate, reliable, and usable funding to high schools, colleges, and community-based organizations to sustain the near-peer advisor role.** This includes funding for training and supervision of near-peer advisors, and critically, for their pay which must become a line item in budgets.
- > **Formalize a career pipeline for near-peer advisors by offering credit and/or financial benefits to them.** Universities and employers should work with best practice peer-to-peer advising programs to incentivize near-peer advisors to move into the counseling field.

At scale, this model has the potential to transform the field of postsecondary guidance for students from under-resourced communities—creating student, institutional, and system level change. As the lens of postsecondary pathway support broadens to more purposefully include career pathway development, it is critical to understand the unique contributions and possibilities of peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs and commit the resources to scale this triple-impact model.

DARLENE | A Near-Peer Advisor's Journey

NEAR-PEER ADVISOR PROFILE

From College to Career

Darlene* began college directly after completing high school. A first-generation college student, he was confident he wanted to go to college, but was not sure about what he wanted to study or, ultimately, to do with his degree. He first declared linguistics as a major, shifted to chemistry, then to math, and ultimately graduated with a degree in anthropology.

One year into college, Darlene's alma-mater high school hired him to be a near-peer advisor. He was trained to support students through all aspects of the postsecondary planning process, and worked under the supervision of the school's college counselor. It was a game changer for both the school and for Darlene.

The high school, which had only one counselor to support students in grades 9-12 with all of their postsecondary planning needs, was able to give students more individualized help as they navigated the many complicated steps of applying to college. College application and FAFSA completion rates increased, as did the school's college enrollment rate.

For Darlene, the job offered a steady income throughout his college years and, more than his coursework, the experience he needed to define and prepare for a future career. **"Being a near-peer advisor gave me a lot of power; it gave me a skill set; it gave me a knowledge base that I could use to enrich others."** Darlene decided he wanted to pursue a career in counseling, one that would allow him to continue to use this power to "open doors and open this world to young people like myself"

Immediately after graduating, Darlene was hired as a college counselor at a community-based organization in NYC. He recently completed his master's degree in school counseling and continues to work in the field.

**"Being a near-peer advisor gave me the blueprints
for everything I do now."**

* Interview participants' real names and preferred gender pronouns are used throughout the report with consent, and otherwise have been changed.



Introduction

The Triple Impact of Best Practice Peer-to-Peer Postsecondary Advising Programs

Darlene's¹ journey through college and to a career was an ideal one: He had an opportunity for a paid internship that helped him identify a career field by the end of college; he began his life as a professional with a strong set of skills and history of work-based learning²; and he was connected through his internship to a set of organizations at which he was well-qualified to be hired, in a high-need field where his “first-gen” identity was viewed as an asset. Darlene's story is not unique; he is joined by thousands of first-generation college³ graduates across NYC who were trained, while they were students, to work as near-peer postsecondary advisors.

Peer-to-peer advising programs focusing on postsecondary pathway support for first-generation college students from low income backgrounds—some directly peer-to-peer, others “near-peer”⁴ have proliferated across NYC and nationally in recent years.⁵ While program elements vary across them, our experience and our work with colleagues in the field has convinced us that high-quality programs can reliably produce powerful and layered impacts. And they can do so at a price that is considerably lower than many other solutions.

We believe best practice peer-to-peer programs should be seen as a way to transform postsecondary access for first-gen students across the country in the coming years.

Best practice peer-to-peer advising programs are ones that:

- > **Thoroughly prepare young people** for the role they are asking them to play through comprehensive training.

- > **Provide students adequate pay and stable employment**, not just small stipends or micro-internships, but competitive hourly wages for substantial periods of time.

- > **Place a strong emphasis on supervision**, not throwing young people in alone to do the work once they have been trained, but providing peer advisors ongoing supervision by an experienced college access/success professional who is qualified to support their work.

- > **Structure peer advisors' work with students as proactive, relational, and ongoing** throughout an educational transition process, as opposed to discrete or random moments through a “drop-in” model.

- > **Position near-peer advisors to work within their own communities**, ensuring both culturally relevant student support and the availability of work opportunities to students from low-income backgrounds.

Note: This report uses the term “peer-to-peer” to refer to both peer-to-peer and near-peer models; it uses the term “near-peer advisor” to refer to college students who advise peers or near-peers through the postsecondary process. Examples of titles for near-peer advisor used across different programs and organizations include Peer Leader, Bridge Coach, Peer Coach, Peer Mentor, and Student Ambassador.

At College Access: Research & Action (CARA), we have been developing and running peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs like the one Darlene participated in since our founding in 2011. Our programs (**Right to College**, **College Bridge**, and **College Allies**) include both peer-to-peer and near-peer models and follow these precepts of best practice programs. More specifically, CARA's programs:

> **Provide 70 hours of comprehensive training to near-peer advisors** designed around a set of **Core Competencies** and **Career Capacities** and aligned to industry and National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) standards. Near-peer advisors are formally evaluated on these competencies and capacities.

> **Pay near-peer advisors for their work**, at or above NYS minimum wage and provide year-round employment, with some near-peers serving in this role for up to four years at the same institution.

> **Integrate near-peer advisors** into the primary structures and practices of public

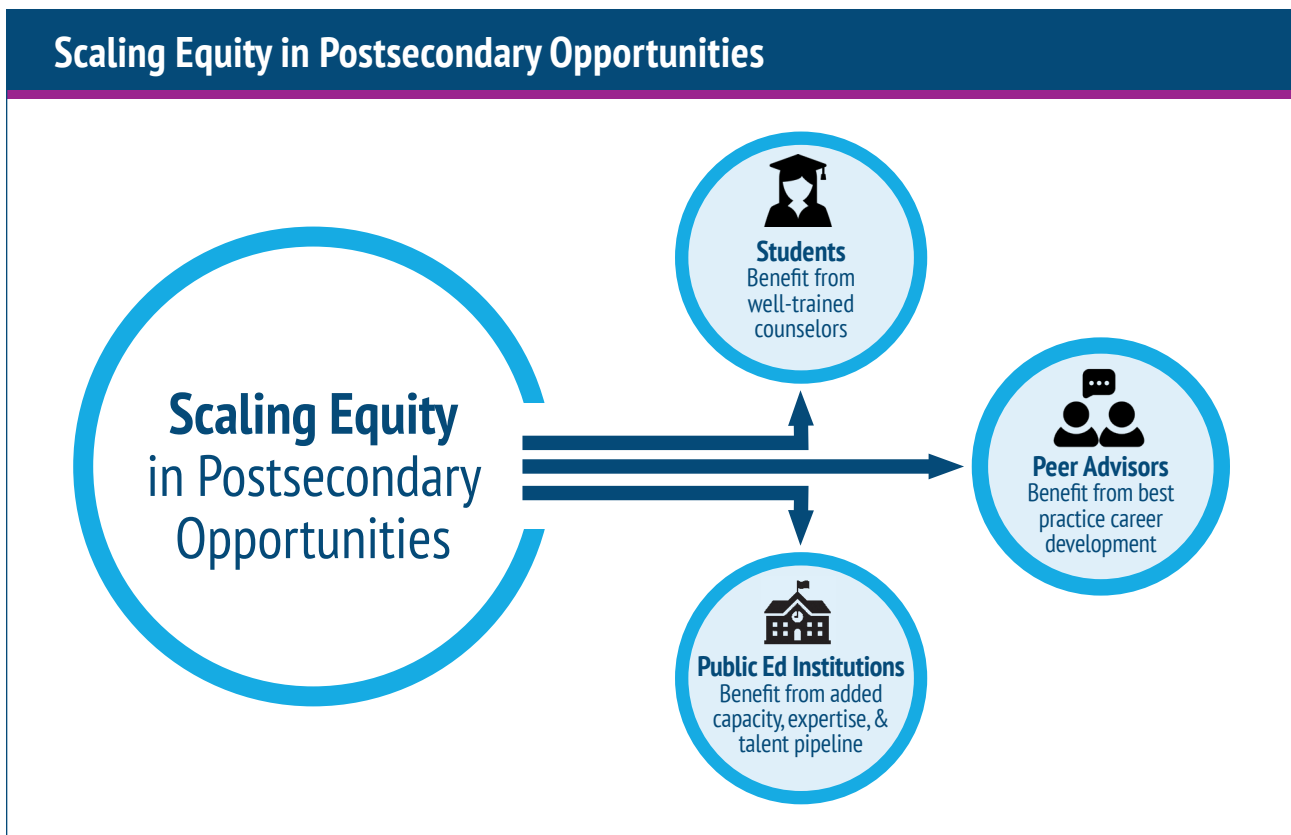
high schools and colleges, providing clear systems of supervision and following principles of youth development.

> **Position current and former students** to work within their own high school and college communities.

Across the years, CARA has trained over 1,800 high school and college students to work as near-peer advisors and supported over 120 high schools and 15 college campuses to implement near-peer advising. We have also collaborated with public systems—both NYC Public Schools and the City University of New York (CUNY)—to scale peer-to-peer postsecondary advising across New York City, and, more recently, consulted with schools and districts outside of New York to adapt the model to their settings.⁶ Through both our work and that of our colleagues in New York City and beyond, there is increasing evidence that best practice peer-to-peer programs have a powerful triple impact:

Triple Impact

- 1 **Increasing Postsecondary Planning Support for Students:** Peer-to-peer advising expands capacity in under-resourced public high schools and colleges, providing students with needed application and persistence support from “credible messengers.”
- 2 **Providing Career Development for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds:** Peer-to-peer advising provides meaningful career exploration and development to those who serve as advisors, who often have limited access to internships.
- 3 **Creating a Diverse Talent Pipeline for the Counseling and Advising Fields:** Peer-to-peer advising creates a talent pipeline of well-trained candidates for public high schools, colleges, and nonprofit organizations. These young people, for whom graduate programs are often cost-prohibitive, can fill open positions, provide culturally relevant support to students, and offer needed expertise to a developing field.



At the same time, the challenges to sustaining and scaling this work have also become clear. Public dollars to fund program operations are limited and programs—and the high schools and colleges within which they work—continuously struggle to secure and administer adequate pay for their near-peer leaders.

As attention within our own city, and within the country as a whole, turns to broadening the lens of postsecondary pathway support to more purposefully include career pathway development, it is important both to understand the unique contributions of peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs and to solve the resourcing challenges that exist to scaling them.

This report uses CARA's programming in NYC as a case study to document and leverage the triple impact of peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs. Drawing on our many years of experience implementing a robust peer advising model, as well as interviews with current and former near-peer advisors,⁷ counselors, and educational leaders, we argue that scaling this model has the potential to transform the field of postsecondary guidance for students from under-resourced communities by creating student, institutional, and system-level change. We conclude with policy recommendations geared toward creating the infrastructure and securing the resources needed to scale peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs.

Scaling this model has the potential to transform the field of postsecondary guidance for students from under-resourced communities by creating student, institutional, and system-level change.



Impact 1: Increasing Postsecondary Support for Students

Near-Peer Advisors Narrow the Guidance Gap

“Near-peer advisors are such a great resource; I lean on them for workshops and working one-on-one with students. I can’t sit with 100 kids and read personal statements; I have three very different and busy jobs. I can’t do it all!” –College Counselor, NYC Public High School

CARA has advocated over the past decade for the expansion of peer-to-peer programs primarily because near-peer advisors increase existing advisement capacity within under-resourced public institutions.⁸ The current national counselor-to-student ratio in high schools is 1:408, with 47 states exceeding the recommended 1:250 ratio, and caseloads in some instances reaching as high as 900 students.⁹ At the college level, the median caseload per full-time academic advisor is 441 students at public two-year colleges and 260 students at public four-year institutions;¹⁰ the ratio for career advisors at public colleges is, shockingly, 1:2,263.¹¹ Furthermore, few schools have a counselor dedicated specifically to postsecondary pathway support, and the preservice training counselors receive through BA and MA programs traditionally lack sufficient preparation in how to guide students through college and career access and persistence.¹²

Ensuring counselors’ caseloads are manageable and that they have sufficient expertise are essential to achieving equity. High school counselors serving fewer students are more likely to help them with critical access and retention tasks, less likely to leave the field due to burnout, and produce better outcomes.¹³ For college students,

CURRENT NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
COUNSELOR-TO-STUDENT RATIO

1:408

In some instances, caseloads reach as high as 900 students.

CURRENT COLLEGE LEVEL
ADVISOR-TO-STUDENT RATIO

1:441

PUBLIC TWO-YEAR COLLEGES


1:260

PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

CURRENT COLLEGE LEVEL RATIO
CAREER ADVISOR-TO-STUDENT

1:2,264

Near-peer advisors increase existing
advisement capacity within
under-resourced public institutions.



COLLEGE ACCESS: RESEARCH & ACTION
PEER-TO-PEER MODEL

A cost-effective way to provide students with the individualized support they need to be successful.

\$285 Cost on average per student served in an academic year

one study finds that for every one-on-one meeting with an advisor, a student’s odds of being retained increase by 13%.¹⁴ Reduced counselor or advisor-to-student ratios are often cited as the key driver of effective high school and college-level support programs.¹⁵

Changing the Odds of Postsecondary Success

Peer-to-peer models are a cost-effective way to provide students with the individualized and differentiated support they need to be successful.¹⁶ CARA’s model, for example, costs on average \$285 per student served in an academic year. Students are a proven source of guidance and inspiration, and are able to provide up-to-date information and advice that adults often lack.¹⁷ Near-peer advisors are more accessible—at hours and through mediums that adult counselors are not—and have the time and relatable experience to help students get to the root of complicated issues.

One near-peer advisor, who worked on her college campus, contrasted the ease students have reaching her with having to formally schedule a meeting during small windows of time with campus advisors:

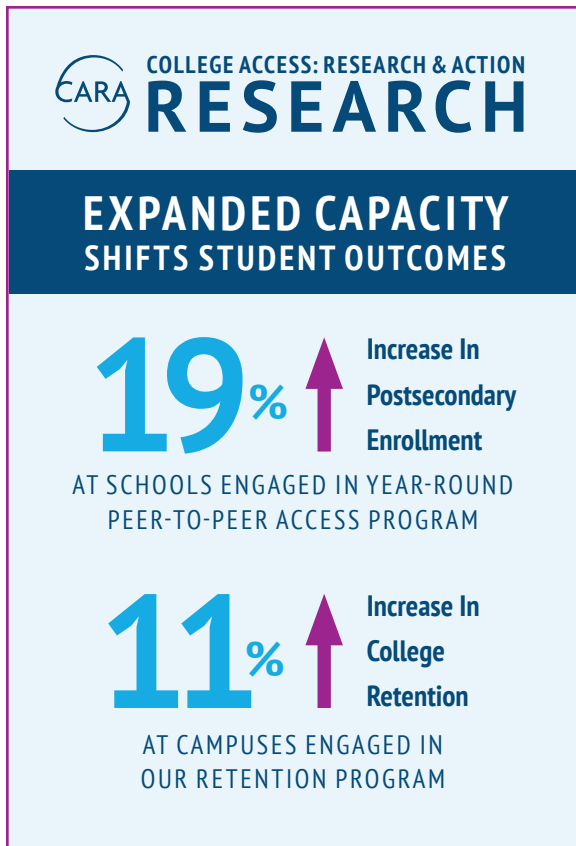
Sometimes, even if I am not officially working, I’ll respond to a text message, if it’s something really quick ... I will schedule a meeting with a [student] even if I’m not working. I’ll still make time for you because I know that this is urgent. If it’s dire—like, I lost my TAP [state aid]—ok, we need to meet and figure this out.

Positioning students to work at the college they attend, or the high school they graduated from, is an especially effective practice because of the shared identity between the near-peer advisor and the students they are supporting.¹⁸ Near-peer advisors bring lived experience and firsthand knowledge of both the student’s institution and community. Laura Myers, who oversees college access and near-peer mentoring initiatives at CUNY as the University Assistant Dean of K16 Initiatives explains:

A really important value-add in peer mentorship is the vicarious learning that you can have from someone who looks like you, is from your background, can talk to your mom, can translate the FAFSA into Bengali via text. There is such a special value-add that near-peer mentors can provide that school counselors cannot.

“CARA-trained near-peer advisors are the best bargain in town. They add so much value: They are so skilled; they are our own homegrown talent; they come in with such huge advantages because they know the school. And the students know them.”

–College Counselor, NYC Public High School



While powerful, this shared identity alone is not enough to substantially change students' postsecondary outcomes. In order to ensure near-peer advisors can effectively support students, there also needs to be an investment of significant resources to provide comprehensive training. Near-peer advisors need the detailed knowledge and nuanced skills required to effectively support students, and their role needs to be embedded in high school counseling offices or college departments dedicated to student advising and support. Under these circumstances, working 10 hours a week or more, these near-peer advisors can meaningfully expand capacity through one-on-one support, workshops, and events.

A college counselor at one CARA partner high school explained,

CARA-trained near-peer advisors are the best bargain in town. They add so much value: They are so skilled; they are our own homegrown talent; they come in with such huge advantages because they know the school. And the students know them.

And CARA Co-Directors argued in a 2020 editorial for **The Hechinger Report**:

At the schools where these near-peer advisors work, they are adding desperately needed guidance capacity. But they are also doing something else: They are bringing critical support and tools for first-generation students from under-resourced communities that adults cannot provide. This is because near-peer advisors serve as credible messengers, rooted in multiple ways in the communities they are serving.

This expanded capacity shifts student outcomes. CARA's own research shows a 19 percentage point increase in postsecondary enrollment at schools engaged in year-round peer-to-peer access programs and an 11 percentage point increase in college retention at campuses engaged in our retention program. Best practice peer-to-peer programs also have a positive impact on near-peer advisors themselves. The navigational strategies, self-advocacy skills, and sense of belonging they develop greatly support their attainment of a college degree.¹⁹ CARA near-peer advisors who were undergraduates at CUNY have been almost twice as likely to persist through college than comparison groups, and those who attended community college completed their associate degree 1.5 years sooner.²⁰

Impact 2: Providing Career Development for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Near-Peer Advisors Get Valuable Internship Experience



“As a near-peer advisor everything started coming together and I realized, this is what I want to do. This is where I want to stay. I want to keep helping students. That’s where my love got discovered.” –Luz, former near-peer advisor

Research shows how important internship and work-based learning experiences are for students, especially for 17-to-24-year-olds who are uniquely motivated to situate job experiences within a personal framework of interests and strengths, and to take advantage of networks of trusted adults.²¹ Eighty percent of students who engage in internships report that these experiences shape their career plans, helping them to feel more confident and knowledgeable about career opportunities.²² Internships are also a preferred recruitment strategy for employers, in lieu of events such as career fairs or campus visits.²³ College graduates who have participated in paid internships are three times more likely to secure a job and, on average, earn higher salaries one-year postgraduation than students who do not.²⁴

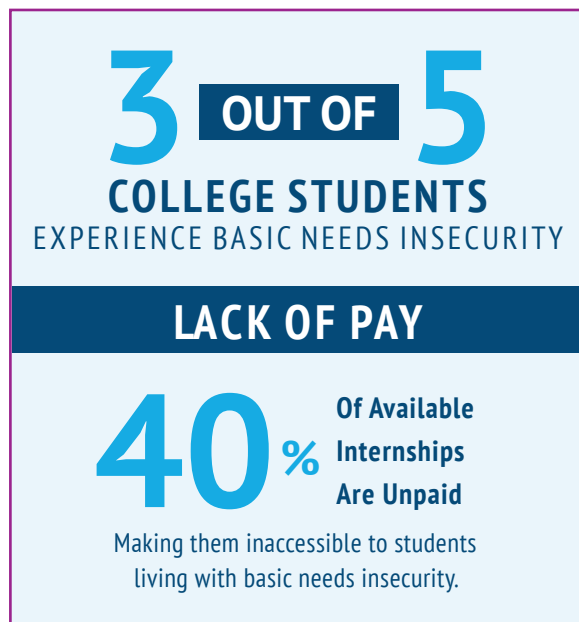
Unfortunately, access to internships is profoundly inequitable: While 70% of first-year college students expect to have

internships while in college, fewer than half of seniors report having had one.²⁵ Students from under-resourced backgrounds are even less likely than high- and middle-income students to have access²⁶; in NYC, for example, where over 70% of students at CUNY come from households earning less than \$40,000/year, only 10% participate in paid internships and 7% in unpaid ones.²⁷

Educational leaders across the country are increasingly speaking up about the need to address this inequity. In NYC, CUNY Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez has named himself “the patron saint of paid internships for [CUNY] students,” and is actively working to increase opportunities for CUNY students.²⁸ Similarly, Chancellor of NYC Public Schools David Banks has committed the K-12 system to “providing each student with a clear pathway to, and preparation for, a rewarding career and long-term economic security” through “access to real world work experience, important professional skills, a strong college and career plans.”²⁹ At a national level, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, when launching the federal Raise the Bar: Unlocking Career Success initiative, argued, “It’s time we bridge the divide between our K-12 systems and our college, career, and industry preparation programs.... An education system reimagined

“An education system reimagined for the 21st century engages youth of all ages in the power of career-connected learning.”

–Miguel Cardona, U.S. Secretary of Education



for the 21st century engages youth of all ages in the power of career-connected learning.”³⁰ These are welcome goals, but ones that require significant resources and infrastructure development to make access to internships readily available and equitable.

Key Barriers to Internship Access

Best practice peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs are an established source of work-based learning experiences that address the following key barriers to internships for students from low-income backgrounds:

Lack of pay

Forty percent of available internships are unpaid, making them entirely inaccessible to students living with basic needs insecurity.³¹ Within the realm of paid internships, low-income students are underrepresented in large part because these positions seldom offer competitive pay, sufficient hours, and yearlong employment.³²

Best practice programs provide pay aligned to or above minimum wage. CARA-trained near-peer advisors are paid for at least 10 hours a week, at a rate above minimum wage, and the model guarantees yearlong employment.

Almost every former and current near-peer advisor we interviewed explained that they were first interested in the role because they needed a paid job. One remarked, “Being able to work as a near-peer advisor is a big relief because I don’t have to worry as much about how I’m going to pay for food and rent. And it’s a stable job—it’s not something I do for a couple of months and then it’s over.”

Several also noted that, because the role was connected to an educational institution they were, or had been, a part of, it supported them to prioritize their studies and offered the flexibility they needed as full-time students.

Lack of connections to and knowledge of internships

Students from low-income backgrounds typically have fewer connections to internships than their middle- and upper-income peers, and limited advising through which to learn about them at their colleges.³³

“Being able to work as a near-peer advisor is a big relief because I don’t have to worry as much about how I’m going to pay for food and rent. And it’s a stable job—it’s not something I do for a couple of months and then it’s over.”

–Current near-peer advisor

Best practice peer-to-peer advising programs are based within students' own communities, within institutions where they have established networks. Many of the former near-peer advisors we spoke with heard about the job through a staff member from their alma mater high school or college. For example, Chris ran into his former college counselor on the street, told her he was looking for work, and she shared that she was looking for a near-peer advisor to work in the college office; Carmen was talking to an academic advisor in the support program she was a part of at her community college about needing to earn money and he suggested she apply to be an on-campus near-peer advisor.

Inadequate availability of high-quality internships

There are simply not enough opportunities that provide pay and explicit skill development, strong supervision, and purposeful reflection.³⁴

Best practice peer-to-peer advising programs provide comprehensive training in a range of professional and counseling specific skills. As previously noted, CARA's were developed in consultation with counseling and advising experts, and guided by the National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE) standards.

CARA near-peer advisors receive consistent supervision, support, and feedback from a professional counselor or advisor who meets with them regularly to reflect on their work, troubleshoot challenges, provide targeted performance feedback, and complete a comprehensive evaluation process. Starling

reflected on how his supervisor helped him develop independence, describing her as "an excellent coach" who would "always check in on us, always teach us something, always be there" but who was never "hand-holding."

Changing the Odds of Career Success

Throughout our interviews, former near-peer advisors recounted how influential their role as a near-peer was to the way they think about their professional pathway.

Melissa explained that when she began college she had done little to no career exploration. Her mother wanted her to be a lawyer, and so she checked off "criminal justice" as her intended major and registered for courses with this focus. As she moved through her college coursework, she found herself questioning, "Is criminal justice what I want to do? Is it my passion?" Working as a near-peer advisor helped her find an answer.

Seeing the outcome of that work, I decided that is what I wanted to do. I wanted to help people not who get in trouble with the law, but people who are struggling emotionally.

After completing her BA, Melissa enrolled in a master's program and now works as a mental health counselor.

"Because of being a near-peer advisor, the thing that I see is that college is not a place where you get a degree. It's actually a place where you go to make networks for the dream that you are going to achieve." –Carlos, former near-peer advisor

Kendra emphasized the importance of being in a community where they could talk to a range of adult professionals.

Being at [my alma mater high school], the community definitely helped with figuring out my path. I had conversations with my supervisor; at some point I considered being a social worker and then I talked to the social worker at the school. Just having these conversations with that community helped a lot with recognizing my strengths.

Between working directly with students and networking with adults at their school, Kendra was able to construct a future career vision. They are currently working as a College Access Coordinator at a community-based organization.

Importantly, because CARA's near-peer advisor job is a minimum of a year (with some near-peer advisors working in the role for three or four years), the position offers young people the chance to evolve and continually develop new skills. Carmen, now a full-time advisor at a community college, explained:

First ... it was learning how to navigate my feelings, my posture, my body language, my form of communicating with students. Later on it was conducting events. I moved into my fourth year and it was Excel tracking and data reporting.

All of the former near-peer advisors we interviewed emphasized how skills they developed in the role helped them to succeed professionally, regardless of the career they pursued. Rishana, now a mortgage broker in the real estate field, explained:

What you learn as a near-peer advisor, you can take anywhere. The discipline. The work ethic. The way you speak to people, the way you approach someone ... you learn to be professional.

The near-peer advisor role provides students who typically have limited access to career-related internships an opportunity to explore a range of possible careers, a space to try out specific roles, and mentors who can guide them through the challenges of defining their career pathway. Designing the role as a multiyear experience affords near-peer advisors the chance to construct an informed vision for their professional future. For young people who must work while they attend college, the fact that these positions are paid allows them to work in jobs that propel their careers, in positive and affirming ways, while also helping them cover costs while in college.

“You learn how to advocate for yourself and others, how it’s important to use your voice, a lot of the organizational skills because you are dealing with hundreds of kids, keeping track of them, making sure they’re on the right path.” –Chris, former near-peer advisor

Impact 3: Creating a Diverse Talent Pipeline for Counseling and Advising Fields

Near-Peer Advisors Address Staffing Gaps



“I think broadly about the impact on the system; we are growing all of these young people, professionally, who are engaged in education and engaged in community. They are going on and staying connected to and impacting the system, as college counselors, school counselors, data analysts for the Department of Education or CUNY. That is really exciting.”

–Laura Myers, University Assistant Dean of K16 Initiatives at CUNY

As peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs developed in NYC over the last 15 years, both CARA and our colleagues in the field observed that many near-peer advisors moved into professional counseling or advising positions when they graduated from college.³⁵ When we reached out to a group of former near-peer advisors to interview them about their career trajectories, 15 of the 20 (all of whom identify as students of color from under-resourced backgrounds) were working within counseling or education fields (see Appendix for information about the interview participants).

In our current economy, counseling jobs are both available and relatively well paid. Employment growth within the counseling field outpaces the national average (10% vs. 5%), and in cities, projected growth can be even higher (for example, 21% in NYC).³⁶ Counseling positions offer starting salaries higher than many other professions³⁷ and often have

steady pay increases over time: with 8-10 years experience and a master’s degree, counseling jobs within NYC Public Schools and CUNY pay over \$100,000.

At the same time, this high-need field faces several challenges which the talent pipeline produced by peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs helps to address. First, the field is marked by high-turnover rates, which were further exacerbated by the pandemic.³⁸ Second, the counseling field is generally not representative of the demographic makeup of students served in urban areas, having remained 67-70% white for the past 10 years.³⁹ This is especially problematic in light of research showing that when students of color are matched to nonwhite counselors, they have stronger academic outcomes and are more likely to attend college.⁴⁰ Third, there is not adequate and affordable preservice or in-service training for the field.

Having a diverse pool of new counselors and advisors who have already been trained for advising roles addresses all three of these issues. Near-peer advisors, having worked within their own communities over several years, graduate from college ready to move into full-time professional roles in postsecondary access and success fields.

Near-peer advisors, having worked within their own communities over several years, graduate from college ready to move into full-time professional roles in postsecondary access and success fields.

Josh Steckel, Senior Director of College and Career Advising at NYC Public Schools, describes the value-add to NYC's system as a whole:

There is no existing infrastructure to evaluate and mentor staff in postsecondary planning roles the way there is for teachers. There's so much heavy lifting to do to change what in-service and pre-service training looks like in these areas. If we have a pool of students who knows what it is to be a NYC public school student and know what it is to work with them in this area, we are accelerating the solution to the training gap we need to fill to ensure that the people we are counting on to deliver the services have the skills and competencies they need to deliver high quality support.

Acquiring the Necessary Skills and Knowledge

Near-peer advisors participating in best practice programs acquire both the general counseling skills and the very specific knowledge of the landscape that are critical to supporting students to navigate postsecondary pathways.

Their development begins with professional and comprehensive training. For example, CARA ensures near-peer advisors master the details of everything from the financial aid process (completing the FAFSA, analyzing financial aid packages, and maintaining federal and state funding), to the landscape of different college systems, to navigating college portals, to the campus resources available to students. Near-peer advisors practice roleplaying scenarios with students: what to do when a high school senior is avoiding completing a college application because they are undocumented, how to handle a college freshman who is considering dropping out because they are struggling in their classes, how to engage a student who doesn't respond to emails and text

messages. They learn how to listen, to probe for more information, to guide without judging, to vary messaging depending on the audiences.⁴¹ The Director of Advising at one college noted,

The training that the near-peer advisors get... they may actually have more training than some of the new advisors we are hiring.

The former near-peer advisors we spoke to described how training was essential to being prepared for the job at hand and for full-time work upon graduation. Ruth explained arriving at her first day of training and wondering what she had gotten herself into, doubting she could do it. Over the course of training, she learned “everything about college” and was able to excel at the job. Now a full-time school staff member, Ruth attends conferences with professionals from around the city and is particularly proud to find herself “sometimes knowing more things than [professional counselors] because of all of the training I did as a near-peer advisor.”

Carlos, a near-peer advisor who worked in his college's undergraduate advising office, explained that when he first began, his supervisor encouraged him to come to her with any questions he had. With time, he was proud to share, “It actually got to the level where the questions weren't coming from me, but to me.” Carlos' campus, eager to hold onto this expertise, hired him full time once he graduated.

“The training that the near-peer advisors get ... they may actually have more training than some of the new advisors we are hiring.”

– Director of Advising, CUNY Campus

Near-peer advisors' skill development extends beyond training. Working 10 hours a week over the course of a year, they have ample opportunity to apply their learnings. Jharol, another near-peer advisor, explained,

I would learn things during training and then I would try it out with one student and see how it worked. If it worked perfectly, I would do it with more students.

Working under the direct supervision of a professional counselor or advisor, near-peer advisors also get critical on-the-job feedback. Darlene noted,

My supervisor sat me down and was like, 'Okay, let's go over today. I've noticed some things and this is how it looks and this is how I don't want you to be perceived and this is where you can work on this.' And that shifted how I interacted with people.

Many former near-peer advisors shared that the skills required of the role did not come easily to them. Amina recounted how she had been "very shy and nervous" before working as a near-peer advisor. Christi, a native Spanish speaker, began working after having only been in the United States for a few years, and communicating with others was not just a challenge, it was one of her biggest fears. Training helped her to get over the first hurdle, and then, with the support of her supervisor, she became comfortable presenting in a range of settings.

The training, application of skills, and on-the-job feedback CARA near-peer advisors receive combine to provide the gold standard internship experience. Those who move into full-time roles in the field are exceptionally prepared for their jobs. Maggie Pimentel,

Director of Access programming at New Settlement in the Bronx, has hired several former near-peer advisors. She described the impact on her programming:

When I hire a former near-peer advisor straight out of college it's like hiring someone older with two to three years of experience; they bring so much added value even if they are younger and this is their first full-time job. For us, as a CBO, and for the schools we partner with, it creates an easier pipeline to transition counselors into the role and have them start to work with students.

Importantly, this pipeline of prepared counselors is representative of the populations served by the institutions near-peer advisors later join as full-time staff members. Several who went into the field explained that working with other students of color from low-income backgrounds was both a driving force in their decision to become a counselor and important to doing their job effectively. Mariana explained:

The students we serve come from families that are very much like mine. My parents never went to college; they were not familiar at all with the process.... Now I speak to a lot of the parents and I really take my time with them because I remember my parents; they did not understand anything about college. So really breaking things down, having someone they can trust and really feel supported by, that's really important to me.

The fact that near-peer advisors moving into counseling roles both understand the field they're entering and bring a deep personal commitment to it is likely to lead to greater longevity in the role.



Reaping the Triple Impact: Policy Recommendations

Scaling Peer-to-Peer Advising Models

“There is, right in front of our eyes, an opportunity. The volume of this pipeline, this particular talent pool in this particular space, is amazing.”

–Josh Steckel, Senior Director of College and Career Advising at NYC Public Schools

Scaling peer-to-peer advising models can profoundly impact the field of college access and success, expanding both postsecondary planning support and work-based professional learning opportunities to students from low-income backgrounds. NYC Public Schools Senior Director of College and Career Advising Josh Steckel argues,

Research shows how impactful advisors are who look like their students and are from the same community as them. The idea of a pipeline for NYC public school alumni to work specifically within the field of counseling in NYC public schools and nonprofits, in student affairs and student services within higher education, the institutional value proposition of that is so undersold and underestimated.

“The learning curve is flatter and former near-peer advisors come ready to dive right in. They come in with expertise on postsecondary access; they come in with facilitation skills, counseling skills.”

–Maggie Pimentel, Director of Access programming at New Settlement

PAID INTERNSHIPS

10% Of Education Majors Participate In Paid Internships.

In comparison to participation by **56% of Engineering Majors & 39% of Business Majors**

The question is, how can we seize upon this opportunity and make it a systemic solution to issues of equity of postsecondary opportunity?

While well-resourced industries have ample opportunities to create pathways for students into their fields through paid internships—56% of engineering majors and 39% of business majors participate in them—only 10% of education majors do.⁴² Currently the field **does not have the resources to scale the pipeline.** This is a missed opportunity: K-16 systems offer a steady flow of well-paid job opportunities that benefit the long-term economic status of the students who engage in them and provide public educational institutions with a well-trained candidate pool who reflect the students served by those systems.

Recommendations

In order to realize the value of this model, we believe it is critical for city, state, and federal government, as well as private philanthropy to take up the following recommendations:

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1
Significantly expand peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs that are aligned to best practices.
- 2
Ensure adequate, reliable, and usable funding to high schools, colleges, and community-based organizations to sustain the near-peer advisor role.
- 3
Formalize a career pipeline for near-peer advisors by offering credit and/or financial benefits.

1 **Expand peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs**

Significantly expand peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs that are aligned to best practices.⁴³ CARA and a range of other organizations in New York City and around the country have already built the models to do this work well. As noted at the beginning of this report, best practice programs must include:

- > **Comprehensive training** for near-peer advisors delivered by experts.
- > **Competitive pay and stable employment** for near-peer advisors with rates above state minimum wage and opportunity for yearlong work.
- > **Strong site-based supervision and evaluation** from an expert in the field.
- > **Structures that ensure that peer advisors' work is proactive, relational, and ongoing** throughout an educational transition process.
- > **Near-peer advisors working within their own communities**, i.e., at the high schools, colleges, and community-based settings that they themselves do or did attend, in order to act as role models and provide culturally relevant counseling.

2 Ensure funding to high schools, colleges, & CBOs for the near-peer advisor role

Ensure adequate, reliable, and usable funding to high schools, colleges, and community-based organizations to sustain the near-peer advisor role. This includes funding for training and supervision of near-peer advisors, and critically, for their pay.

In order for best practice programs to grow and endure over time, city, state, and federal governments need to allocate near-peer advisor pay as a line item in high school and college campus budgets. They can do this through:

- > **Earmarking guidance and student support funds for near-peer advisor pay.**
- > **Restructuring existing sources of student pay so they can be leveraged for this role.**
- > **Ensuring public funding at both the local and national levels dedicated to student pay is well aligned to best practice peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs.** For example, in NYC, there is dedicated funding for student employment for over 100,000 high school and college students,⁴⁴ but the programs are either summer only or focus on industries other than counseling.⁴⁵

At the federal level, Federal Work Study is available to some college students, but the way that it is currently structured limits its use for near-peer advisor pay. The current allocation formula: results in disproportionate funding to institutions that enroll small shares of low-income students;⁴⁶ does not allow for yearlong employment; does not easily allow students to work in off-campus positions, making high school and community-based organization placements a challenge. There are important efforts underway to restructure Federal Work Study that, if realized, would be a partial solution to the problem.⁴⁷

In addition to creating more reliable, adequate, and usable public funding, **there will continue to be a key role for private philanthropy.** While fields such as technology and finance have the capacity to fully fund students' on-ramps to those industries, counseling and advising fields need the support of private funding sources to create and sustain near-peer advisors' work-based learning experiences.

In order for best practice programs to grow and endure over time, city, state, and federal governments need to allocate near-peer advisor pay as a line item in high school and college campus budgets.

3 Formalize a career pipeline for near-peer advisors with credit and/or financial benefits

Universities and employers should work with best practice peer-to-peer advising programs to incentivize near-peer advisors to move into the counseling field.

Counseling pathways are currently built around BA and MA programs that are often cost-prohibitive to many first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds. Formalizing counseling pathways that capitalize on near-peer programs will help to create a robust pool of candidates whose expertise will help to shape the field and better serve students.

To do this, near-peer advisors who have been trained by best practice postsecondary advising programs could be offered one or more of the following:

- > **Priority hiring** for related positions in public high schools, public colleges, and community-based organizations;
- > **A two-year waiver** from a master's requirement in counseling;
- > **Course credit or tuition remission** toward a BA, MA, and combined BA/MA programs;
- > **A guaranteed increased salary step** for an entry level job in the field.

There are existing programs that offer starting points for this. In NYC, CUNY's College and Career Advising Fellows employs college graduates who served as near-peer advisors in a paid position within a NYC high school, and provides tuition benefits to fellows who stay for a second year. On the national front, College Advising Corps offers college graduates a pathway to counseling professionals; while it does not target former near-peer advisors, or exclusively place advisors in their alma mater high schools, it does offer an important launching pad for students interested in counseling pathways.

While fields such as technology and finance have the capacity to fully fund students' on-ramps to those industries, counseling and advising fields need the support of private funding sources to create and sustain near-peer advisors' work-based learning experiences.



Conclusion

“Being a near-peer advisor helped me navigate the system not only for myself, but also for my family... I still use the skills I learned to help my community apply to college.”

- Jazmin, former near-peer advisor

It is not easy for any student to navigate through a college and career pathway. It is a complicated journey marked by hard-to-answer questions, bureaucratic obstacles, and challenging decisions. Students from middle- and upper-income backgrounds typically have the resources needed to guide them along this bumpy road, while students from under-resourced backgrounds—whose road is bumpier—typically do not. All students need strong guidance and meaningful career exploration and development opportunities along the way, and high schools, colleges, and CBOs need the staff to make this happen.

Best practice peer-to-peer postsecondary advising programs address each of these needs. By their nature, these programs create positive opportunities for the students that they serve, for the young people who take part in them as near-peer advisors, and for the larger public education systems they exist within. To close equity gaps, increase student retention and success, and create the pathways to satisfying and family-sustaining careers for first-generation students, we must scale this triple-impact model.

Near-peer advisors serve as credible messengers, rooted in multiple ways in the communities they are serving.



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Please email lori.chajet@caranyc.org with any questions or to share your adaptations of this material.

About CARA

CARA's mission is to ensure that first-generation college students, low-income students, and students of color have the knowledge and support necessary to enroll in and persist through postsecondary education. CARA works with high schools, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions to move access and success guidance from an 'enrichment for some' to an 'entitlement for all' model, and conducts applied research with practitioners and young people to advocate for more equitable postsecondary pathways.

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Appendix: Interview Participants

We conducted 20 interviews with former near-peer advisors, trained by CARA between 2017 and 2022, to learn how their training and work-based experiences shaped their career development, professional skills, and career pathways. We recruited participants from rosters of former peer advisors who had completed a college degree (associate or bachelor's), and were working full-time when the interview was conducted.

Education & Counseling Careers	
ROLE	Number (% of Sample)
College Counselor, NYC Public HS, or CBO	5 (25%)
Program Manager, Education Organization	4 (20%)
Program Manager, NYC Public HS	3 (15%)
Advisor, Community College	2 (10%)
Mental Health Counselor, Private Practice	1 (5%)

Other Professions	
ROLE	Number (% of Sample)
Senior Analyst, Compliance Firm	1 (5%)
Graphic Designer, Education Organization	1 (5%)
Loan Officer, Mortgage Company	1 (5%)
Development Assistant, CBO	1 (5%)
Case Officer, Insurance Company	1 (5%)

Endnotes

- 1 Interview participants' real names and preferred gender pronouns are used throughout the report with consent, and otherwise have been changed.
- 2 Throughout this piece we use the terms work-based learning and internship interchangeably.
- 3 We define first-generation college students as those whose parents, guardians, or primary caregivers' highest earned degree is a high school diploma.
- 4 This report uses the term "peer-to-peer" to refer to both peer-to-peer and near-peer models; it uses the term "near-peer advisor" to refer to college students who advise peers or near-peers through the postsecondary process. Examples of titles for near-peer advisor used across different programs and organizations include Peer Leader, Bridge Coach, Peer Coach, Peer Mentor, and Student Ambassador.
- 5 The following NYC-based organizations have peer-to-peer postsecondary access and persistence programs: Asian Americans for Equality, College Access: Research & Action (CARA), Commonpoint Queens, CUNY K-16 (College & Career Bridge for All), CUNY's Office of Student Affairs (College Connect), Cypress Hills LDC, Good Shepherd Services, East Side House Settlement, Hudson Guild, Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, Make the Road NY, New Settlement, Student Leadership Network, New Visions for Public Schools, and Urban Assembly. Matriculate and Peer Forward are examples of national organizations working within and/or outside of NYC. Nationally, there are organizations working to position college graduates to support students to and/or through college, such as College Advising Corps, College Possible, and iMentor; while valuable programs, they do not fit into the triple-impact argument made in this report. Please note: These are not comprehensive lists, as peer-to-peer programs have proliferated across the country.
- 6 While CARA's programs are based in NYC, we have also worked nationally to adapt our model in Georgia, Hawai'i, Tacoma, WA, and Newark, NJ.
- 7 The former near-peer advisors we interviewed participated in the program when they were college students; some had also been near-peer advisors when they were in high school and supporting fellow 11th and 12th graders.
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