
Construction and Practice of Peer Psychological Support System in Universities under the Mode of “Three-Stage Empowerment”

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of dual challenges in higher education quality development and accelerated social transformation, the rapidly changing external environment has intensified psychological distress among college students. From academic GPA competition to career selection pressures, these real-world challenges have made mental health issues increasingly prominent. As professional psychological service resources face significant challenges, peer psychological support has become a vital supplementary force. However, current peer support programs in some universities suffer from issues such as insufficient team professionalism, lack of practical skill application scenarios, and inadequate quality control mechanisms. This paper proposes a “Three-Stage Empowerment” model, which involves three progressive phases—basic empowerment, practical empowerment, and feedback empowerment—to establish a professional, implementable, and optimized peer psychological support system, providing practical references for university mental health initiatives.

Keywords: three-stage empowerment; peer psychological support; mental health in higher education

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1. Introduction

In the current era of connotative development in higher education, multiple factors such as academic competition, interpersonal adaptation, and employment pressure have intertwined, making mental health issues among college students a critical bottleneck constraining their comprehensive development. Although negative indicators of mental health among university students have shown a continuous downward trend in recent years, slight declines in self-esteem, goal orientation, and optimism within psychological well-being indicate that students’ mental health needs have extended from “crisis intervention” to “positive development”^[1]. Peer psychological support, with its core advantages of having service providers and recipients of similar age and value systems, utilizes psychological knowledge and communication skills to offer emotional support, problem guidance, and resource connections. This psychological service model, characterized by its proximity to students, ease of communication, and rapid response, has become an important supplement to professional psychological services. It effectively breaks down the “stigmatization” barriers of professional counseling and plays an irreplaceable role in emotional guidance, information dissemination, and crisis early warning^[2].

Practical experience demonstrates that a well-established peer support system can extend psychological services to the smallest units of student organizations such as classes and dormitories, enabling early detection and intervention

of psychological issues^[3]. However, in reality, cases of ineffective peer support due to insufficient professional training and ambiguous boundary awareness among facilitators frequently occur. For instance, “forced encouragement” of individuals with depressive symptoms may exacerbate their psychological burden. Students’ core concerns regarding peer psychological support services focus on “insufficient professional competence of facilitators” and “inability to resolve complex psychological distress”^[4]. These phenomena profoundly reveal three major bottlenecks prevalent in traditional peer support work: lack of team professionalism, difficulty in effectively translating skills, and absence of quality control mechanisms, which severely constrain the fulfillment of its intended functions. Therefore, establishing a scientific, systematic, and continuously optimized empowerment system to provide comprehensive support for peer facilitators throughout their entire process—from selection and training to practical application and reflective growth—has become an urgent requirement for improving the quality of peer psychological support services in higher education institutions.

2. Analysis of the current status and issues in peer psychological support work in higher education institutions

2.1. Development foundation: peer support has formed a scalable development trend

Currently, Chinese universities have established a peer support framework led by university-level mental health education centers, supported by colleges and departments, and anchored by class psychological representatives. This structure has developed diversified service models including individual counseling, group activities, and mental health awareness campaigns. Peer support initiatives have evolved from fragmented volunteer efforts into a systematic framework. In terms of service effectiveness, innovative practices such as the “four-level early warning network” and “peer instructor teams” have demonstrated significant achievements in crisis prevention and knowledge dissemination, reducing the incidence of crisis events^[5,6].

Regarding resource allocation, universities generally incorporate peer support into their mental health education budgets, enhancing team capabilities through regular training and mentorship programs. Additionally, the proportion of students utilizing peer psychological support has increased, making it one of the primary channels for mental health assistance. This indicates that peer support has transitioned from peripheral student activities to a systematic educational component, with its scaled development providing a solid practical foundation for constructing the “three-stage empowerment” model.

2.2. Existing outstanding problems: key factors restricting the improvement of peer supporter efficiency

The construction of the peer support team prioritizes selection over training, with insufficient professionalism emerging as the core weakness. Although peer supporter have been widely recruited by universities, their training systems exhibit three critical flaws: fragmented content dominated by short lectures, lacking systematic integration of “psychological knowledge—helping skills—professional ethics”; poor relevance, with courses failing to account for students’ psychological characteristics across different academic years and majors; absence of evaluation, lacking scientific standards for assessing counselors’ ongoing competency^[7]. These shortcomings result in counselors’ limited response strategies when addressing common issues like academic procrastination and interpersonal conflicts, and may even pose a risk of secondary victimization due to unclear professional boundaries.

The practical component “emphasizes form over substance,” with skill application lacks practical scenarios. Traditional peer support predominantly focuses on superficial services like mental health awareness campaigns and basic emotional comfort, failing to address complex psychological issues such as “conflicts in the family of origin” or “employment anxiety accompanied by depressive symptoms”^[8]. Practitioners often face the dilemma of “daring not to speak, unable to articulate,” compounded by the absence of timely, professional case supervision. This leads to a vicious cycle of “practice—mistakes—confusion,” hindering the effective transition from theoretical understanding to practical competence^[9].

Quality control prioritizes outcomes over processes, with gaps in feedback optimization mechanisms. Current

evaluations of peer support programs predominantly focus on outcome metrics like service engagements and event frequency, lacking routine monitoring and refined management of service quality. The feedback chain reveals two critical shortcomings: no regular evaluation channels for beneficiaries, and neglect of peer facilitators' self-reflection and growth needs^[8]. Professional instructors' guidance resources are disproportionately allocated to crisis management, while systemic analysis and solution development for recurring issues in daily support remain inadequate. This "implementation-only, feedback-deficient, and optimization-challenged" operational model impedes the peer support system's capacity for self-renewal and sustainable development.

3. Construction and practice of the "three-stage empowerment" model

The "Three-Stage Empowerment" model systematically addresses these challenges through three interconnected and progressively ascending phases: foundational empowerment, practical empowerment, and feedback empowerment, ultimately establishing a comprehensive, closed-loop peer psychological support system.

3.1. Basic empowerment: building a professional peer support team

Basic empowerment serves as the cornerstone of the peer psychological support system. Its core objective is to cultivate a team of peer supporters who possess professional competence, master fundamental skills, and adhere to ethical standards through scientific selection mechanisms and systematic training programs, thereby laying a solid foundation for subsequent practical work.

3.1.1. Establish a multidimensional and precise selection mechanism.

As a bridge connecting students with professional psychological services, peer supporters' personal qualities directly determine the quality and safety of counseling work. To this end, the selection process can adopt a "multidimensional indicators + three-step procedure" precision screening model to ensure the selection of candidates with potential. In setting selection criteria, it breaks through the traditional binary evaluation logic of "qualified and unqualified," constructing a three-dimensional indicator system that encompasses psychological literacy, professional ability, and development capacity. Each category is further divided into three tiers: "Basic Items," "Advanced Items," and "Excellence Items," forming a quantifiable and assessable multidimensional evaluation system (as shown in **Table 1**). The selection process adopts a three-step progressive method: "voluntary application—psychological assessment—structured interview." Particularly, the interview phase incorporates a "simulated peer counseling" scenario to directly evaluate candidates' listening skills, empathy levels, and preliminary intervention strategies, ultimately selecting peer supporters' with comprehensive competencies.

Table 1. Grading criteria for peer psychological supporter selection

Primary Dimension	secondary indicator	Tertiary Criteria
Psychological Literacy	Emotional Stability	<p>Basic: Maintains composure when facing the help-seeker's negative emotions, demonstrating no irritability or avoidance behaviors.</p> <p>Advanced: Conveys acceptance through non-verbal cues and possesses strategies to regulate the help-seeker's emotional fluctuations.</p> <p>Excellence: Proactively identifies the emotional threshold of the help-seeker and proposes effective emotional buffer solutions.</p>
	Empathy	<p>Basic: Accurately summarizes the help-seeker's core concerns.</p> <p>Advanced: Identifies the potential emotions and deep needs of the help-seeker.</p> <p>Excellence: Establishes emotional connections without shifting topics, always focusing on the feelings and needs of the help-seeker.</p>
	Sense of Responsibility	<p>Basic: Adheres to the assistance schedule and strictly maintains confidentiality of the seeker's information.</p> <p>Advanced: When crisis signals are detected, records them promptly and notifies professional teachers to activate the early warning system.</p> <p>Excellence: Establishes personalized records before and after assistance and incorporates them into dynamic monitoring.</p>

Table 1 (Continued)

Primary Dimension	secondary indicator	Tertiary Criteria
professional ability	Communication skills	Basic: Language is clear and unambiguous to ensure the help-seeker accurately understands the intent. Advanced: Guides expression with open-ended questions, avoiding interruptions or negation. Excellence: Encourages in-depth expression through non-verbal cues, helping those with disorganized thoughts to clarify their ideas.
	Problem Analysis Ability	Basic: Accurately identifies the core issues from multiple concerns. Advanced: Differentiates problem types and clarifies support boundaries. Excellence: Anticipates trends and prioritizes issues.
	Learning Ability	Basic: Masters basic theories such as psychological crisis identification and confidentiality principles within the specified time. Advanced: Applies techniques such as the “active listening method” to simulated scenarios and achieves the desired results. Excellence: Tailors strategies to the help-seeker’s characteristics to achieve personalized skill transfer.
development capacity	Self-Reflection	Basic: Able to objectively describe the general process of assistance. Advanced: Able to identify personal strengths and weaknesses in assistance. Excellence: Able to develop specific and feasible personal capacity-building plans based on reflection.
	Teamwork Ability	Basic: Actively participates in team activities and shares basic information. Advanced: Provides constructive feedback and supports peers in team discussions. Excellence: Capable of proactively initiating or organizing effective team learning and case studies.

3.1.2. Implement a “knowledge-skill-ethics” trinity training system.

Following the logic of “cognitive foundation first, skill development next, and ethical safeguards last,” we establish a systematic training curriculum. At the professional cognition level, we build a cognitive framework centered on “psychological knowledge principles, group characteristics, and crisis identification,” helping peer supporters develop a scientific understanding of psychological issues, eliminate cognitive biases, and master criteria for psychological crisis assessment. At the practical skills level, we focus on the core process of “listening-comforting-guiding-referral,” designing training programs with the goal of being “implementable and replicable” to help peer supporters acquire key support skills, avoid practical pitfalls, and achieve the transition from “understanding theory” to “applying knowledge.” At the ethical standards level, we clarify rules around “boundary definition, privacy protection, and crisis management,” delineate the boundaries between facilitation and professional counseling, and standardize information confidentiality and crisis response procedures.

3.2. Practice empowerment: the core link of competency transformation from “qualified” to “excellent”

Practice empowerment as the core of the “three-stage empowerment” model, addresses the key pain points of “difficulty in skill implementation and lack of practical experience.” Through tiered practical scenarios and diversified supervisory support, it peer supporters achieve the critical leap from “knowledge” to “action,” realizing progressive growth “qualified” to “excellent.”

3.2.1. Establish a “three-level practice scenario” system to achieve tiered competency enhancement.

To progressively hone the practical skills of support providers, a three-tiered scenario system— “Basic Practice—Advanced Practice—Specialized Practice” —is implemented during the empowerment phase, ensuring step-by-step progression and deepening. At the basic practice level, the core scenario revolves around “daily reception at campus psychological centers,” solidifying service foundations. Support providers are scheduled for regular duty shifts, primarily handling simple needs such as “mild emotional counseling,” “psychological knowledge dissemination,” and “resource

information consultation,” thereby cultivating their basic service awareness and routine problem-solving abilities. At the advanced level, focus is placed on typical psychological challenges like “academic anxiety, interpersonal conflicts, and adaptation difficulties.” Through “proactive invitation and targeted matching,” support providers are assigned corresponding cases for weeks-long one-on-one peer counseling sessions, enhancing their ability to address complex issues. At the specialized practice level, tackling challenging tasks such as “psychological crisis intervention” and “support for special groups,” support providers participate in specialized initiatives including “campus psychological crisis drills,” “adaptation assistance programs for freshmen,” and “psychological support plans for graduate employment.” These activities strengthen their capabilities in specific scenarios and address skill gaps.

3.2.2. Establish a “multi-party collaborative supervision” mechanism to ensure practice quality and safety.

To ensure standardized practice processes and effective support outcomes, a multi-party collaborative supervision mechanism integrating professional supervision, peer supervision, and self-supervision is established to provide comprehensive growth support: Each supporter is assigned a dedicated supervisory mentor for targeted guidance, addressing specific issues and skill gaps during the support process to mitigate service risks. Supporters are grouped into teams and regularly hold peer supervision meetings. Members follow structured procedures to provide feedback on each other’s practice cases from dimensions such as “rationality of skill application,” “ethical compliance,” and “improvement suggestions.” This approach broadens support perspectives through perspective-taking and strengthens ethical awareness through mutual supervision. Supporters are required to develop the habit of structured self-reflection by writing supervision logs, completing standardized review forms, and actively organizing their practice experiences to summarize strengths and weaknesses while formulating improvement plans.

3.3. Feedback empowerment: establishing a dynamic optimization loop to address the challenge of quality control deficiencies

Feedback empowerment is a pivotal element in the “three-stage empowerment” model, forming a closed loop for continuous optimization. To address the issue of “inadequate quality control,” a tripartite feedback mechanism is established: “students (beneficiaries) – peers (facilitators) – professional teachers (supervisors).” This framework collects service data from multiple dimensions, identifies existing issues, and formulates improvement strategies. It ensures the baseline quality of peer support services while driving dynamic upgrades in both the team’s capabilities and the service system, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of “practice – feedback – optimization – re-practice.”

As direct participants in peer support services, beneficiaries’ feedback serves as the core basis for evaluating service quality and adjusting assistance priorities. By focusing on three key dimensions—satisfaction, need alignment, and practical outcomes—we collect personalized feedback to anchor service effectiveness. Peer supporters’ self-reflection and mutual evaluations form the core pathway for individual skill enhancement and team collaboration optimization. Targeted improvements are achieved by addressing both individual weaknesses and team-wide commonalities. As the supervisory layer, professional instructors act as pivotal hubs integrating feedback from both sides to optimize the service system. Comprehensive analysis should center on three objectives: establishing service quality benchmarks, resolving complex core issues, and empowering the growth of support teams. Through organizing specialized workshops, developing targeted training modules, and streamlining workflows, feedback is transformed into concrete optimization actions. These actions are then implemented in the stages of foundational and practical empowerment, driving the system’s spiral upward progression and dynamic adaptation.

4. Conclusion and outlook

Peer psychological support in higher education institutions serves as a crucial complement to professional mental health services, addressing the diverse psychological needs of college students and enhancing the accessibility of mental health services. The “Three-Stage Empowerment” model proposed in this paper establishes a solid professional foundation

through foundational empowerment, facilitates skill transfer via practical empowerment, and constructs a closed-loop mechanism for continuous quality optimization through feedback empowerment. This effectively resolves prominent issues in traditional peer support, such as insufficient team professionalism, difficulty in skill implementation, and inadequate quality control. The core value of this model lies in its dual objectives: it facilitates the transition of peer supporters from “volunteers” to “professional assistants, thereby providing high-quality talent support for university mental health services; improving the precision and effectiveness of psychological support services through a systematic and implementable empowerment framework, enabling students to receive tangible support through personalized services; and establishing a sustainable optimization mechanism to ensure the system dynamically responds to evolving student psychological needs and emerging challenges in practice.

Looking ahead, the “Three-Stage Empowerment” model still holds vast potential for refinement and expansion. In the context of digital transformation, it can further integrate technologies such as online training platforms, virtual simulation environments, and intelligent feedback analysis systems to enhance both efficiency and reach. At the resource integration level, exploring cross-institutional collaborations and school-community coordination mechanisms can facilitate the sharing of training resources and practical experiences, thereby promoting the standardization and scaling of this model. Through continuous practical exploration and theoretical refinement, the “Three-Stage Empowerment” model is expected to inject greater momentum into university mental health education, safeguard the healthy development of college students, and provide solid support for building a harmonious and stable campus environment.

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