Being a Good PAF

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Abstract: Advising is a critical aspect of the Harvard College first-year experience. When freshmen arrive on campus, they have a robust network of academic advisors, proctors, and resident deans who can support them on their higher education journey. A unique aspect of the first-year advising network is the Peer Advising Fellow, or PAF. PAFs are upperclassmen who undergo a rigorous application process in order to mentor their freshmen counterparts, and their applications are reviewed for key personality traits that make a “good PAF”, such as empathy and ability to reflect. In this paper, I use interviews with Peer Advising Fellows to comprehend what motivates people to become PAFs, what they emphasize when applying to become Peer Advising Fellows, what they have learned from their role, and what *they* believe makes a “good PAF”. In other words, what personal qualities are needed to become a Peer Advising Fellow?

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.

Sienna Campbell

**Introduction**

Starting college can be daunting. First-year students must face homesickness, form new friendships, and navigate extracurriculars, while deciding what they want to pursue as working professionals. Without support, being a college student, particularly at an elite institution, may feel impossible. Harvard College offers a first-year advising network that is designed to ease the transition and make students’ first years unforgettable. While the advising network includes academic advisors, proctors (residential assistants), and resident deans, the most unique players are Peer Advising Fellows (otherwise known as PAFs).

 Peer Advising Fellows are upperclassmen (sophomores, juniors, and seniors) students who advise freshmen on extracurricular, social, and academic matters, as well as whatever challenges students face. They are the only members of the first-year advising network who are students themselves, and only first-year students have access to a Peer Advising Fellow. The Harvard College Advising Programs Office selects a new cohort of PAFs every year, and prospective Peer Advising Fellows must undergo a selective application process where they write about their extracurricular commitments, express their enthusiasm for the position, and even pen an email to a pre-written sample message from a PAFee[[1]](#footnote-0). Upon submitting their applications, they must participate in an interview where they act out scenarios with an Advising Programs Office staff member and a head (or Eagle) PAF. The written application and interview are used to gauge qualities that make a “good PAF”, such as empathy, open-mindedness, resourcefulness, and a capacity for self-reflection. I seek to understand what motivates students to become Peer Advising Fellows, what they perceive their impact is on their PAFees (advisees), and what they believe a “good PAF” is, especially considering their ability to reflect deeply on their own experiences both during and after freshman year. In my paper, I ask: what qualities are needed to become a Peer Advising Fellow?

I will approach my research question using empirical methods. Specifically, I will interview Peer Advising Fellows, asking them what inspired them to be PAFs, what they imagined their impact would be when they entered the position, and what they believe makes them “good PAFs”. Evaluating Peer Advising Fellows in this manner can provide insight into the effectiveness of the program from the perspective of those carrying it out, and it could also inform future PAFs about any challenges or bright spots that they may encounter while advising other students.

**Literature Review**

Peer Advising Fellows are student employees who serve as peer coaches and mentors for first year students. While researchers have yet to investigate Harvard’s PAF program, the existing literature provides helpful context for undergraduate student employment, as well as the benefits of peer advising in universities (ie, increased retention and graduation rates (Bettinger et al 2014). First, Klemenčič (2020) provides an overview of student employment in higher education. Klemenčič defines student employees as undergraduate and graduate students who have part-time, paid positions at their institutions, and such positions can be “high impact” in that they have educational benefits (p. 2). Peer Advising Fellows are student employees (they receive a $1000 stipend for the year and work part-time), but according to the PAF section of the APO website, their responsibilities are much closer to the responsibilities of faculty members and administrators who advise students (“Peer Advising…”, 2021). They are part of the first-year advising network (which includes a proctor and academic adviser) and are effectively student administrators (“Peer Advising…”, 2021). Given this level of responsibility, what does this work mean to Peer Advising Fellows, and what personal qualities contribute to the impact that PAFs have on their PAFees?

 Astin (1999) offers some insight into how personal qualities relate to student involvement. He advances and describes a developmental theory for higher education based upon student involvement. He argues that involvement is an active term, and it is synonymous with attachment, commitment, devotion, and showing enthusiasm for whatever one is involved in. While Astin does not delve deeply into peer advising, each of these terms aligns closely with what the Harvard Advising Programs Office (APO) seeks in its annual cohort of Peer Advising Fellows. Indeed, the PAF application page on the APO website explicitly states that candidates for the PAF position must demonstrate qualities like dedication and commitment during the selection process (“Peer Advising…”, 2021). In this paper, I explore whether current PAFs see these qualities in themselves and deduce that those qualities aid in the overall impact they have on their students.

 Similarly to Astin, Stevenson and Clegg (2011) investigate the relationship between self-perception and student involvement in higher education (particularly through extracurricular activities). They interview 61 students to investigate how extracurricular activities relate to their perceptions of their future selves. Their research interests stem from the “possible selves” framework, which describes “representations of the self in the future, including those that are ideal and hoped for as well as those that one does not wish for” (p. 233). In other words, possible selves are individuals’ conceptions of who they aspire to be and who they are afraid of being. Though their article delves deeply into the relationship between extracurriculars and self-perception, there is room for future research to uncover how mentoring ties into one’s imagined future self. Specifically, how does the PAF role affect PAFs? Is being a PAF aspirational? According to Jessica Bok (2010), many factors influence how students reach their desired futures. How do personality traits play a role in that attainment? Especially in the context of peer coaching, which is designed to focus on personal and professional development (Parker et al 2008), what traits do PAFs see as vital to both their own and their PAFees’ success?

 Eriksen et al (2020) offer some background information on peer coaching. They state, “The peer coaching process facilitates students’ personal and leadership development, as well as supports the development of their ability to effectively coach others” (p. 13). Peer coaching’s reciprocal nature is perhaps another reason that people apply to be Peer Advising Fellows; did their PAFs have such a profound impact on their first-year experience that they would like to pay it forward? Contrariwise, did first-year students not enjoy their Peer Advising Fellows and want to become PAFs in order to change the narrative and be the PAFs they always wanted? Further, did they have other motivations, such as money or flexibility? Without interviewing PAFs, the answers to these questions are unclear. While the PAF program is distinct to the Harvard First-Year Advising Network, it bears investigating because understanding what makes Peer Advising Fellows unique could assist in the development of peer coaching programs at other universities. One such peer coaching program exists at the University of Tennessee, but it differs significantly from the Harvard Peer Advising Fellow program. Diambra’s 2002 study of peer coaching at the University of Tennessee indicates that in order to become peer advisers, students must be “advanced” (completed most of their required courses and one required internship) (p. 57). They must also have a minimum grade point average of 2.0 and a minimum of 2.5 in their major. These advanced students help new students and guide them through course selection, time management, internship opportunities, and any issues they encounter while meeting their program requirements. One key distinction between Harvard and University of Tennessee’s program is that Tennessee’s peer mentors are strictly academically and professionally oriented. Unlike PAFs they do not serve as an intersection among social, academic, extracurricular, and personal needs. That being said, Diambra suggests that the role of the peer adviser may have something to do with the traits candidates must possess in order to get the peer advising position (p. 57), once again demonstrating the need for more investigation into how personality relates to peer coaching.

**Methods**

 My research question is: what are the qualities needed to become a Peer Advising Fellow? My sub topics include: what makes a “good PAF”; what motivates people to become PAFs, and what have been people’s experiences serving as PAFs and how they compare to what those individuals anticipated. Each of these sub topics is a different entry point into understanding PAFs’ perceptions of the application process and their lived experiences being PAFs. I hypothesize that the qualities needed to become a Peer Advising Fellow strongly parallel those that the Advising Programs Office identifies as critical to being a “good PAF”. One of my main variables is personality traits, which I operationalized by using self-reported personality traits. My other variables are the effects that PAFs perceive to have on their advisees as well as the effects that the PAF role has on PAFs. Like personality traits, I operationalized these two variables using self-reporting. I collected data through semi-structured qualitative interviews with current Peer Advising Fellows. I conducted six interviews (see Appendix for transcripts) and recruited interviewees using snowball sampling. In order to avoid potential bias, I did not interview close friends who are current PAFs. I was also aware of my own assumptions throughout the interview process. A potential limitation is that the PAF program is very distinct to Harvard, so that could ultimately affect the external validity of this study. Additionally, the PAFs I interviewed may not be completely representative of the entire PAF cohort. Another limitation is my positionality. I had a Peer Advising Fellow when I was a first-year student and have experienced being an advisee. Therefore, as an ethical consideration, I approached the investigation objectively and was mindful of possible biases related to my personal experience being a PAFee. I also made sure to respect my interviewees’ confidentiality and conducted myself professionally and with integrity during the interviews and the recruitment process. Interviewees did not have to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. I recorded the interviews and performed a content analysis of the transcriptions for common themes, characteristics, or anecdotes that emerged.

**Findings**

 Upon completion of the interviews, I found that my interviewees shared similar motivations for becoming Peer Advising Fellows, but they differed when it came to the experiences that helped them secure the PAF position. I also found that my hypothesis was only partially supported. Though the interviewees described “good PAFs” using several characteristics specified on the Advising Programs Office website (specifically empathy, flexibility, and reliability), they highlighted new qualities that the Advising Programs Office does not explicitly account for, such as “being yourself” and advocacy. In the following subsections, I describe my findings in greater detail, starting with what motivates people to become Peer Advising Fellows. Then, I discuss what current PAFs emphasized in their applications and believe helped them to secure a PAF position, finishing off with the qualities that make a “good PAF” and what PAFs have learned from their role.

*Motivations*

 While some interviewees enjoyed having a PAF as a first-year student, and others did not have a good experience with their assigned Peer Advising Fellow, all the interviewees cited an appreciation for the PAF role as their motivation to apply for the position. First, Thomas, a current senior and one of nine “Eagle PAFs” (students who have served as PAFs for at least one year and now train new PAFs) discussed the complexity of Harvard College as an institution. He noted that there are a lot of systems and resources to navigate, and his PAF “was not even the best'' at navigating those resources. Despite this, he felt empowered to apply for the PAF position, offering the following as his rationale:

There was an opportunity to get more help with finding resources and...feeling a sense of community,...understanding that...a PAF has really two immense powers in their roles, one being that go to person who can help you as a first year student, find anything you need to find, to connect you with people who can help you with any situation for the most part, and then also to...build a sense of community and belonging in the entryway.

In other words, in the absence of support from his own Peer Advising Fellow, Thomas saw an opportunity to help the next generation of first-year students to find resources as well as a sense of community in their entryway. His quote demonstrates this realization as well as a deep understanding of what Peer Advising Fellows could truly accomplish for their PAFees (“a PAF has really two immense powers in their roles”). Another senior and Eagle PAF, Erica, had a similar experience, stating that her PAF “really didn’t do anything” for her, and she “felt the lack of that but also saw other people getting help, and {thought} ‘Oh my gosh, I want to do that.’” It is especially noteworthy that both Erica and Thomas had negative experiences during their first-year, yet, as Eagle PAFs, they are two of the most involved students in the PAF program. As an Eagle PAF, Erica shared, she is responsible for six to ten first-year advisees *and* a similar number of first-year PAFs (Peer Advising Fellows who are new to the role; first-year PAFs can be sophomores, juniors, and seniors). This points to an additional finding that current PAFs need not have had positive experiences with their own PAFs in order to join the program. Negative experiences can provide the same amount of motivation as positive ones. Another interviewee, Olivia, described this phenomenon when she said that she did not have a “particularly positive experience” with her PAF and was “not super tight” with them, but she got along well with the other two PAFs in her entryway. When asked about what inspired her to apply, Olivia cited the contrasting experiences as motivation. Her experience with her own PAF inspired her to be a better Peer Advising Fellow than the one she had, and the two PAFs that she connected with showed her that she “can be that for someone else.” Kelly, a junior and first-year PAF, had a more positive experience with her PAF *and* at Harvard, but she phrased her motivation in a similar manner. Kelly commented, “I’ve just loved my experience at Harvard so much that I knew that I wanted everyone else to...have this great experience.” Likewise, a junior and second-year PAF named Mango stated, “I really...enjoyed having my PAF my first year. Being that for someone else as well as just remembering how complex being a first-year is...I just wanted to.” Mango and Olivia’s responses express a clear willingness to help others and a desire to simply be present for someone else. Mango’s motivations slightly aligned with Thomas’s as well, since both discussed the complexity of being a first-year college student. Like Mango, Victor, a junior and first-year PAF, had a positive experience with his Peer Advising Fellow. When I asked what inspired him to apply for the role, he said:

I really liked my PAF freshman year. I didn't use him too much, but I knew he was always there if I needed help or had questions, and I was a big fan of the entryway community as a whole, like I was the {intramural} representative.

Both Mango and Victor expressed “really” enjoying their PAFs, and while Victor noted that he did not rely too heavily on his Peer Advising Fellow, he knew he *could* rely on his PAF. It is important to note that Victor did not get the PAF position the first time he applied, so his initial motivation was enjoying his PAF and his entryway, but his motivation the second time was seeing his friend become an Eagle PAF. Having been denied the role the first time, Victor felt that the program was “nebulous” and “unreachable,” but once he saw that the program was in his friend’s hands, it showed him “it was something {he} could still pursue.” Victor’s case is unique in that he did not have a negative experience with PAFs themselves but instead had a negative experience *applying*. That being said, in both instances, a PAF inspired Victor to apply. Therefore, regardless of whether the interviewees had positive or negative experiences, their appreciation for the PAF role was their shared motivation to apply.

*Securing the Role: What Makes PAF Candidates Successful*

When I asked current PAFs what they emphasized in their applications, they each mentioned highlighting the specific characteristics that make them a good fit. Most interviewees did not immediately discuss any “resume building” extracurricular activities or work experiences that contributed to their application. However, when I explicitly asked them about the extracurriculars that they believed helped them secure the PAF position, they all described past experiences working with people. In the first paragraph of this section, I discuss the personality characteristics that Peer Advising Fellows emphasized in their application, and in the following paragraph, I provide more detail on the experiences that current PAFs called attention to when they applied.

 The main characteristics that current Peer Advising Fellows emphasized in their applications were empathy and a passion for connecting with others. First, Victor initially mentioned that he highlighted his interest in building “a fun community,” but as he reflected, he commented:

I guess an overarching theme of the application...is empathy for the first year and the first year experience. And that can come in a lot of different forms, but like at the end of the day...that's what PAFs are there for...to, you know, go on the same level as them and say, ‘Hey, I was in your shoes. This is what I did.’ Or also like, ‘I had friends who were in this situation, here's what they did’...I think that's probably one of the things I stressed.

In other words, the PAF application stresses empathy as a key component of the Peer Advising Fellow role, but that empathy is two-fold: PAFs are meant to empathize with their PAFees as people, but they are also meant to understand how challenging the first-year experience can be. Victor recognized that empathy in the context of being a PAF is multidimensional and brought that understanding to the fore. Similarly, Thomas mentioned that “emotional maturity” was a critical aspect of his application. He discussed how he is personally skilled at navigating a balance between “a willingness to have hard conversations and a wanting to be there for people.” Kelly was also passionate about supporting others and emphasized “wanting to make sure everyone felt accepted...and found their own community and...groups here on campus that make Harvard home.” Kelly’s answer points toward three skills she could contribute to the PAF role under the overarching theme of connecting with others: ensuring people felt accepted, found community, and felt at home. Mango expressed a similar sentiment, sharing that she always valued community both “prior to Harvard” and while being at Harvard, and she elaborated by saying, “I don't want anyone to feel isolated, because...growing up {there were} moments, where...I felt alone so just wanting to be a part of a community...just wanting that...for everyone, no matter who they are at Harvard.” Put differently, Mango had personal experiences with feeling isolated and those experiences contributed to her passion for community. For Mango, being a PAF is about ensuring that first-year students can also feel a sense of belonging as Harvard students regardless of where they come from, and it was important for her to emphasize this in her application. Erica offered an even more specific perspective on human connection when she discussed that her main focus in her application was her identity as a Black woman and a desire to connect with fellow students of color. She mentioned “being able to help others through similar experiences and...being able to represent a minority that isn’t as present” in PAF cohorts. Hence, Peer Advising Fellows viewed human connection and empathy as critical to emphasize in their applications.

 Besides emphasizing personality characteristics in their applications, Peer Advising Fellows cited experiences working with people (extracurricular or otherwise) as helpful in securing their positions. First, several interviewees had peer tutoring and mentorship experience. When Kelly was in high school, she participated in a peer counseling program, which she described as a “similar situation” to the PAF program. First-year students in Kelly’s high school were assigned to student counselors who were seniors. Erica also participated in a program that she described as “being a kind of PAF in my high school.” In a similar vein, Olivia was a math tutor in high school and said that “was related to PAF-ing in that {her students} were the same age” that she was. In other words, Olivia had experienced mentoring other students with little to no age gap, which PAFs do as part of their role (especially PAFs who are sophomores advising first-year students). She also worked in an afterschool enrichment program through the Harvard’s Phillips Brooks House Association (PBHA), which allowed her to mentor younger students who attend local schools. Thomas was a PBHA tutor as well and said that mentoring and tutoring students “was helpful.” He also volunteered with Boston Children’s hospital and worked with children and their families, but Thomas added that the most important experience he had was not his volunteer work. While he believed volunteering was helpful, Thomas “actually leaned more on experiences with...being an advisor and being an advocate for members of {his} own family...That was probably as important as maybe those two extra curricular experiences that {he} had.” In other words, Thomas’s role as a mentor to his family members was worth just as much as his more traditional experiences of working with people as a volunteer. Victor felt similarly. When I asked him what experiences he felt helped him to secure the PAF position, he said everything helps “because the position is such a unique position in that it’s not...skills-driven. It’s not like you have to have...a thing you checkmark and now you’re, you know, eligible.” Put differently, every experience is an asset. Victor briefly mentioned having some speech and debate experience, but he emphasized that “being a big brother” was the most significant experience he contributed, since “that’s what a PAF is, right?”. Indeed, having a formal title does not matter so much as being able to relate to other people, whether those people are children in local Boston schools or younger siblings. Therefore, the interviewees all exemplified experiences working with people, and found those experiences to be helpful in their pursuit of the PAF position.

*What Makes a Good PAF*

 What makes a good Peer Advising Fellow? While the interviewees defined a “good PAF” using several characteristics specified on the Advising Programs Office website (“Peer Advising…”, 2021) (specifically reliability, resourcefulness, and flexibility), they discussed new qualities that the Advising Programs Office does not explicitly mention, such as “being yourself” and advocacy. In the first paragraph of this section, I discuss the APO-approved qualities that current PAFs believe make a “good PAF.” In the second paragraph, I address the other qualities that current PAFs consider essential.

Current Peer Advising Fellows defined a good PAF using several qualities that the Harvard College Advising Programs Office identifies on its website, such as reliability, resourcefulness, and flexibility. First, Thomas commented on the importance of being reliable. He said, “You have to be reliable and take initiative in your first-year meetings...if you can’t figure out a solution for first-year students, it’s about finding someone who can.” For Thomas, reliability has an element of self-awareness. Good PAFs are reliable when they recognize that they do not have all the answers and take the necessary steps to find those answers. Likewise, Victor was in favor of the belief that a good PAF is reliable but does not “know everything.” He said, “It’s easy to be an upperclassman who...pretends to know everything. Even if you do know everything, that atmosphere...is a little destructive.” In other words, claiming to know everything about being a Harvard College student actually works against the Peer Advising Fellows who do so. Additionally, Thomas added resourcefulness to his definition of a good PAF, remarking, “if a student has a concern and needs follow up or needs to connect with a resource, to be a good PAF, you have to connect them with that resource. The chain of communication cannot stop at you.” In other words, good PAFs do not leave their PAFees hanging. Erica addressed both reliability and resourcefulness in her response, stating that “it’s important that PAFees...know that they can rely on you, like whenever they ask you a question, you give them solid information.” Erica also described a good PAF as flexible and said “being flexible is important”. For example, if a Peer Advising Fellow plans a study break for twenty people and “only five come,” a good PAF would make changes to accommodate fewer attendees. Olivia expressed that flexibility also plays a role in one-on-one communication with first-year students as well. She said, “a good PAF...does not get offended if someone’s not always responding.” Put differently, even if Peer Advising Fellows are reliable and regularly check in on their PAFees, they must be prepared for a delayed or even no response. Therefore, flexibility, reliability and resourcefulness were some of the Advising Programs Office-approved attributes that current PAFs believe a good PAF possesses.

 Peer Advising Fellows did not only define a “good PAF” using the characteristics provided by the Advising Programs Office—they also used other traits, such as approachability and “being yourself.” To begin with, Mango said, “being a good PAF is essentially...being yourself” because “sticking to yourself...allows PAFees to see who you are and allows them to relate to different aspects of you.” In other words, being a good PAF means letting PAFees see what got their PAF accepted into the program in the first place, especially considering the previous section's findings that every experience PAF candidates have is an asset. Similarly, Victor described his approach to being a PAF as “laid back” and letting his PAFees see that he is “one of the dudes...one of your friends, one of your roommates.” To Victor, a good PAF is able to relate to first-years on a deeper level that dismantles the power dynamic of student and advisor. He exemplified this using the following anecdote: “the other day, one of my PAFees...just used profanity during one of our conversations, and I was like, this is a win...This means they’re comfortable talking to me.” Victor’s anecdote demonstrates that his PAFee was able to relate to him not as a Peer *Advisor* but instead as a *peer*. It also ties into approachability as a key characteristic of a good PAF. Victor told me that a good PAF tries to navigate the stressful moments in a PAFee’s life “without being too pushy.” He elaborated on this by saying that a PAF should be careful to avoid two extremes: “don’t abandon ship and be a stranger but also, at least in my view, don’t be too naggy.” Both extremes have their disadvantages that make it more difficult for PAFs to be approachable. Kelly shared the same perspective and remarked, “being a good PAF...is making sure students feel comfortable coming to you as a resource but not being too overbearing.” Her response once again highlights that a good PAF should avoid an extreme of being “too overbearing.” Kelly practices this by “taking a step back” and letting her PAFees know that they can contact her any time, but she will not “waste their time” with a meeting when they do not need to meet. Along the same lines, Erica simply stated, “it’s important to be approachable so that people feel comfortable asking you questions and...coming up to you.” Victor, Kelly, and Erica’s definitions all address approachability as a mutually beneficial quality that good PAFs possess. Being approachable allows PAFees to relate to their students, and it allows their students to relate to them. There is also an element of “being yourself” that goes hand in hand with being approachable. Interviewees’ definitions of a good PAF all imply that they are aware of the extremes they avoid and in order to avoid those extremes, they tailor their approaches to their personalities. Thus, being a good PAF means being yourself and being approachable, which are two distinct characteristics that the APO does not take into account.

*What PAFs Learned from Their Role*

 When I asked the interviewees what they have learned from serving as Peer Advising Fellows, they had two main takeaways: PAF-ing has shown them that they cannot help everyone, but it has also exposed them to diverse human experiences. I first reveal what interviewees shared about the former, and I then finish this section by discussing the latter.

 The Peer Advising Fellow role has shown PAFs that they cannot help every PAFee because some are unresponsive or have come to Harvard with prior preparation. When I asked Erica what she learned, she said:

I’ve just learned that I can’t help everybody...Some people will not engage with you from the beginning or some people had all of their family come here before, so they don't need your advice...They already have other people telling them what to do.

In other words, some students will not respond to their PAFees from the beginning and thus assert their independence early on; other students are legacy students and have perhaps grown up hearing about how to succeed as a Harvard student or what their parent’s experience was like. As such, certain first-year students feel that having a PAF is unnecessary. That being said, Erica does not take it personally. She added, “You can only do what you can. I can extend information, but I can’t force people to take it.” Knowing that her PAFees may not take her advice does not impede Erica from offering it, which aligns with her definition of a good PAF as reliable. Similarly, Olivia said “it sucks” when PAFees are unresponsive, but as long as said PAFees are finding the information they need and “not completely isolating themselves”, Olivia “is cool with it.” Like Erica, Olivia has come to terms with the fact that some PAFees are less present, but she is flexible and does not take it personally. Thomas has also noticed that PAFees have varied levels of preparation when they enter Harvard and some “could care less” about his advice, but he said “the PAF role is incredibly important” for other students (i.e. first generation students) who need the support. As such, while there are students who may not need their PAF as much, there are students who do, and it makes being a PAF worthwhile; just because a PAF cannot help everybody does not mean a PAF cannot help somebody. Therefore, PAFs have learned that they are not capable of helping everyone because some students are more prepared than others.

 Peer Advising Fellows have also learned how diverse people’s experiences can be. To begin with, Mango said, “people are so different...I love hearing their experiences and being able to celebrate them.” She mentioned valuing diversity prior to being a PAF and seeing those values take shape in her experiences advising others has been rewarding. Kelly also appreciated the diversity she has witnessed, declaring, “There’s so much diversity at Harvard...There are so many people...who are so different from me and I’m so different from, but we all get along great!” In other words, being a PAF has shown her that despite being different from her PAFees, she can still connect with them, and she values that connection. Likewise, Victor acknowledged the “variety of freshmen experiences” that he has been exposed to through his PAFees. He commented, “I only had my individual freshman experience, and I knew of the ones that my friends had,” but because he has seven PAFees who are each “doing different things,” advising them has “expanded {his} worldview of Harvard.” That is, prior to being a PAF, Victor’s view of the first-year experience was limited to his knowledge of what he and his friends went through. However, serving as a Peer Advising Fellow has allowed him to live vicariously through his advisees and also view Harvard anew. Thomas’s response paralleled Victor’s. He said that he has had over 25 PAFees over the years, and by being a PAF, he has learned “the breadth of the human experience….Harvard students have such unique experiences coming in...and everyone has a story to share.” Like Victor, Thomas discussed how being a PAF has broadened his view of Harvard, but he took it a step further by saying that it has also shown him how expansive the human experience can be. Hence, being a Peer Advising Fellow has shown PAFs how diverse humans truly are.

**Conclusion**

 In this paper, I sought to investigate several aspects of the Harvard College Peer Advising Fellow (PAF) program. I interviewed six current Peer Advising Fellows (two of which also serve as Eagle PAFs) who represented different class years and have PAFed for varied periods of time. My specific research question was about the personal qualities necessary to become a Peer Advising Fellow, but I divided my findings into four categories: what motivates PAFs to apply for the role, the experiences that made them successful during the application process, their definition of a “good PAF”, and what current PAFs have learned from their role thus far. These findings are not conclusive but instead can serve as catalysts for future research. First, I found that regardless of whether current PAFs had a good experience with their PAF freshman year, an appreciation of the PAF role inspired them to apply. Second, current PAFs considered their experiences working with people to be helpful when they applied for the position. These experiences were not necessarily work experiences or “resume builders.” In fact, some interviewees believed that being an older sibling was just as important as a formal job experience. My third finding was that while current PAFs believe a good PAF possess some qualities that the Advising Programs Office lists in its own definition of a good PAF, such as reliability and resourcefulness, a good PAF is also approachable and skillfully navigates the midpoint line between being too relaxed and too overbearing. Finally, I found that the Peer Advising Fellow role has taught current PAFs that they cannot help every PAFee because some freshmen are not responsive or enter college with an established understanding of how to navigate resources. However, the PAF role has also taught PAFs about the diversity of human experiences that exists.

My findings point to implications for future research and for the APO. Future researchers could perform a similar investigation with a larger sample or ask Harvard College first-year students how they define a good PAF; one could conduct a longitudinal study to evaluate first-year students’ needs when they enter college and how their PAF has helped them to meet those needs over the first year. This data could be useful to the Advising Programs Office. Likewise, based on the findings from this paper, the Advising Programs Office could begin adapting its definition of a good PAF to go beyond APO staff’s expectations and instead center the expectations that Peer Advising Fellows have for themselves and each other. While I discussed being a good PAF in the context of my interviews, it would behoove the APO to obtain more perspective from its PAFs, since they are on the ground and modify their approaches based on first-year needs. My findings are limited to a small sample, but I hope they can contribute to future reflections on student leadership and service in higher education.

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1. <https://hwpi.harvard.edu/peer_advising_fellows/home> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)