

A Study on the Model of College Student Peer Role Models Leading Academic Atmosphere Cultivation—A Case Study of University B

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College student peer role models are carefully selected by universities based on their strong political awareness, sound moral character, and solid personal study conduct—qualities that position them well to guide fellow students in building a healthier academic atmosphere on campus. Drawing on peer education theory, this study interviewed students at University B to examine how college student peer role models contribute to academic atmosphere cultivation. Data were gathered through snowball sampling and analyzed using three-level coding. Three findings stood out: students broadly support college student peer role models taking an active guiding role; current efforts are undermined by weak organizational coordination, a tendency to respond only to assigned tasks, limited self-awareness among role models, short-lived engagement, and inadequate use of interactive channels; and peer role models can address these gaps by working along four lines—demonstration and leadership, peer assistance, experience dissemination, and supervision. Building on these findings, the study proposes the “Lead-Assist-Disseminate-Supervise” model as a structured framework for strengthening the role of college student peer role models in academic atmosphere cultivation.

Keywords: college student peer role models, academic atmosphere cultivation, peer education

Introduction

Academic atmosphere ranks among the most telling indicators of a university’s educational vision, instructional quality, and overall management. A genuinely positive academic culture operates as a quiet but pervasive force—shaping student attitudes, fueling motivation, and pushing individuals toward higher standards. Sustaining such a culture demands deliberate and ongoing effort, and peer-based leadership has come to be recognized as an indispensable element in that process.

The theoretical foundation of this study is peer education. As a concept, peer education first took shape in the United States during the 1960s, when schools began experimenting with student-led mental health programs.

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By the early 1970s, counselors Hamburg and Varenhorst had formally launched a peer counseling initiative in California that would eventually be adopted across the country (Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972). While originally confined to mental health contexts, the framework was later applied more broadly—to ideological development, study skill sharing, and other educational domains. At its core, peer education involves educators deliberately channeling the influence students naturally have on one another: encouraging them to learn together, adopt each other's effective practices, and grow through mutual support. The approach is characterized by equality among participants, collaborative assistance, shared ownership of outcomes, and student initiative.

College student peer role models are drawn from the student body itself, identified through a careful institutional selection process that looks for individuals with high political awareness, organizational discipline, strong intrinsic motivation, and broad peer respect. Embedded in the same community they seek to influence, these role models carry genuine credibility. Their daily proximity to fellow students gives them direct insight into the real pressures and needs those students face. Most perform well academically, and many hold positions in student organizations—unions, class committees—that sharpen their communication and organizational capacities. Together, these attributes place college student peer role models in a uniquely favorable position to connect with, encourage, and guide their peers, making them an effective vehicle for applying peer education principles to the broader project of academic atmosphere cultivation (Liu & Yang, 2021).

A Survey of the Current State of College Student Peer Role Models' Role in Leading Academic Atmosphere Cultivation

Research Design and Data Sources

Interview-based data collection was employed in this study, with snowball sampling used to recruit a representative group of students at University B. All transcripts were subsequently analyzed through three-level coding. Students at University B have direct, lived experience of the campus academic culture, which made them well-positioned to offer meaningful observations. Before each session began, participants were informed of the principles of free expression and confidentiality—conditions designed to encourage candid responses and consistent with the standards of qualitative inquiry.

Altogether, 32 students were interviewed from different schools and year levels at University B, yielding first-hand qualitative data. Of these, 25 were female and 7 were male. They came from seven schools within the university: School of Tourism Sciences, School of European Studies, School of Advanced Translation, School of Asian Studies, School of Culture and Communication, School of Economics, and School of Business. Year levels ranged from first-year undergraduates through to first-year postgraduate students, and the sample included regularly enrolled undergraduates, students in consecutive bachelor's-master's programs, and regularly enrolled postgraduates. Participant profiles covered Members of the Communist Party of China, university-level academic atmosphere ambassadors, student cadres, scholarship holders, and ordinary students—a spread deliberately chosen to ensure breadth and typicality.

Each session ran between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviewers adjusted their questions in real time based on what participants said, aiming to draw out the most nuanced responses possible. After each session, the conversation was transcribed word-for-word and reviewed until a clean, verified text was produced. Transcription and coding proceeded in parallel, with each completed interview informing the next round of sampling. The final corpus totaled 65,200 Chinese characters, with participants coded N01 through N32 (Table 1).

Table 1

Basic Information of Interviewees

Interview No.	Sex	Year	Affiliated School
N1	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences
N2	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences
N3	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences
N4	Female	Junior	School of Tourism Sciences
N5	Male	Senior	School of European Studies
N6	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences
N7	Male	1st Year Postgraduate	School of Tourism Sciences
N8	Male	Junior	School of Tourism Sciences
N9	Female	1st Year Postgraduate	School of Tourism Sciences
N10	Male	Senior	School of Asian Studies
N11	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences
N12	Female	Senior	School of Culture and Communication
N13	Female	Senior	School of Economics
N14	Female	Senior	School of Economics
N15	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences
N16	Female	Senior	School of Culture and Communication
N17	Male	Junior	School of Tourism Sciences
N18	Male	Sophomore	School of Tourism Sciences
N19	Female	Senior	School of Business
N20	Female	Junior	School of European Studies
N21	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences
N22	Female	Junior	School of European Studies
N23	Female	Senior	School of Asian Studies
N24	Male	Junior	School of European Studies
N25	Female	Senior	School of European Studies
N26	Female	Junior	School of European Studies
N27	Female	Freshman	School of Tourism Sciences
N28	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences
N29	Female	Freshman	School of Tourism Sciences
N30	Female	Sophomore	School of Culture and Communication
N31	Female	Senior	School of Advanced Translation
N32	Female	Senior	School of Tourism Sciences

Presentation of Survey Data Analysis Results

The interview texts were analyzed through a three-level coding procedure. First-level codes were derived inductively from labeled raw data; these were then consolidated into second-level codes, which were abstracted further into third-level codes. This layered process produced the coding structure shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Three-Level Coding Results

Third-Level Coding	Second-Level Coding	First-Level Coding
Advantages of College Student Peer Role Models in Leading Academic Atmosphere Cultivation	High Political Integrity	Possessing a relatively sound worldview, value system, and outlook on life; upholding mainstream values; demonstrating patriotism; dedicating learning to serving the nation; engaging in regular study of political theory

Table 2 to be continued

	Recognized and Respected by the Majority of College Students	Gaining recognition from fellow students; being elected through student voting; possessing influence and appeal within the student community; able to engage deeply with students to understand their actual circumstances and specific needs.
	Strong Moral Character	Willing to help others, eager to share, responsible, with a big-picture perspective, and willing to endure hardships
	Well-Rounded Personal Competencies	Strong intrinsic motivation and self-discipline; most have experience as student leaders; excellent communication and organizational skills.
Challenges Faced by College Student Peer Role Models in Leading Academic Atmosphere Cultivation	Over-Reliance on Task-Driven Approaches	Formalized, monotonous, and task-driven; focused solely on completing tasks rather than achieving practical outcomes
	Lack of Organizational Coherence	Activities are fragmented and scattered; some peer role models lack platforms to give full play to their strengths; limited scope of influence; absence of systematic activity series for leading academic atmosphere cultivation.
	Misconceptions and Inadequate Awareness	Believing it is sufficient to wait for university arrangements without taking initiative; perceiving academic atmosphere cultivation as separate from their own personal learning.
	Short-Term and Unsustained Engagement	Discontinuation of effort after academic atmosphere activities conclude; absence of long-term follow-up support mechanisms
	Poor Interactivity	Lack of integration with new media, poor interactivity, and monotonous content
	Approaches of College Student Peer Role Models in Leading Academic Atmosphere Cultivation	Playing a Supervisory Role
Playing a Dissemination Role		Establish a unified platform, new media, official accounts, sharing sessions, live broadcasts, soft promotions, face-to-face interactions, and integrate class and dormitory activities for academic atmosphere promotion and management.
Playing an Assistance Role		One-on-one assistance; diversified and comprehensive full-process support; long-term follow-up tracking; student needs-oriented approach; establishing incentive mechanisms.
Playing a Demonstration and Leadership Role		Expand the scope of outreach, conduct activities periodically, enhance resonance, and regularly carry out quality cultivation

Main Findings of the Survey

Three principal findings emerged from the data. Students at University B broadly support college student peer role models playing an active role in academic atmosphere cultivation. At the same time, current practice reveals notable weaknesses: peer role models tend to operate without sufficient coordination, respond to assigned tasks rather than showing independent initiative, hold an incomplete understanding of their responsibilities, disengage once activities end, and make limited use of interactive or digital channels. Despite these shortcomings, the interviews also pointed clearly toward four areas of improvement—demonstration and leadership, peer assistance, experience dissemination, and supervision.

Students Hold a Supportive Attitude Toward College Student Peer Role Models Leading Academic Atmosphere Cultivation

Many interviewees expressed a genuine desire for strong peer figures they could look to for guidance. The prevailing view was that college student peer role models, by virtue of their political awareness, community

standing, moral conduct, and general capability, could exercise real influence over campus academic culture. As one participant put it: “The power of a good role model really is unlimited.” (N9) Another suggested a more structured approach: “If we’re serious about leading the academic atmosphere, I think it makes sense to identify and train Members of the Communist Party of China among college students—people who can actually demonstrate what good academic conduct looks like.” (N3) Yet another participant noted simply: “I think role models can genuinely drive everyone’s engagement with academic atmosphere cultivation.” (N10)

Challenges Faced by College Student Peer Role Models in Leading Academic Atmosphere Cultivation

While peer role models have historically contributed something to academic atmosphere cultivation at the university level, the interviews painted a picture of unrealized potential. Recurring concerns included fragmented and poorly coordinated activities, a reactive posture that waits for task assignment rather than self-directing, confusion about what the role actually requires, short-lived engagement that ends when a given activity does, and limited use of interactive formats. One participant observed: “The way things get promoted just isn’t vivid enough. Role models need to find approaches that actually resonate with people—the focus should be on real impact, not just going through the motions.” (N6) Another commented: “When activities become too dry, and it’s just presenting for the sake of presenting, they stop attracting interest.” (N3) A third offered this assessment: “Personally, I don’t think peer role models are doing enough right now. They mostly just complete what they’re assigned, and the tasks are scattered and disconnected. Once something ends, there’s no follow-through. The effect is short-term, and the number of people any given role model genuinely reaches is small.” A colleague added: “Individual effort can only go so far—collective action is what’s really needed.” (N15)

Optimizing Academic Atmosphere Cultivation Through Demonstration and Leadership, Assistance, Dissemination, and Supervision

Coding the interview data revealed broad agreement that peer role models can address these challenges along four lines: modeling good academic conduct, actively supporting struggling peers, sharing effective learning practices, and helping uphold academic integrity. On modeling: “Members of the Communist Party of China in college really need to walk the talk and be out in front.” (N8) “Members of the Communist Party of China among students can set the tone academically.” (N12) On assistance: “He connected with our dormitory, helped us with coursework questions—not just subject knowledge but also the psychological side of studying. It felt very personal and approachable, and we hope that kind of support continues.” (N25) On dissemination: “If the learning experiences of peer role models could be promoted more widely through current communication channels, it could reach and inspire far more students—that kind of promotion is persuasive and creates a positive ripple effect.” (N25) On supervision: “You have to model it yourself first. Then day-to-day, you should be ready to gently redirect classmates—if a peer role model notices someone drifting toward misconduct, the right move is to step in early and help shift their thinking.” (N20)

Construction of the Model for College Student Peer Role Models Leading Academic Atmosphere Cultivation

Model Content

Taking University B as its empirical basis, and grounded in both peer education theory and the interview findings, this study proposes the “Lead—Assist—Disseminate—Supervise” model for college student peer role models leading academic atmosphere cultivation (Figure 1). “Lead” captures the idea of role models personally

practicing and embodying a strong academic work ethic; “Assist” denotes their proactive support for struggling fellow students; “Disseminate” refers to actively sharing effective learning approaches; and “Supervise” involves peer role models conscientiously attending to the academic conduct of those around them.

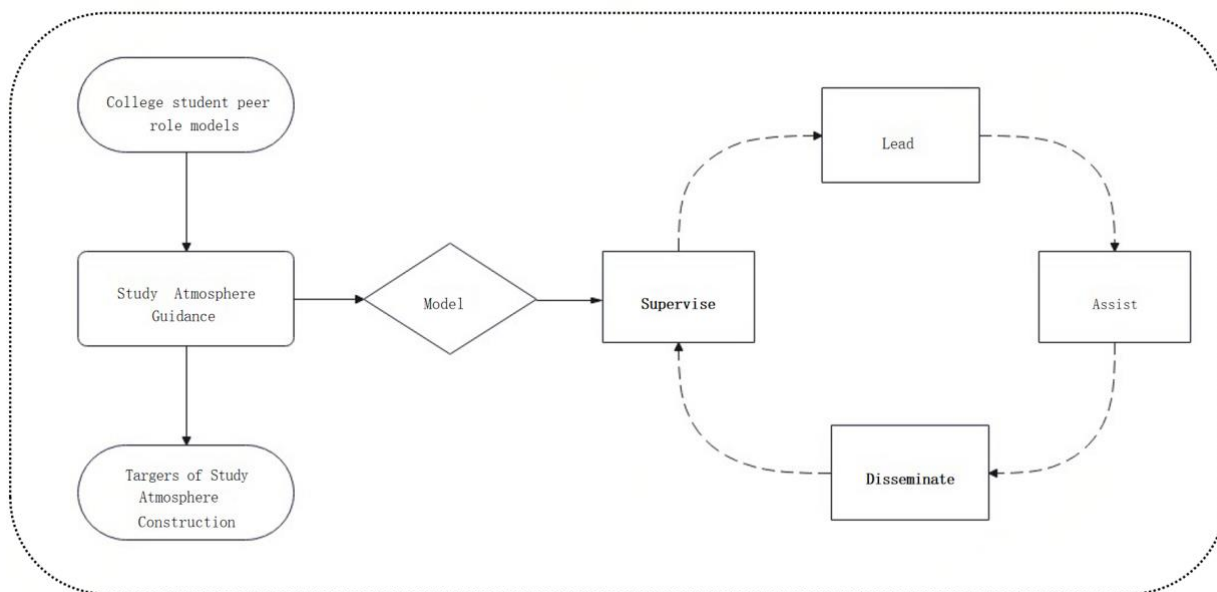


Figure 1. Model diagram of college student peer role models leading academic atmosphere cultivation.

Model Analysis

(1) “Lead”

What does it mean, in practice, for a peer role model to lead? The answer is less about formal activities than about daily conduct. How a role model attends class, responds to assignments, handles exam pressure, and carries themselves as a student—these things are noticed. In a campus environment where students observe one another closely, behavior tends to travel faster than any announcement.

Universities can do several things to support this. Keeping peer role models engaged with theoretical learning—relevant educational ideas, broader values discussions—helps ground their example in something more than routine. There is also value in making certain expectations explicit and visible. Arriving to class punctually and engaging actively with teachers, submitting work on time, keeping phones away during lectures, maintaining integrity in assessments: these can be formalized as public commitments, made visible through room identification boards or distinguishing insignia. The point is not bureaucratic box-ticking but the creation of a visible standard that others can orient toward.

Beyond individual conduct, participation in shared academic spaces—exchange forums, cooperative study groups, peer learning platforms—extends a role model’s example into the wider environment (Liu & Chen, 2022). And when role model performance in academic atmosphere cultivation is included in formal evaluation, accountability follows. Without that, the expectation risks becoming nominal.

(2) “Assist”

Supporting students with learning difficulties is arguably the most demanding of the four functions—and the one that requires the longest time horizon. A single tutoring session rarely changes much. What tends to matter is sustained engagement over weeks or months.

The starting point is often simpler than expected: a role model's own academic trajectory, shared honestly, can shift what a struggling student believes is possible. Practical help follows—sharing study methods, working through problems together, identifying approaches that fit the student's particular situation. Pairing systems, whether one-to-one or with a small group, give this structure. Through regular sessions, persistent difficulties can be addressed—including those that go beyond subject knowledge, such as gaming habits, time management failures, flagging motivation, or interpersonal strain (Xie, 2013).

That said, the work is not purely academic. Students who have been struggling for a while often carry self-doubt that subject tutoring alone cannot touch. A role model willing to have a real conversation—about stress, about fear of failure, about what the student finds genuinely hard—can sometimes reach further than any formal support mechanism. Rebuilding confidence is slow work, but it tends to be what makes the difference.

None of this is sustainable without institutional backing. Assistance funds, organized forums where peer role models can share what they've tried, and formal recognition of this work all help bring more students into it (Wang, 2019).

(3) “Disseminate”

There is a straightforward case for dissemination: effective learning habits, once developed, should not stay with one person. Peer role models who have found what works—not just in subject study, but in managing time, handling pressure, and planning ahead—are natural candidates for passing those discoveries on.

The harder question is how. Formal talks and scheduled presentations reach some students, but rarely those who need help most, and rarely in ways that stick. Newer formats tend to do better: short videos, social media posts, live sessions with real back-and-forth, and shared note platforms allow for repeated contact and genuine interaction. Specificity matters too. Techniques for working through a dense reading, strategies for approaching a long project, ways of managing exam anxiety—these kinds of concrete examples land better than general encouragement.

Different students need different things. Those at an earlier stage of their studies face different challenges from those approaching graduation; students managing personal difficulties may need something tailored that a broad dissemination format cannot offer. Small group discussions and one-on-one follow-up allow peer role models to adjust what they share to who is actually in front of them. For this function to work well, universities need to give peer role models the platforms, training, and, where necessary, the funding to do it properly.

(4) “Supervise”

Supervision is perhaps the most delicate of the four functions, and the one that demands the most careful thinking about what peer role models are actually being asked to do.

The argument for peer-based supervision rests on a simple fact: proximity. Faculty encounter students in scheduled settings; peer role models share dormitories, meals, and informal time with them. This means they often notice things earlier—a pattern of absences beginning to form, signs of academic misconduct, a student whose engagement has quietly dropped. Acting on such observations, whether by raising them directly or passing them to a teacher, is the kind of early intervention that can prevent small problems from becoming serious ones.

For this to work, peer role models need to know what they are looking for and what to do when they find it. Clear guidelines from universities and constituent schools are not optional here—without them, supervision risks becoming either intrusive or toothless. Regular training helps sharpen judgment. Practical structures matter too: a named supervision group, a clear channel for raising concerns, a process for follow-up. These things normalize

the supervisory function and make it easier for peer role models to act when they need to, without feeling they are stepping out of line.

Summary

This paper has argued that college student peer role models—selected from within the student body, embedded in it, trusted by it—represent a resource that universities in China have not yet fully put to use. Their closeness to their peers is precisely what makes them valuable. They see what faculty cannot, act in ways that formal structures cannot, and reach students whom official channels often miss.

The “Lead-Assist-Disseminate-Supervise” model developed here tries to give that potential some structure. Each of its four dimensions responds to a specific gap identified in the research. “Lead” asks role models to make their own conduct count. “Assist” asks for sustained investment in students who are struggling. “Disseminate” asks them to move good practice outward rather than keeping it to themselves. And “Supervise” asks them to stay genuinely attentive to what is happening around them.

If the model works as intended, its effects should be cumulative: a role model who leads draws attention; that visibility creates openings for assistance and dissemination; and supervision helps maintain the environment in which all of this can happen. Whether that chain actually plays out in practice remains a question for future study. What this paper offers in the meantime is a working framework that other institutions can adapt, alongside a contribution to the theoretical conversation about peer-based approaches to academic culture.

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