FLOURISH LABS
Scaling Peer Support Training with User-Centered Learning Design
The Challenge: A Growing Need for Certified Peer Supporters

In 2021, Flourish Labs launched to help solve the mental health crisis in higher education and empower college students with the skills and knowledge needed to provide meaningful support to peers experiencing mental health challenges. There is evidence showing peer support has many benefits, including improved quality of life, increased engagement with support services, and better overall health. Peer support services like Flourish Labs provides are also known to decrease hospitalization and overall costs of services.

To be certified as a peer supporter, most states require a minimum of 40 hours of instruction. Initially, Flourish Labs partnered with a third-party provider who trained peer supporters in face-to-face settings. With a desire to create an accessible training that would accommodate people with complex schedules, or living in a variety of geographic areas, Flourish Labs saw the opportunity to create its own program that would modernize and scale peer support training while also designing a more engaging experience for busy college students.

As part of its investment in Flourish Labs, WGU Labs worked with staff members and potential peer supporters to develop a competency-based program to train peer supporters. By providing effective ways for trainees to build competence and confidence, redesigning the training would set the foundation for even better service for students experiencing mental health crises.

The Mental Health Crisis

The mental health crisis in higher education has risen dramatically in recent years.

- 75% of students in bachelor’s programs and 66% of adults seeking associate degrees have considered taking a break from college due to emotional stress.
- While more investments in mental health support have been made in higher education, including $46.8 million from the U.S. Department of Education, 84% of student affairs leaders say mental health funding needs to increase.
- 60% of students with mental health conditions haven’t received any type of help in the last year.
- White students access mental health care about twice as much as Asian students and Black students, which could speak to the idea that students of color are unable to find counselors that look like them and can connect with their experiences, particularly since 72% of counselors are white.
The Solution: Online Training Based On User-Centered Design

Our user-centered design process was critical to developing an effective curriculum that met the needs of both learners and organizations. We worked closely with the leaders at Flourish Labs to develop a 40-hour, learner-centered, competency-based curriculum (Note: We later expanded our work to 16 competencies and 80 hours of curriculum). The curriculum had three main components:

1. 14 clearly defined competencies learners could expect to develop
2. Asynchronous modules that enabled trainees to proceed at their own pace
3. Structured live opportunities for skill development, practice with peers, and engagement with expert peer support supervisors

Throughout the research and development process, we applied user-centered design (UCD). UCD prioritizes the needs and preferences of the end-users in the design process. The ultimate goal of UCD is to create products, services, or systems that are effective, efficient, and satisfying for the people who will use them.

Using UCD, we designed a training for Flourish Labs that was engaging, intuitive, enjoyable, and meaningful to learners while also ensuring that upon completion of the training, learners felt confident and competent in their role as peer supporters. Our user-centered approach included:

- Extensive user research in the form of interviews
- Co-design sessions with potential learners and mental health and peer support experts
- Iterative and agile design and development processes that invited feedback from a variety of stakeholders throughout content development
Interviews

We engaged three types of users during our process: peer support experts, recent graduates of support training, as well as young adults and working adults who expressed interest in peer support.

MENTAL HEALTH AND PEER SUPPORT EXPERTS

We started our research by talking to mental health and peer support experts from around the country to learn about the existing training programs and the competencies required for effective peer supporters. Our interview questions focused on the competencies that peer supporters must develop, the goals and objectives of existing peer support training, and the accreditation requirements of various states.

RECENT GRADUATES OF PEER SUPPORT TRAINING

We spoke with recent graduates of peer support training to learn about the topics covered in the training that felt most relevant and important to them and the aspects of the training they felt were most engaging and effective.

YOUNG ADULTS AND WORKING ADULTS

The young adults and working adults who we spoke with all had expressed some interest in becoming peer supporters. We learned about the mental health challenges they face, as well as the coping strategies they use to juggle the responsibilities of school, work, and life. We learned about their current and prior experiences with online learning, as well as the strategies and learning activities that were either effective or frustrating for them. We also invited them to share their experiences regarding access to mental health support through either their school or work environments.
Competency-Based Curriculum

The course design included competency-based curriculum. To establish the most comprehensive set of competencies we partnered with Flourish Labs to analyze the certification requirements from all 50 U.S. states. The depth of the research scope was intentional. We wanted to ensure that the training we developed could meet the accreditation needs for peer support across the country. We also analyzed existing peer support training programs from around the country and examined learning objectives and guidelines from these programs to ensure the training we designed addressed the knowledge and skills that effective peer supporters would need. We combined that research with input shared during the interviews with subject matter experts to identify 14 competencies of effective peer supporters that would be relevant and meaningful to our target audience of young adults. The training modules were then designed to align with the competencies to provide trainees with a transparent view of what skills a qualified peer supporter needs and a clear path to build those skills.
Co-Design Sessions

Co-design sessions also informed the curriculum and competencies. We held separate design sessions with potential learners, mental health experts, and peer support specialists. From our conversations, we determined specific outcomes and competencies for the training and used the results to focus conversations with potential learners about their experiences and needs.

The potential learners provided insights into the types of online learning experiences they found most valuable. We learned that opportunities for formative assessment, feedback, and connecting with others were highly valued.

All of the groups involved in the co-design sessions provided valuable input on ideas for scenario and role-play activities to incorporate into learning activities that would allow learners to practice and model the competencies of an effective peer supporter.

Co-design invites users into the design process. By working collaboratively with potential users, learning experience designers are able to create products that better meet user needs and preferences.

Digital sticky note responses from co-design session participants.

**ONLINE LEARNING ACTIVITIES I LIKE**

- Notetaking template
- Videos must be up to date
- Info in podcast format
- More auditory learning
- Interactive activities
- Reflection on what we learned
- Incorporate stories
- Extended time limit on quizzes
- Retaking tests after completion

**ONLINE LEARNING ACTIVITIES I DON'T LIKE**

- Unable to move ahead (e.g., locked modules)
- Massive portions of just reading
- Additional resources that you have to find (requires extra effort)
- Having to sign up for an account
- Having to find additional resources (requires extra effort)
- Massive portions of just reading
Translating Findings into Personas

From our research findings, we developed personas that summarized some of the characteristics of our target audience. Despite some similarities, the challenges and expectations of the two potential learner populations varied enough that we determined it would be challenging to design a one-size fits all training. The personas we developed helped Flourish Labs determine that initial training should focus more on the specific needs of the young adult audience.

Personas help learning designers understand the needs, preferences, and goals of different user groups.

PABLO
The Activist

“I know what it is like to struggle, and I think I can empathize well with others who are struggling.”

DEMOGRAPHICS
- Male | 22 | Latino
- College Senior
- Psychology Major

BACKGROUND
- Grew up in a low-income family, struggled with depression
- Identifies as gay and can support others who have experienced fear and discrimination

MOTIVATION
- Has had a lot of hard times
- Has found strategies that help him and wants to help others

EXPECTATIONS AND NEEDS
- Plans to apply what he learned from his Psych classes
- Hopes to be paired with someone with similar struggles

Iterative and Collaborative Content Development

In the design and development phase, we engaged key stakeholders at Flourish Labs. The involved members had opportunities to provide feedback on draft content in outline format and then again as the content was built out in the learning platform. Weekly meetings allowed opportunities for feedback and clarification on proposed learning activities, ensuring content was closely aligned with the skills that learners would need to develop and practice to gain competence.
Results

Based on user-centered research, we designed a 40-hour competency-based training course that blends asynchronous and synchronous components, which Flourish Labs piloted with a group of peer support trainees.

The asynchronous elements of the course enable trainees to learn on their own schedule, making it easier for people with work, caregiving, school, and other responsibilities to participate. The synchronous elements provide a high level of human connection and practice — something users told us they wanted during the pilot. We found that this opportunity for trainees to interact with and learn from each other was a crucial element in peer support training. In addition to recommendations on the cadence of synchronous sessions, we provided Flourish Labs guidance on how to make the sessions meaningful, including specific exercises to adopt.

The results of the pilot were very positive. Flourish Labs now has a successful training program to ensure supporters are more prepared and confident to deliver counsel when a peer is experiencing a mental health challenge. During the initial run, 76% of trainees completed the training. In post-training surveys, the majority of participants said they were likely to recommend the training, with an overall Net Promoter Score of 50.

After the successful pilot, WGU Labs collaborated again with the Flourish Labs team to develop two additional modules around the following competencies: “Facilitating Peer Support Groups” and “Preparing For Employment.” The course was revised and expanded to incorporate these additional modules, as well as additional synchronous sessions and peer practice activities to meet the 80-hour training requirements for the state of California.

“Peer support is core to our mission at Flourish Labs. We needed a training program that could teach people who are eager to help how they can use their lived experiences to support others. With WGU Labs’ intentional, thoughtful process and commitment to understanding peer support training from the users’ perspective, we were able to do that. The training they designed will help us meet the need for more mental health support and scale our business at the same time.”

— Kim Newell Green, MD, Co-founder and Chief Medical Officer, Flourish Labs