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Training for Retention: How Effective are Writing Center and Learning Center Training Programs at Pace University?

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Pforzheimer Honors College at Pace University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for University honors

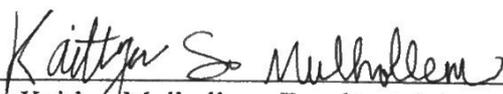
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Abstract

Although peer student support services are offered at college and universities across the country, there is little discussion regarding how students are trained to work in these positions. While the benefits of student support services are generally agreed upon, these services can only be effective if student employees feel adequately prepared for their roles. This study aims to determine best practices to design training curriculum for students employed as writing center consultants, content tutors, and peer mentors in a university setting. To do so, student employees at Pace University - Pleasantville's Learning Commons were surveyed to analyze how prepared students felt for and in their positions. These responses were used to determine if any disconnects existed between the training curriculum and the job responsibilities, as well as best practices that could be incorporated into training program design. Overall, the findings suggest that credit-bearing courses are most effective when used for training, followed by training programs that incorporate a class-like structure. Additionally, these findings show that students feel most prepared for these positions when training programs incorporate hands-on components. This goes against the current literature, wherein best practices for training programs are heavy on theory. As such, these findings both inform gaps within the literature as well as can be utilized by other colleges and universities to improve training curriculum for similar positions.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Literature Review	3
Training Programs for Peer Tutors and Peer Mentors	3
Outcomes and Impacts for Employees	4
Outcomes and Impacts for Students Utilizing Services	5
Training Programs for Writing Center Consultants	6
Historical Stigmas and Perceptions of Writing Centers	8
Conclusion	9
Overview of Training Curriculum	10
Historical Writing Center Training Programs	10
Historical Learning Commons Training Programs	14
Current Learning Commons Training Curriculum	15
Methodology	17
Participants	17
Design and Procedure	17
Research Ethics	18
Results	19
Writing Center Consultants	19
Content Tutors	20
Peer Mentors	22
Discussion	24
Conclusion	28
References	31

Introduction

Student support services are offered at universities across the country, and research examines the benefits these services render to the entire university community (Goddu; Fode-Made et al.; Pugatch and Wilson; Yomtov et al.). Despite this, very few researchers focus on the students who staff these services, and even fewer focus on the processes in place to train these student employees. While this is likely due to a lack of standardization in how these services are rendered by different universities, the true benefits of these services cannot be accurately measured without determining if student employees are effective in their positions. At Pace University, there are several student support services that employ upperclassmen, though many of the opportunities most visible to the student body are located in the Learning Commons. The Learning Commons employs upperclassmen as content tutors for various subjects, such as nursing, mathematics, and business, as writing center consultants, and as peer mentors who work closely with groups of first-year students. While both positions require students to undergo extensive training, as within the broader literature, there is no existing quantifiable data that examines whether these training programs are effective.

As an undergraduate student, I have worked as a writing consultant for the past three years, and I have also held other positions on campus under the broader student support services umbrella. Though I recognize overlap of my responsibilities in these roles, there is very little overlap in the training programs. Moreover, I often find that the skills and techniques that I utilize in the writing center were not explicitly covered in the training program. Likewise, the skills that I have learned as a writing center consultant have been directly applicable to other positions I've held on campus, though these skills were also not explicitly covered in other training programs I've attended. This realization made me question the efficacy of these trainings, and when I began to speak to several of my peers about their own experiences, I

realized a more wide-spread issue with these training programs. Specifically, when I spoke to students who were dissatisfied in similar positions, many believed that the training they received did not adequately prepare them for their roles. While the benefits of student support services are evident, these benefits are lost without effective training for these positions.

From my own experiences and these conversations, I believe that this observed lack of preparation is the result of a disconnect between the learning objectives of training programs at Pace and the assigned job responsibilities. Thus, this thesis will examine the disconnect between the learning objectives of current training programs and the assigned responsibilities of on-campus positions, specifically within the Learning Commons. What has caused this disconnect, and what changes can be made to training curriculum to close the gaps between the learning objectives and the knowledge retained? More specifically, how can faculty and staff at Pace ensure that peer tutors and mentors receive effective training to succeed in these positions?

Literature Review

This research aims to examine the learning objectives of training programs within student support services, thus offering suggestions for future improvements. To create a framework for exploring this issue, the study will examine best practices for training programs for peer tutors, both within content and writing support services, and peer mentors as defined by scholars in the field. For the purposes of this study, peer tutors, or content or subject tutors, and peer mentors have been grouped together due to the overlapping trends in the available research on training programs for these positions. The study will then analyze other overlapping trends in literature regarding peer tutors and peer mentors, largely to contextualize the current literature on training programs. In conjunction, the research will examine equivalent training programs within writing centers, as well as examine the historical stigma surrounding writing centers to further contextualize the current literature.

Training Programs for Peer Tutors and Peer Mentors

Though many universities offer peer tutoring services, very few researchers have examined training programs developed for these positions. More recently, researchers focusing on peer tutoring at the university-level have begun analyzing these gaps in the literature. Unfortunately, because this is a newer trend, much of this research was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which altered the results of many studies. Prior to this shift, researchers attempting to define best practices emphasized streamlining the training process, rather than improving the actual training programs. For example, Kaitlyn Crouse-Machcinski determined the effectiveness of populating a class within the university's learning management system to train tutors asynchronously and at their own pace (81-82). While these conclusions are beneficial to the design of training programs, they do not inform the actual content of training curriculum.

While similar research has been conducted regarding peer mentors, there is comparatively very little research that focuses broadly on peer mentors within a university setting. Generally, researchers who attempt to define best practices for designing training programs focus on peer mentors outside of the university setting, such as youth mentors or mentors for individuals with disabilities. However, research suggests that undergraduate peer mentors are increasingly concerned by a lack of effective training (McFarlane). Moreover, according to Kathryn McFarlane, even peer mentors who were initially trained for their positions sought additional, continual training to further their development as mentors. This suggests a need for further study in this area.

Overwhelmingly, much of the current research on peer mentors and peer tutors emphasizes the outcomes of student support services. This suggests a need to examine the benefits of these services within a university setting. Though researchers often either focus on the outcomes for student employees or for students utilizing these services, these trends are highly visible within the current literature, implying that outcomes and impacts are more pressing within the field than the design of current training programs.

Outcomes and Impacts for Employees

Many researchers agree that working within student support services appears to be a positive experience for student employees. This manifests for student employees in two distinct ways: first, through academic improvements, and second, through personal development. Academic improvements are especially seen within populations of peer tutors. Interestingly, Thurston et al. definitively determined that peer learning models produced larger academic gains for the tutors than the tutees (8). Likewise, in university-level subject tutoring, peer tutors will often improve both their knowledge of the subject and gain relevant teaching skills in the process

(Bugaj et al. 5). While peer mentors do not typically report academic improvements, peer mentoring has been associated with developing relevant academic skills, such as time management and public speaking (Miller et al. 162). In addition, both peer tutoring and peer mentoring is associated with professional development, which is an integral part of the collegiate academic experience. For instance, working in these positions allows students to more effectively network with other students in their field (Bugaj et al. 5). Moreover, Miller et al. found that peer mentors who worked closely with faculty, such as students in TA positions, developed stronger professional relationships (162).

Additionally, scholars have determined that many peer tutors and peer mentors feel their positions have positively impacted their personal growth. Bugaj et al. determined that many peer tutors are highly motivated and enthusiastic to work with other students (5). This enthusiasm also means that many peer tutors find the experience incredibly rewarding (Bugaj et al. 5). Likewise, many peer mentors also report a sense of achievement from their positions (Beltman and Schaeben 40; Miller et al. 163). Furthermore, peer tutoring and peer mentoring are both associated with increased self-confidence (Bugaj et al. 9; Miller et al. 162). According to Bugaj et al., this increased self-confidence is also associated with emotional progression as students become more experienced and comfortable in their positions (9). Thus, while less quantifiable than academic improvements, both are associated with positive personal growth for students.

Outcomes and Impacts for Students Utilizing Services

Students also overwhelmingly benefit from utilizing student support services, though these impacts are largely rooted in academic achievement and improvement. Numerous studies have shown that the utilization of peer tutoring resources improves academic achievement, particularly among first-year students (Arco-Tirado et al.; Fode-Made et al.; Pugath and Wilson).

Arco-Tirado et al. determined that first-year students who utilized peer tutoring services ended the fall and spring semesters with higher GPAs than students who didn't (2198). Likewise, Fode-Made et al. found that the utilization of student support services could lower achievement gaps between underrepresented groups and the general student population (8). While peer mentoring does not traditionally focus on the transfer of academic knowledge as much as peer tutoring does, peer mentoring has also been associated with improved academic achievement. This is because peer mentors are able to connect their mentees to other academic resources on campus, thus improving the overall academic experience for first-year students (Miller et al. 161).

In addition, first-year students who utilize student support services often feel better connected to the entire university community. This is more specifically a result of peer mentoring services. Yomtov et al. found that "students with mentors felt significantly more connected to the university, perceived significantly more support at the university, and felt significantly more like an active part of the university than students without a mentor" (38). Likewise, Miller et al. determined that first-year students with mentors felt more emotionally and socially supported when beginning college (161). For many students, their mentors do not just assist them academically; mentors provide first-year students with needed guidance and advice, and some students view their mentors as role models as a result (Miller et al. 161). As such, these student support services can be integral to helping first-year students during their transition to college, which goes far beyond merely succeeding academically.

Training Programs for Writing Center Consultants

The existing literature is quite robust in describing and defining best practices when developing training programs for new writing center consultants. Generally speaking, writing center scholars are careful to consider previous literature that attempts to define best practices,

thus allowing researchers to add to the broader literature with potential improvements and changes for training programs (Bell; Devet; Nordlof).

Early writing center scholars often focused on the idea of tutor-centered conferences, wherein “the tutor controls the topics, the content, and the pace, does most of the work, and talks much more than the student does” (Bell 80). With that said, these early scholars often sought to dismantle the idea that all sessions were tutor-centered, leading many researchers to examine the different strategies that writing consultants could employ during sessions (Bell 80-81). Thus, while many early writing center scholars may not have explicitly defined “best practices” for building training programs, these scholars were increasingly concerned with the exploration of various strategies available to writing center consultants (Bell; Nordlof). In that way, these early scholars still informed training programs by suggesting what strategies and techniques should be taught to new consultants. Furthermore, this continual exploration of new strategies has led to the development of theories that can be utilized to design effective training programs. John Nordlof lauds the social construction theory, which is described as “the process by which professional equals build knowledge”, as a middle ground for writing center tutoring (50). Nordlof continues to apply this theory to the practice of scaffolding, which he believes will allow writing center consultants to more successfully support students utilizing the services (57). While theories may not necessarily inform training procedures, writing center theories commonly inform the content training programs, thus indirectly shaping the development of training materials.

With that said, writing center scholars have also developed best practices that can be directly incorporated into training programs. Some of the earliest examples of the development of best practices can be seen in the development of writing center training courses. Stephen North was among the earliest scholars to discuss the development of such a course. North, a

writing center director himself, developed an effective curriculum wherein consultants learned to pinpoint a student's "location" in the writing process, encouraged writers to reflect on the composition process, and utilized tutoring services themselves (434-435). Since then, scholars have continued to outline these best practices in a way that can be integrated into existing writing center training programs. For example, reflection-on-practice, wherein consultants reflect on their tutoring sessions, can be beneficial if accompanied by long-term training (Bell 90). Likewise, Harvey Kail suggests incorporating the ideas of separation, initiation, and return into writing center trainings, wherein consultants-in-training are "separated" from the broader university community for their "initiation" into the writing community, and this rigorous initiation process allows students to "return" more knowledgeable about the writing process (76). While each scholar has different ideas surrounding the training process, many of these ideas can be implemented into existing programs or can be incorporated into new program designs.

Historical Stigmas and Perceptions of Writing Centers

On one hand, the emphasis on developing effective training programs for writing center consultants may be attributed to the perceived need of this research. In writing centers, "much of the daily business . . . takes its shape from the ongoing necessity of recruiting new tutors and training them" (Kail 74). However, it is also important to note the historical stigmas and negative perceptions of writing centers, which are equally as likely to have influenced scholars in the field. Historically, writing centers have been viewed as spaces solely for struggling or "problem" writers (Devlin 145). While students may hold this belief, it appears to have originated with faculty, wherein faculty recommend the weakest writers in their courses receive help with lower-order concerns (Devlin 145). Unfortunately, this can also prevent writing centers from realizing their full potential. As Andrea Lunsford points out, collaboration is incredibly effective within

the writing center, but it can be difficult to build a truly collaborative environment against these preconceived notions (6). Writing centers are most effective when used as a preventative service, meaning that students utilize these services *before* higher-order concerns are present (Goddu 1). However, when students and faculty view the writing center as a space to fix bad writing, rather than to improve writing skills, the writing center cannot be nearly as effective as intended (Goddu 6).

Conclusion

As a whole, the literature suggests a need for further study of training programs. Very few scholars have analyzed existing training programs for content tutors and peer mentors, and thus no best practices have been defined. While scholars have defined best practices when training writing center consultants, these best practices can be inconsistent. Although the foundational texts suggest a need for hands-on training, many scholars still agree that incorporating writing center theory reflects best practices. Thus, this presents another opportunity for further study regarding best practices for training curriculum.

Overview of Training Curriculum

Before student perceptions of the training curriculum can be accurately measured, the training curriculum must be established. Presently, all student employees in the learning commons must undergo the same general training, regardless of their position. However, this only applies to student employees who began in the Fall 2021 semester. While many students employed as content tutors or peer mentors may have undergone similar training, students employed by the writing center prior to the Fall 2021 semester participated in different training programs. Even then, writing center training has changed dramatically in the past few years due to staffing and initiative changes. Likewise, while the learning commons has traditionally employed a similar training curriculum for content tutors and peer mentors, there are some key differences between the two training programs.

Historical Writing Center Training Programs

The most senior writing center consultants were both trained during the Spring 2019 semester. At that time, the Pleasantville Writing Center operated in a separate space on campus and was a part of the English Department. Since then, the Pleasantville Writing Center has had two directors, and the center was integrated into the Pleasantville Learning Commons under the current director prior to the Fall 2021 semester. These changes within the writing center also led to the creation of a new training program, and, as a result, many of the current writing center consultants did not undergo the same training. Thus, to determine how effective writing center training is or has been, understanding the various historical training curriculums is paramount.

The two most senior writing center consultants in the Pleasantville Writing Center were both trained under the previous director. Although all writing center consultants underwent the same training under the previous director, only two of the writing center consultants trained by

this director are still employed. As a part of this training program, both consultants were assigned readings about writing center theory that were completed individually. The consultants then met several times with the director, and as a group the three would discuss the reading, analyzing the writing center theory and tutoring strategies presented. After several meetings, the consultants would visit the writing center and observe active tutoring sessions. They would take notes on the strategies and techniques utilized by each consultant they shadowed, and they then had individual meetings with the director to discuss what they had observed. Once the new consultants began tutoring, they would record audio of their tutoring sessions. These audio recordings were played back in additional individual meetings with the director, and consultants would discuss what strategies and techniques they utilized, what went well in each session, and what could be improved or done differently in future sessions. Within this training program, the learning objectives were always centered around the teaching of, observation of, and implementation of tutoring strategies and techniques. For example, to learn scaffolding, consultants read relevant literature and writing center theory, observed other consultants, and paid particular attention to the beginning of each session to take notes about scaffolding. Later, consultants would share their notes with the director, and they would be asked to review the goals that were set in the session and determine whether or not scaffolding was effectively implemented.

Under the new director, the Pleasantville English Department introduced a linked course aimed to train future writing center consultants. Students interested in becoming writing center consultants were required to enroll in both Introduction to Writing Studies, a three-credit class focused on writing theory, and Writing Center Practicum, a one-credit hands-on course that allowed students to apply these theories. New writing center consultants could be hired only after

they successfully completed the Writing Center Practicum course. The director taught the Writing Center Practicum course, and a distinguished member of the English Department taught Introduction to Writing Studies. However, the director attended and participated in Introduction to Writing Studies to build a stronger rapport with potential student employees and to better connect the course material to writing center work. At the start of the semester, students received a detailed syllabus that outlined the learning objectives, as well as a list of essential questions.

The specific learning objectives for the practicum course were:

- Talk about writing and engage with writing center discourse
- Apply ideas from writing studies research to tutoring sessions

In addition, students were given three essential questions:

1. How are best practices for tutoring writing gleaned from research applied in actual tutoring sessions?
2. What kinds of challenges do tutors and their tutees often face?
3. What are useful strategies for thinking about and perhaps mitigating these challenges?

The learning objectives and essential questions were designed to guide student work throughout the practicum. Students were required to keep a weekly reflective journal where they responded to assigned readings and class discussions, analyzed their own tutoring strategies, met with current writing center consultants to discuss their tutoring strategies, and reflected on observations that they conducted of tutoring sessions in the writing center. After completing all of their observations, students enrolled in the practicum had a chance to visit an English class and conduct their own tutoring sessions, as well as review student essays to provide written feedback. This allowed students to put their coursework into action. At the end of the course, students wrote a tutoring philosophy based on their experiences. Unfortunately, this course was

introduced and ran in Spring 2020, which may have impacted the student experience, though students enrolled in the course did still get a chance to complete the learning objectives and assignments virtually.

After that semester, the Writing Center Practicum course was no longer offered to students. Instead, a new training curriculum was introduced during the summer of 2021 for writing center consultants who started in the Fall 2021 semester. New and returning writing center consultants were invited to attend training sessions, which were held weekly over Zoom during a four-week training period. Newly hired writing center consultants were given assigned readings, and each Zoom was an opportunity to discuss the strategies and theory highlighted within each reading. Though returning writing center consultants were not required to complete the assigned readings, those in attendance offered advice and connected the readings to their own tutoring strategies. These Zoom meetings were more akin to informal discussions of writing center theory, though new hires did engage in some hands-on practice. In one of the Zoom meetings, the director brought a student essay that was read aloud to all of the writing center consultants in attendance. Consultants took notes as sections of the essays were read, and there was a group discussion regarding setting goals for this particular student, strategies that could be utilized, and exact phrasing consultants might use in a tutoring session with this student. At the end of the Zoom training, all writing center consultants, whether they were new hires or returning employees, reflected on their work and drafted a personal tutoring philosophy. In addition, all of the consultants in this training cohort have completed weekly self-reflections throughout the Fall 2021 semester.

Of the ten current writing center consultants in the Pleasantville Writing Center, two were trained under the previous director, one successfully completed the Writing Center Practicum

course, and three were trained during the summer of 2021 through the Zoom sessions. The other four either did not receive formal, structured training, which was the case for writing center consultants hired in the period between the two directors, or were trained for the Fall 2021 semester as a part of the general Learning Commons training.

Historical Learning Commons Training Programs

Previous training programs within the Learning Commons have been far more consistent, as well as generally far more structured. Generally, those receiving training in the fall would receive group training, whereas those receiving training in the spring, which was a much smaller cohort, would be trained individually. Those who received the more structured group training would meet weekly, and these training sessions would cover content tutoring as well as specific content areas. Although this training utilized a class-like structure, it is unclear if specific learning objectives were communicated during training. Content tutors would also meet regularly with their supervisors to check-in and discuss effective tutoring strategies and techniques. Previously, the Learning Commons also offered general training during semester breaks that were hosted on the university's learning management system. Like the present training, this was set up as a course, and content tutors were given assignments to complete virtually. However, all of the previous Learning Commons training programs are very similar to the current training curriculum that all employees of the Learning Commons undergo.

Most of the differences between previous and current training curriculum within the Learning Commons is seen within the training programs for peer mentors. Though there have been group components of peer mentor training, much of this training curriculum focuses on shadowing and observing current peer mentors. New peer mentors would be tasked with reading lesson plans and sitting in on mentoring sessions to observe how existing peer mentors complete

their job responsibilities. In addition, new peer mentors would check-in with other peer mentors in seminars, and they would meet regularly with their supervisors to review their lesson plans and work performance. Peer mentors were also given the option to undergo content tutor training.

Current Learning Commons Training Curriculum

Ever since the Writing Center was put under the auspices of the Pleasantville Learning Commons, all students employed within the Learning Commons have undergone the same general training. New student employees received general training in September, prior to the opening of the Learning Commons. This was a one day, three-hour training that introduced participants to other student employees, gave an overview of learning commons operations, and examined tutoring strategies and techniques.

New student employees also receive continuous training throughout the semester, which is largely done independently but has some collaborative elements. This training is conducted within Classes, the university's learning management system, and is set up as a course page. All of the training materials are organized across four units, each of which last two weeks. Each unit clearly outlines what student employees will accomplish after completing each task in that particular unit. For example, Unit 2, the first unit to analyze the act of tutoring, displayed the following learning objectives:

As a result of Unit 2 Training, students will be able to:

- Determine their personal communication styles and how they contribute to their work as LC staff members.

- Evaluate the multifaceted aspects of communication and identify methods for effectively supporting students with different needs in many contexts, including situations that require professional staff intervention.
- Evaluate the impact of personal biases as they relate to the practice of supporting peers and determine strategies for combatting bias.

Each unit contains readings, worksheets, discussion board prompts, self-reflections, and other assignments. These assignments are generally completed when student employees are at work, and all assignments should ideally be completed before the course meeting. Course meetings, which are hosted by the supervisor overseeing training, are held every two weeks at the close of each unit. After meeting, student employees are also responsible for completing a quiz to check for understanding and comprehension. Once all four units are completed, student employees must complete a final project that is presented to the entire cohort.

Methodology

Participants

All students employed by the Pleasantville Learning Commons were asked to participate in this study. This study was emailed to all student employees multiple times. On the Pleasantville campus, the learning commons employs 10 writing center consultants, 28 content tutors, and 4 peer mentors. This study was also shared with the 14 writing center consultants employed on the New York City campus to increase the sample size.

In total, 20 student employees chose to participate in this study. 9 participants self-identified as writing center consultants, 8 participants self-identified as content tutors, and 3 participants self-identified as peer mentors. From the responses, it is assumed that no writing center consultants employed at the New York City campuses participated in the survey, although this cannot be definitively determined.

Design and Procedure

This study was conducted using a brief, anonymous survey. Participants were asked to reflect on their roles, responsibilities, and past training experience. Specifically, participants were asked to:

1. Identify the position that they hold in the Learning Commons.
2. Describe the training they underwent in 2-3 sentences.
3. Describe the skills, strategies, and/or techniques that they utilize in their position in 2-3 sentences.
4. Identify how prepared they felt to utilize these skills, strategies, and/or techniques using a Likert scale.

5. Briefly describe what topic(s) may have been missing or could have been expanded upon in the training they received.

Once all responses were collected, they were sorted based on each participant's self-reported position. Responses were further coded by group "cohorts" of participants who received the same training. These responses were then compared to the actual training materials and learning objectives for each position. This was done to quantify student retention and examine which, if any, learning objectives were not clearly communicated to student employees.

Research Ethics

Since this research involves human subjects, the survey was designed to comply with all Institutional Review Board guidelines. This survey was classified as exempt, and the guidelines for exempt research were strictly followed in the design of this survey. Although all student employees of the learning commons received an anonymous survey link, participation was voluntary. In addition, because the survey link was wholly anonymous, IP addresses were never captured during the study. No identifying information was collected during the study. Though participants did need to self-identify their position and describe the training they received, the brevity of the responses ensured that individual students could not be positively identified by their responses alone.

Results

Writing Center Consultants

In total, nine participants self-identified themselves as writing center consultants. Of these participants, four reported feeling very well prepared for their positions, four reported feeling somewhat prepared for their positions, and one reported being neither prepared nor unprepared for their position. Participant #20 reported feeling neither prepared nor unprepared for this position, and this was the lowest ranking response within the entire survey. There was also one outlier among these respondents. Although Participant #19 self-identified as a writing center consultant, this individual reported participating in content tutor training. While Participant #19 will be classified as a writing center consultant, this is a known outlier in the dataset.

Of these nine participants, four expressed that effective communication skills are important to fulfilling their daily responsibilities. In addition, two participants expressed that they typically focus on mentoring and relationship building in their sessions. Participant #3, Participant #4, and Participant #7 also pinpointed the types of questions that they typically ask students during sessions, which they respectively described as thought-provoking, leading, and Socratic. Participant #7 also discussed the importance of critical listening, a skill that they attributed directly to the training they received. These skills and strategies all fall under the larger umbrella of effective communication. Additionally, Participant #2 and Participant #6 expressed that they must steer students to focus on higher order concerns rather than lower order concerns, such as reviewing spelling and grammar. Participant #4 provided specific metaphors that they use while tutoring, saying that they might “compar[e] an introduction paragraph to a funnel: starting from broader to more specific info, but it still is contained to the scope of the paper”.

Other participants listed specific strategies that they employ; for example, Participant #2 reports using “authoritarian strategies”, Participant #3 reports using “modeling”, and Participant #4 reports using “the minimalist approach”.

Eight of the nine participants offered ideas for ways training could be improved. The four participants who felt very well prepared all had suggestions that related to specific situations, rather than tutoring as a whole. Participant #3 mentioned that training could address how to best help ESL students, and Participant #7 suggested incorporating teambuilding activities to build relationships between staff. Of the four participants who felt somewhat prepared, Participant #13 and Participant #19 both emphasized the need to focus on content in training, rather than theory and pedagogical tools. Furthermore, Participant #19 states that they “didn’t really use what [they were] trained upon in tutoring”. Likewise, Participant #20, who was the only participant in the study to feel neither prepared nor unprepared, wrote that “the training was based mostly on theory [and] more attention to the structure of a meeting before tutoring starts would be helpful”.

Content Tutors

Eight participants self-identified themselves as content tutors. Of these participants, five reported that they felt very well prepared for their positions, and three reported that they felt somewhat prepared for their positions. Many of these participants, particularly those who felt very well prepared, underwent multiple or continuous training programs. In addition, Participant #12 referred to training as a class, and Participant #17 discussed weekly assignments that had to be completed. From the participant accounts, it appears that many of the content tutors felt training for their position was akin to a course.

Interestingly, four of the eight participants identified the skills they utilize by referencing theory and terms that were covered in their training. Of those four, three of these participants reported that they participated in a structured, class-like training program. As with writing center consultants, the content tutors also emphasized the importance of strong communication skills. Four of the eight participants referenced various communications skills. Additionally, Participant #18 mentioned that strong communications skills were incredibly important while tutoring remotely, and this participant was the only participant in the study to reflect on tutoring during the COVID-19 pandemic. When reflecting on the skills, strategies, and techniques that they employ, both Participant #12 and Participant #16 said that they ensure they don't give out answers to students, and Participant #18 said they encourage their tutees to become independent learners. Moreover, Participant #17 and Participant #18 emphasized a need to understand the content to effectively tutor.

Six of these participants offered ideas about improving the training curriculum. Of these six, four of the participants offered suggestions that focused on the act of tutoring. Some of these suggestions are to expose trainees to tutoring. Specifically, Participant #14 would have liked to observe more tutoring sessions, and Participant #16 would have liked to role play mock tutoring sessions. The other two participants had suggestions that would prepare content tutors for specific situations while tutoring. Both Participant #15 and Participant #17 wished training discussed difficult or unusual situations for content tutors to navigate, such as how to proceed when students are disengaged or do not understand the material no matter how it is explained. Although Participant #11's suggestions did not address tutoring itself, Participant #11 also mentioned that they wished they had additional training focused solely on their content area, which other participants deemed important to the act of tutoring. In addition, when asked about

particular skills and strategies that they utilize, Participant #11 stated: “Most of the skills I learned as an education major for undergrad program”. While Participant #11 reported feeling very well prepared, it is unclear whether this is the result of the training program after all. Regardless, this means that, in all, five of the six participants that addressed the final question had suggestions to improve the training curriculum that would add material directly applicable to the act of tutoring. The remaining participant, Participant #17, felt that training could be improved if trainees received feedback on the assignments they were turning in.

Peer Mentors

Three participants self-identified themselves as peer mentors. Two of these participants reported that they felt somewhat prepared for their positions, and one participant reported that they felt very well prepared for their position. Interestingly, Participant #9 wrote that they received standard tutor training which was then supplemented with mentor training. In this training, Participant #9 says that they had a chance to “simulate situations that may arise in mentoring”, although other participants that underwent tutor training expressed that they would have liked to role play or practice tutoring sessions.

While all three peer mentors did highlight skills that they use in their positions, all three mentors also reflected on what their position entails. Participant #8 and Participant #9 both mentioned communication skills they utilize, with Participant #9 noting active listening as the skill they utilize most often. In addition, both Participant #8 and Participant #10 reported using teaching strategies in their positions. However, the peer mentors otherwise focused on different aspects of their positions. Participant #8 wrote that they, as a mentor, need to be able to connect with students. Likewise, Participant #9 felt that “a lot of [the position] is just caring; you just have to really care about your mentees and genuinely want to help them and the rest will come”.

Participant #10, meanwhile, mentioned that mentors must be familiar with Pace's resources, such as online systems and offices, to help freshmen students navigate the university.

In addition, all three peer mentors had suggestions to improve the training program. Generally, the peer mentors most strongly suggest a disconnect between the training curriculum and their job responsibilities. Both Participant #8 and Participant #9 mentioned that they had to read lesson plans while training for the position. However, Participant #9 states that "the training and mentoring itself focuses a lot on the academic lesson plans (which are quite old and somewhat outdated) when the job is really more about connecting to the personal lives of the students". Participant #9 continues, "I would argue that their personal lives and issues dictate their academic success more than the quality/knowledge of their academic skills. I think the outside-of-school factors could be embraced more in training and the mentoring program itself". Additionally, Participant #10 was the only peer mentor who felt very well prepared for the position, but Participant #10 still had suggestions to improve the training program. Participant #10 states, "I felt very prepared for this position, but I also had much more intensive and frequent training than I think some of my peers have". Participant #10 also believes that allowing new mentors to check in with experienced employees "would better support new mentors".

Discussion

Overall, these results suggest that student employees felt best prepared when they participated in a structured training course, which aligns with the best practices defined by scholars. Of the ten participants who reported feeling very well prepared, six stated that they were either enrolled in a training course or participated in a highly structured class-like training program, which refers to training programs with weekly cohort meetings and assignments. Of the remaining four participants, three did not specify the training program they participated in, and one reported that they received intensive individual training that other student employees did not receive. Although the literature suggests that class components are beneficial when training writing center consultants, these responses suggest that structuring training as a course is beneficial to all student employees within the learning commons, regardless of their position. These responses also suggest that the length of the training programs is equally important to the structure. While Participant #20, who felt the least prepared of any participant, described their training program as a class, this training program only met four times over the summer.

Additionally, several participants highlighted the importance of working alongside professional staff or senior student employees during training, which further supports the need for a structured training course. Of the seven participants who felt very well prepared and described the training they underwent, three specifically mentioned their supervisor's role in training. Likewise, Participant #10 suggested that new mentors could be better supported if they are able to check in with professional staff or senior study employees. The literature suggests that working within student support services can allow student employees to develop stronger professional relationships, but these benefits are only seen when student employees work closely

with professional staff. This implies that the supervisor plays an integral role in training, which a class or class-like training supports.

However, while the responses suggest that a class-like structure improves student perceptions after training, it appears that the structure of training is not enough to guarantee that students feel prepared. Participants generally expressed a desire to gain additional knowledge regarding situations that may arise while tutoring, perhaps by observing more tutoring sessions or engaging in mock tutoring sessions. This is also seen among the students who felt very well prepared and participated in a class or class-like training program. Five such participants, all of whom only participated in a class-like training, offered suggestions to make training more effective; two participants expressed that they wanted to cover specific situations that may arise, one participant desired further training in their particular content area, and one participant wished to practice tutoring with mock sessions before beginning. Interestingly, Participant #2, the only participant to complete the Writing Practicum course, also offered similar suggestions to improve training despite feeling very well prepared. However, unlike the students who only participated in class-like training in lieu of a for-credit course, Participant #2 suggested the inclusion of diversity training, which does not relate to a core job responsibility in the way that the other responses do. This implies that offering a credit-bearing course can more effectively prepare student employees for their job responsibilities than merely adopting a class-like structure. This is also seen among participants who completed class-like training programs but only felt somewhat prepared. Although these participants felt less prepared, they generally felt that training was lacking in the same areas, suggesting that there are improvements to be made.

Moreover, the responses generally suggest that a disconnect does exist between the training materials and the job responsibilities of each position. In all, 17 participants offered

suggestions to improve training, and 13 of those participants had suggestions that directly relate to their job responsibilities. As previously stated, many participants wished to be better prepared for difficult situations that may arise while tutoring, which suggests that student employees are not adequately being prepared for challenging sessions. Likewise, several participants would have liked to see more examples of tutoring or structuring tutoring sessions. Several participants also expressed that they would have preferred to spend more time discussing and learning about their content area in training. As a whole, many participants highlighted that existing training programs heavily focus on theory. However, from their responses, it appears that theory is not a priority for student employees during training. Nearly all of the participants who offered feedback on the existing training programs included suggestions that directly related to their job responsibilities, and three participants specifically stated that they would have preferred focusing on these topics. This is consistent with North's assertion that tutors need and want hands-on training. Although North's work is often cited as a foundational text, many scholars have continued to focus on incorporating theory into training curriculums. While this is not meant to imply that theory should not be covered in training, this does suggest that additional time should be spent on topics that directly pertain to the job responsibilities.

Furthermore, the disconnect between the training materials and job responsibilities is especially seen when considering the responses of peer mentors. Although peer mentors are employed by the learning commons and must undergo learning commons training, peer mentors must work off of a curriculum set by the university. Of the three peer mentors who participated, only one felt very well prepared for their position, and this participant acknowledged that they received training that was more intensive than their peers. Participant #9, meanwhile, directly acknowledged that the training materials were largely outdated. As Participant #9 explained, the

training heavily relies on lesson plans that are old and do not address the actual job responsibilities. As such, this further supports a disconnect between the materials covered in training and the materials student employees find relevant to their position.

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Conclusions

While these findings suggest important improvements that can be made to the training offered by the Pleasantville Learning Commons, it is important to note that this study has several limitations. First and foremost, this study has a relatively small sample size. Of the 56 student employees who received the survey, only 20 chose to participate. In addition, this study only examined a single university. Student support services may look different at every university, and each university will employ different training programs for student employees. As such, the results of this study may not be representative of training curriculum as a whole, and further research encompassing more universities and training programs is needed.

Moreover, the results of this study were undoubtedly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the changes to the training curriculum can be directly attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the trainings that have occurred over Zoom were only hosted virtually due to the circumstances. In particular, the writing center training curriculum introduced in Summer 2021 was designed with these restrictions in mind. As a result, it is presently unclear if training would have been more or less effective, or if the training would have been conducted differently, without COVID-19 restrictions.

Most notably, it is important to acknowledge that gaps in training may be the direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online appointments were offered prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but not all writing center consultants were authorized to conduct online appointments. Students could not schedule online appointments with writing center consultants who hadn't been trained. However, the additional training to conduct online appointments only showed employees how to navigate and use the online appointment system. This system had a shared document that both the student and writing center consultant could edit, as well as a text chat box

that they could use to communicate. When the university switched to work from home, the system was updated to allow for voice and video chat. Eventually, all appointments, both within the writing center and the learning commons, were migrated to Zoom. Therefore, although some writing center consultants received additional training to conduct online appointments, this training was not directly applicable to operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that no student employees received applicable training prior to working from home, which may have impacted feelings of preparedness. While only one participant mentioned technology in their answers, it is possible that the move online could have changed participant perceptions.

However, these limitations do not discount the importance of these findings. Ultimately, these findings underscore the importance of offering credit-bearing courses to train student employees to be writing center consultants, content tutors, and peer mentors. If a credit-bearing course is not an option, it is extremely beneficial for training programs to follow a class-like structure. While this is consistent with foundational texts in the field, scholars are not presently advocating for training programs to adopt these structures, which suggests a disconnect between what student employees find beneficial and what training curriculums actually look like. Moreover, these findings imply that further study must be done in this area. After completing the survey, many student employees inquired about the findings. When the initial findings were shared with student employees, many had additional suggestions that they hadn't initially thought of. Most interestingly, student employees revealed that they had never received any feedback on the assignments they completed during training, and they were less confident in the material as a result. These additional comments and suggestions were omitted from the study since these conversations happened informally after the study had ended, but it appears that participating in this study prompted student employees to take a more critical look at the training

they received. These conversations suggest that findings may have been different if the study was conducted through semi-structured interviews, rather than a digital survey. However, as a whole, these findings suggest that there is more to uncover and that further study is needed to determine the actual best practices for training curriculum.

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