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A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Learning Community Peer Mentors at Iowa State University

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Abstract

A qualitative study of learning community peer mentors' experiences in their role was conducted in January, 2001. An initial electronic survey resulted in themes that were used to formulate questions for focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted, and the following categories emerged: out-of-class experiences, supervision, improvement areas, development of mentors, and parting thoughts. Peer mentors served as role models for the students, looked to supervisors for similar modeling, and observed students to learn how best to perform their job responsibilities. The data suggest that mentors learned and emphasized the value of relationships and communication that resulted for themselves and the students through involvement in the learning community.

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at Iowa State University

The use of peers in teaching and learning is not a new phenomenon in higher education. Various roles, such as undergraduate teaching assistants, peer tutors, resident assistants, orientation leaders, and the like, proliferate on college and university campuses (Ender & Newton, 2000). The rationales behind using students in these roles include cost effectiveness (Boud, 2001; Miller, Groccia, & Miller, 2001; Topping, 1996) as well as identified research indicating that students may learn best through interaction with other students (Astin, 1993; Boud, 2001; Topping, 1996) According to Miller, Groccia, and Miller (2001), peers play an influential role for each other:

> [P]eer groups play an important role in influencing adolescent motivation, beliefs, engagement, and achievement. Peers exert influence through socialization processes involving information exchange, modeling, and reinforcement of peer norms and values both inside and outside the classroom. (p. xvi)

Peer roles, such as peer tutor, peer counselor, peer assistant, peer educator, and peer mentor, often have different contextual connotations; thus there is little literature that addresses these individual roles with any great depth. Much can be gained, however, from examining the different types of peer roles and piecing together the components, benefits, and challenges of each. One such peer role that is used within the context of learning communities in higher education is that of the peer mentor.

Learning Communities

Learning communities have been defined both broadly and more narrowly in the literature. Cross (1998) broadly defined them as "groups of people engaged in intellectual interactions for the purpose of learning" (p. 4). Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) defined the purpose of learning communities more narrowly as to, "purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students" (p. 5). Angelo (1997) added that learning communities use cooperative or collaborative methods significantly and emphasize cross-course and cross-disciplinary learning. While not necessarily a new approach to education, today's learning communities are based on the work of John Dewey and on academic experiences structured in 1927 by Alexander Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin, Meiklejohn's former student Joseph Tussman at the University of California-Berkeley in 1965 (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith 2001), and Tussman's friend, Merv Cadwaller, at San Jose State College (Smith, 2001). These efforts were short-lived, but recent concerns surfacing in various reports on education resulted in a renewed approach to teaching and learning, including the reuse of the premises behind the Meiklejohn, Tussman, and Cadwaller "learning communities." The use of learning communities is unique in higher education because of their "focus on structural barriers to educational excellence, pointing to the structural characteristics of many colleges and universities as major impediments to effective teaching and learning" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 9).

Learning community programs take on many designs and serve varied purposes. Linked, paired, or clustered courses, in which students are co-enrolled in at least two classes with a cohort, serve as one format. Often one of the courses is a skills course, such as a composition or communication course (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Freshman interest groups (FIGS) involve a cohort enrolled in three classes, some of which are large lecture courses. Students attend a weekly seminar that often is led by an undergraduate peer adviser (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). In the federated learning community, a cohort of students, along with a teacher who serves as a Master Learner, enrolls in three courses and participates in a seminar for content synthesizing (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The Master Learner is a faculty member who is from a discipline not represented in the courses; thus he/she serves as a model for learning as he/she is expected to play the role of student in the courses, including completing academic responsibilities. Coordinated studies programs involve a cohort of students with a team of interdisciplinary faculty who teach a block of courses on a central theme. All faculty are fully involved, attending all aspects of the program (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). Finally, while not necessarily a model from the perspective of the academic component, residence-based learning communities provide a link between the students' living and academic environments, integrating curricular with co-curricular experiences (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Students in residence-based programs typically live within proximity to each other, possibly on the same floor of a residence hall or in the same building.

Learning communities provide a context for learning that includes a social component. The American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators' document, "Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning" (1998), highlights principles about and suggestions for strengthening learning. Two of these principles are particularly applicable to learning communities. "Learning is fundamentally about making and maintaining connections: biologically through neural networks; mentally among concepts, ideas, and meanings; and experientially through interaction between the mind and the environment, self and other, generality and context, deliberation and action" (p. 5). Connections are a foundational aspect of learning communities as students connect more closely with fellow students, faculty, and academic material. The document also stated, "Learning is done by individuals who are intrinsically tied to others as social beings, interaction as competitors or collaborators, constraining or supporting the learning process, and able to enhance learning through cooperation and sharing" (p. 11). That social tie with other students and faculty is critical to the success of both the students and the learning community programs. For some programs, one way to enhance that part of the program is through the employment of peer mentors.

Peer Mentors

According to Ender and Newton (2000), the goals of peers in these helping roles are to assist students in their adjustment to the new environment, satisfaction with their experience, and persistence toward the attainment of their educational goals. The general goals for peer mentors in learning communities are consistent with those mentioned.

Peer mentors are examples of successful students and models for collegiate success, which are valuable for new students to see. Boud (2001), in reference to peer learning, stated:

> The advantage of learning from people we know is that they are, or have been, in a similar position to ourselves. They have faced the same challenges as we have in the same context, they talk to us in our own language and we can ask them what may appear, in other situations, to be silly questions. (p. 1)

Peer mentors serve as models who have been in a similar position as the new learning communities students, and thus may be viewed by the students as models of success whose behaviors may be worth emulating.

Not all learning community programs involve peer mentors. Those programs that do involve peer mentors typically have specific goals for the program that are met best when students provide some leadership for aspects of the program. Peer mentors typically are undergraduate, non-first-year students who have responsibilities that may range from leading discussion sessions to establishing and maintaining formalized communication links among learning community members (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Often peer mentors are former learning community participants, bringing with them a context for their role that is specific to the learning community program with which they work. Qualifications for peer mentors may include academic standing (sophomore, junior, or senior), demonstrated high academic achievement, and ability to commit an identified number of hours to the position. Responsibilities may include planning out-of-class activities, meeting individually with students in the program, providing tutoring or

study groups, and attending and assisting with a learning community class (Iowa State University, 2000).

Social learning theory and student involvement theory

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) serve as the foundation for this study. Through social interaction and modeling (Bandura, 1977), peer mentors both learn and teach. Collegiate involvement, explored by Astin (1984), also clearly impacts the learning that occurs for mentors as well as students in the learning communities.

Peer mentors provide a type of modeling that is consistent with Bandura's (1977) concept of social learning theory. Learning community students associated with peer mentors hopefully view the peer mentor as a model of academic and other collegiate success behaviors. Those who supervise peer mentors, in turn, serve in a modeling role for the peer mentors to emulate in terms of teaching students and providing them with a valuable collegiate experience. Observing these individuals is critical to the learning process:

> [V]irtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experience occur on a vicarious basis by observing other people's behavior and its consequences for them. The capacity to learn by observation enables people to acquire large, integrated patterns of behavior without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error. (Bandura, 1977, p. 12)

Bandura (1977) suggested that modeling makes establishing behaviors quicker than other means of establishing the same behaviors. Thus, peer mentors, in their roles as models, may enable learning community students to establish college success behaviors quickly

through observation of the peer mentors' actions and subsequent consequences. Ender and Newton (2000) noted the value of these students as models: "There are very positive benefits attained by observation of the action of another person who has gone through similar challenges and experiences. In many cases people learn best by having role models who can demonstrate productive ways to act in a common situation" (p. 7).

Observation is a key element in the effectiveness of modeling:

> [M]ost human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. Because people can learn from example what to do, at least in approximate form, before performing any behavior, they are spared needless errors. (Bandura, 1977, p. 22)

It is intended that peer mentors serve as model students, not only by informing learning community students about how to be successful college students but also by demonstrating appropriate behaviors that have led to their own academic and personal success. Students, viewing those success behaviors, hopefully will employ similar behaviors to achieve similar success.

Observational learning has four components: attentional processes, retention processes, motor reproduction processes, and motivational processes (Bandura, 1977). Attentional processes involve the selection of influences one extracts from the multiple influences available. The behaviors of people with whom one chooses to associate on a regular basis will serve as influences that are learned thoroughly. Retention processes require the observer of the modeling to commit the behaviors observed to memory so that those behaviors can be repeated in the future without direction from the model. Motor

reproduction processes move the symbolic representations of the modeled behavior, stored in memory, into actions. Motivational processes focus on valued outcomes. People tend to adopt behavior that results in desired outcomes, as opposed to unrewarding outcomes. Regarding the failure to adopt a modeled behavior, Bandura (1977) said:

> In any given instance, then, the failure of an observer to match the behavior of a model may result from any of the following: not observing the relevant activities, inadequately coding modeled events for memory representation, failing to retain what was learned, physical inability to perform or experiencing insufficient incentives. (p. 29)

Thus, it requires more than simple observation of a model for an individual to commit to and enact model behaviors.

Because they are experienced students, peer mentors have information and experiences to share with learning community students. That sharing is important to the social learning process, so that individuals are aware of the rewards of certain behaviors (and the potentially detrimental effects of other behaviors) in advance (Bandura, 1977). This allows the students to make appropriate choices for success in an informed manner. At the same time, peer mentors look to each other (when possible), to their supervisors, and to the students themselves to learn not just behaviors to model but also successful behaviors, demonstrated by the peer mentor, that the mentor will want to repeat.

Observations and modeling occur within contexts, and Astin's (1984) student involvement theory focused on such actions within the context of higher education. Defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to

the academic experience" (p. 297), student involvement theory posits that participation in the college experience beyond the minimum involvement results in positive gains. One postulate of the theory expands upon this idea: "The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program" (Astin, 1984, p. 298). This theory emphasizes active participation by students and faculty focus on student behavior in learning.

Student involvement often includes participation in activities with peers. In *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*, Astin (1993) stated that the peer group is "the single most important environmental influence on student development" (p. xiv). He suggested that the impact on student learning and development likely will be strengthened by intentional use of peer groups. As well, student-student interaction was identified as influential in the academic experience, and students tended to adapt their values and behaviors to be similar to those of their peer group. Such intentional opportunities as extra-curricular activities provide additional out-of-the-classroom interaction between students. Astin (1993) found that frequent student-student interactions were associated with positive cognitive development.

In reference to peer group influence, Astin (1993) stated:

> [I]f the preliminary theory of peer group effects . . . is valid, then the prime considerations for the formation of peer groups would seem to be twofold: (1) to find a common ground on which *identification* can occur (the possible common grounds are numerous: career interests, curricular interests, avocational interests, political interests, and so on); (2) to provide *opportunities to interact on a*

> *sustained basis*. This second principle means that institutions need to create structures or policies that will require or encourage student peers to interact with each other. (p. 423)

Learning communities offer these intentional, structured experiences for students that encourage, in fact require, interaction among students. Peer mentors tend to be the facilitators of some of these experiences. At the same time, peer mentors, through their own involvement in the program, also have their own important learning experiences, some of which involve discovering how to help learning community students partake of involvement opportunities.

Methods

Methodology

Fitting with Krathwhol's definition of a qualitative point of view, which "seeks to present the world as individuals perceive it" (1998, p. 243), a qualitative approach was taken for this study since the goal was to present peer mentoring as perceived by the mentors. Two purposes for qualitative research are understanding the meaning of experiences of the participants and understanding the context and the influence of that context on participants and their actions (Maxwell, 1996), both of which were purposes of this study.

A phenomenological approach, defined by Creswell (1998) as a study that "describes the meaning of the **lived experiences** for several individuals about a concept or **the phenomenon**" (p. 51), serves as the framework for this analysis. Schwandt (1997) stated that this approach involves a description of the phenomenon as experienced by those involved in it. The phenomenon in this case is the experience of peer mentoring,

which is the common experience of the participants. The goal of this research project was to understand better the experience of learning community peer mentors as they performed their job responsibilities. Additionally, this study explored what and how mentors learned through the process of performing the functions of the role.

In the 2000-2001 academic year, Iowa State University employed approximately 100 peer mentors in learning communities. Mentors fell into one of three categories– residential, course-based residential, or course-based non-residential. Residential peer mentors were those mentors who lived on the same floor as the learning community participants. They did not have classroom responsibilities, and the students in the program did not take classes together. Course-based residential programs involved both common courses and a shared living environment. The students in a cohort typically enrolled in at least one common course, and the mentor usually lived on the same floor as the participants (although there were some exceptions). Course-based non-residential programs were those in which a cohort of students was enrolled in at least one common course. Mentors typically had responsibilities within the classroom for these programs but did not have any involvement in the students' living environment.

Data Collection

The collection of data for this study was done under the auspices of the Peer Mentor Subcommittee of the Iowa State University Learning Community Advisory Committee. After receiving approval to conduct research on human subjects, an electronic survey was distributed to all peer mentors. The survey included thirteen open-ended items (Appendix A). Thirty-six peer mentors responded, yielding a response rate of 36%. The data were compiled and shared with the Peer Mentor Subcommittee. The

committee then analyzed that data and identified common themes. Those themes became the categories around which focus group questions were developed. The categories included the following: out-of-class experiences, supervision, improvement areas, development of mentors, and parting thoughts. A copy of the questions is provided in Appendix B.

Two focus groups were conducted in January, 2001. Two different days of the week were selected, to provide options for mentors to choose the evening that best fit their schedules. Pizza and pop also was provided as an incentive, since the focus groups were scheduled close to the dinner hour. A total of seventeen mentors participated in the focus groups. The original intent was to conduct four focus groups, two each with non-residential and residential mentors. However, due to the small number of focus group participants, mentors from both groups participated together in the focus groups. The focus groups were audiotaped, and a note taker was utilized as well. The tapes were transcribed, although the sound quality was poor. While the researcher does not believe that this dramatically skewed the results, what resulted were some unclear quotations and some missing data that may have been helpful in understanding the experience of the peer mentors.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions were examined, with common themes and salient points identified. These themes formed the basis for a presentation of the preliminary results in May 2001. Themes included: methods used to choose out-of-class activities, attendance at out-of-class activities, strategies used to encourage attendance at out-of-class activities, successful out-of-class activities, benefits of out-of-class activities, out-of-class activities

contributing to student learning, supervision, improvements, development of mentors, benefits to mentors, advice for new mentors, and reasons to continue mentor programs.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that must be acknowledged. The response rate to both the electronic survey and the invitation to participate in the focus groups was lower than anticipated. As a result of the low response rate to the focus group invitation, mentors in the different types of roles (residential and non-residential) were not grouped for individual focus groups. The original intention was to have separate focus groups for peer mentors working with residential programs and for peer mentors employed by non-residential programs as there is some belief that these experiences may differ significantly from each other. However, the low number of participants in the focus groups precluded that opportunity.

Equipment failure resulted during the focus groups; the microphone did not pick up participants' voices well. As a result, the tapes were difficult to transcribe due to the poor recording quality. A full transcript was not available for the second focus group, with the comments from the last two questions not transcribed. However, notes from this part of the focus group were available. Finally, no member-checking occurred to ensure accuracy.

Findings

The data from the focus group revealed information in the five question categories originally identified. Comments about out-of-class experiences, supervision, improvement areas, development of mentors, and parting thoughts were gathered. Within these categories, mentors shared experiences of observation and modeling through which

they learned about themselves, new students, and the nuances of being peer mentors. These experiences are highlighted in this section.

<u>Out-of-Class Experiences</u>

Mentors discussed methods for choosing out-of-class experiences, attendance at these activities and strategies they used to encourage attendance, successful out-of-class activities, the benefits of the activities, and how those activities contributed to student learning. Four areas surfaced as primary methods for choosing out-of-class experiences. Mentors typically used brainstorming, surveys, their own assessment of the character of the group, and learning community program goals and participants' personal goals to identify the out-of-class activities they coordinated.

<u>Choosing out-of-class experiences.</u>

Many mentors stated that they attempted to assess the character of the group as the primary way of determining out-of-class activities that would interest the group. Some of that assessment was done through observation of the group, but most of it was based on discussions with the students, asking them what they would like to do outside of class. Other mentors made decisions or suggestions about these activities based on their own experiences as first-year students, reflecting on what they wished they had been able to experience. While job descriptions may have suggested that many of the out-of-class activities were primarily social in nature, mentors often attempted to connect these activities to the academic area of interest or to studying in general. Mentors made such statements as:

> In the house for programming, [I] ask[ed] girls kinda what they want, what they're interested in and what they need to have academic success.

> [P]eriodically we meet and ask the students what they want to know. If they want more experience working with cameras or studio lighting and stuff like that. We'll ask somebody to come in and have a presentation on it or we'll figure out a way to get them to a place where they can do whatever they want to do.

By attending to the students' expressed interests, the mentors were able to determine the activities for the groups.

Those mentors who primarily used their personal experiences to guide decisions about the out-of-class activities recalled what they had not experienced or did not know as first-year students. They then chose these opportunities to model interests and activities they deemed beneficial to the students. Two mentors discussed using this approach:

> A lot of times kids feel [there] are certain things that aren't approachable. So I try to direct them to things they wouldn't necessarily do themselves, but would be beneficial to look at, as far as something I wish I would have looked [at] as a freshman as far as my career path coming from exercise science. So if there's something or someone they can't really approach, I try to set that up for them and get them to go.

> My group isn't based out of a classroom and it's kind of hard when I ask them what they want to do and it's hard for them to say. So basically I just do what [the previous mentor who responded] said to do and just think what I would like

> to do or something like that related to their major or agriculture. Just things I would like to [do] and I bring that up and give them a list.

Attending to their own recollections of being new students, peer mentors utilized what they learned as first-year students to coordinate activities that the new students may not have yet known could be beneficial to them.

Attendance at out-of-class activities.

Attendance at out-of-class activities was identified as a concern for some mentors. Attendance also was influenced by when the mentors established a relationship with students. One mentor shared what he learned -- getting to know the students early and having the list of names of their learning community students right away was valuable:

> One of my big problems with attendance this time is I didn't get a list of my team members probably until a week into the semester in the fall. I didn't get to them until the second week of classes, and they had already signed up for the volleyball team or for every other club on campus. So they were not very enthusiastic about the learning team. ... I think the idea is just to get them excited about it to begin with, before they make other commitments.

Scheduling conflicts in general were identified as a cause for low attendance at out-of-class activities, and mentors learned that attendance tended to be poor at the end of the semester when students were especially busy. Even when the out-of-class activity offered students the opportunity for practical application of their skills, participation was low because of the other academic demands on their time. One mentor shared that students in her community had the opportunity to participate in a design contest or event on their residence hall floor to enhance the aesthetics of the hallway. She indicated that

the students were too busy with their course-related projects to take on this activity, even though they could practice their artistic skills by participating.

Mentors also indicated that attendance at these events was best when the students in the program chose the activity:

> I found with my group, I had the best participation when they chose the activity and date and time that it was. I had two activities that were kind of dictated by my schedule as opposed to theirs, more so because I had other responsibilities. It was about half the students that showed up. ... [W]e brought up having them pick the date and time so they feel they have a say and pick a time that's best for them.

By attending to the patterns demonstrated by the group, this mentor's observations led to a more successful approach to scheduling activities.

Other mentors did not have the same experience with scheduling activities. A feeling of helplessness was clear as this mentor shared an experience in improving attendance at out-of-class activities: "[W]e're still trying to find a way ... to make everyone interested in working and having fun together. But I don't know what to do." By not participating in these activities, students had little opportunity to observe the benefits of these events and adopt model behaviors enacted by their classmates and their peer mentor(s).

Mentors identified a number of strategies that they used to encourage attendance at the out-of-class activities, based on their observations of student behavior. Being aware of and sensitive to the timing of the events was important, with late afternoon identified as the best time. Using food as an incentive for attendance was mentioned. Having the activity as part of a mandatory meeting also tended to increase attendance.

Peer mentors' knowledge of this information, learned throughout their experience, informed their future/continued practice in their role.

Successful out-of-class activities.

Mentors shared their observations of activities that they considered successful. Enthusiasm and positive feedback from student participants indicated that an activity was successful. An increase in participation was identified as an indication of success by some mentors. Successful activities also resulted in the development of relationships and individual growth. One mentor stated that the event was successful if the student got to know the mentor better:

> After an activity, if they feel like they have gotten to know you [the mentor] better, it's been successful. ... [If] they feel like they can come and talk to us when they see us on campus. ... [t]hat has been a successful outing or whatever.

Another mentor mentioned that when "[d]eep meaningful relationships develop and good discussion and real friendship . . . develop, to me that's a success." Although this mentor did not verbalize how he would know that this happened, he felt strongly that relationship development was a mark of success.

Attendance was not identified as the primary indicator of successful activities by most mentors. In fact, one mentor stated that an event was successful if someone gained something from the experience. Others commented on the importance of individual time, which led to growth:

> The things that my student[s] mentioned to me at the end of the year and said that they appreciated actually weren't the activities at all. I mean, I'm happy to provide them the study groups, the tutoring, and all the activities we do, but they

> never mention that. They mention the one-on-one time they spent with me and the personal contacts they made with the team. They always talk about that most positively.

This mentor was somewhat surprised to learn that what might be considered "casual" time was valued by the participants more than structured academic events that she coordinated.

Responses by the mentors moved away from comments on successful activities to success in the learning community itself. Experiences that encouraged students to accept the mistakes they made and to find out what they wanted for themselves (such as a change of major) were considered successful by mentors because they had observed others who were successful after making such a change. Some comments reflected this type of success:

> [A]s far as my department is concerned, it might not be a success because they want to keep people in the department. As far as I'm concerned, it's a success 'cause [the students who changed majors/left the learning community] like what they are doing [better] than maybe, than being in this group of people that they like, but they don't like the classes. They don't like what they'll be doing in the future.

> [T]hey just want somebody to be there if they decide this isn't going to be for them. ... It's really tough for them to actually admit [it] to themselves as well as to anyone else. So they just want someone there. I feel that's a success, just to be there and let them make their decision.

When students determined that their choice of major was not appropriate for them or fitting with their true interests, mentors sought to assist as the students made new decisions. Mentors recognized that supported change was positive for the students.

Mentors also sought to be helpful to students who discovered that other choices they made, such as failing or not attending class, have negative results:

> I think that's another [thing] that is successful in the group, ... getting them to realize that in the long run, failing a class or changing your major isn't that big of a deal, in the long run. It's good, well, maybe not great, but it's not entirely bad, unless you fail all your classes and that's a little bad.

Peer mentors' experiences and observations indicated that some failure was acceptable for learning to occur and for students to be able to make decisions based on experiences of failure.

Benefits of out-of-class activities.

The benefits of out-of-class experiences clustered around three categories: application, collaboration, and transition. Application benefits resulted in students seeing future possibilities or job prospects in their fields. One mentor stated, "I think it's an opportunity to learn about different jobs in their major, 'cause if they didn't have that they would be kind of confused." Peer mentors often recalled feeling confused about the opportunities within their field of study as new students. Reflecting on their own experiences of confusion, mentors wanted to mitigate the confusion for the students in their learning community.

Collaboration benefits included networking, finding study partners, improving communication, and sharing varied points of view. Many mentors identified

"networking" and getting to know other students in the learning community through out-of-class activities as a benefit to the students. A mentor observed that when students knew each other, they were more comfortable asking each other for help. One of the mentors shared a perspective on the effects of communication through networking:

> I like it [networking] because then we get to share our ideas about a specific topic and sometimes realize the way I was thinking wasn't the proper one. We had to accept that it is sometimes one of the things that [is] hard for people to do, to accept something different to what you believe[d] for your whole life.

Through this process, mentors had the opportunity to model openness to various points of view, which students would continue to encounter in their college experience.

Others with whom students networked included other upper-division students. One mentor indicated that upper-division students were invited to present to the learning community students about their experiences. This resulted in the learning community students learning about opportunities that they soon/eventually would experience and meeting other student resources, serving as models of success, whom they could seek out within the academic department or college.

Transition benefits involved the reduction of typical transition issues for new students through their interaction with others in a similar situation. "If it makes them feel more comfortable as a student or more comfortable in their department or more comfortable in any way, I think they really gain," stated one mentor about out-of-class activities. This comfort theme is noted further in this illustration of the importance of the connections the students make with each other through their out-of-class activities:

> [T]hey hang out together. I think that's really, really important 'cause it makes them happier and makes them feel more [like] 'I see other people doing it; I can do it, too.' I think that's one of the biggest parts, ... keeping them going. If they're more comfortable, they'll stay.

This mentor attributed retention to students' comfort and belief, indicated by what they perceived about their peers, that success can be achieved in the learning community.

Mentors identified that student learning occurred through the out-of-class activities in two primary ways. First, the social or community component of student life was labeled valuable. Students then could connect their social and academic experiences, and mentors typically discussed how the social interactions created better academic interactions among the students. While most of the mentors believed that the activities supported student learning, one mentor stated that the out-of-class activities did not necessarily support student learning if the activities were only social in nature.

Approaching other students was one result, but also being comfortable approaching faculty was mentioned as a result of the out-of-class activities. In a program that had regular dinners with faculty and learning community participants, the mentor indicated that the interactions made the faculty more approachable to the students, thus enhancing the students' opportunities for academic success. Through this event, faculty were present as models for both the students and the peer mentor.

Another result of the social interactions that positively affected student learning, according to the mentors, was that students learned from other students. Learning to critique student work was beneficial, according to this mentor:

> I think the design community makes it easier to do that kind of stuff [learning how to critique other students' work] and to develop that kind of language so that you can learn to talk with professionals for when critiques and job interviews [occur]. I can honestly say I definitely learned a lot more with my classmates and friends than I did with my professors. They didn't have the time for it. And I can't always learn from a book.

Another mentor from the same program mentioned that the learning community provided an audience for the various types of projects on which the students in the program were working. Although the studio time was focused on their academic projects, it also was social in nature:

> It also ends up being a type of social experience because you go down there [to the studio], the radio is on. There are so many projects going on; it is unbelievable. ... The principles are the same in all of these [project] areas, and so to view the principles in different ways is a real positive learning experience, even if the students don't realize that is what they are looking at. ... It's social but at the same time kind of a lucky situation because of that aspect of the major.

In a language learning community, students had a similar experience in practicing their skills in social settings, according to the mentor:

> [B]y being out of class and speaking Spanish to one another, I think we are learning a lot more. ... So when they come here to the learning community, we get to practice. ... We are making games so that [they] can practice and open up their vocabulary in Spanish. So at the same time I believe in my learning community they are learning out of class and having fun with it.

Mentors also believed that interaction with other community members resulted in students learning more about themselves as well as potentially increasing persistence. According to one mentor, "[T]hey are still learning stuff even if it's just about themselves or other people, or how to relate. That's just as important as the academics or the social. Just learning how to deal, being yourself." Some of what they learned during out-of-class activities was about the mentor's experience as a student. When a group of students in a learning community took a trip to a nearby shopping mall, the mentor found that students had many questions:

> I told them once we got there that they could just spread out with whomever they wanted to. But they stuck to us [the mentors]. While we were walking around the mall, they asked questions about, "What made you decide on your major? How did you know this school was for you? Do you ever think about transferring?" Stuff that, being ... away from the academic environment, they still knew that we were mentors. Through me, they are learning something even if its non-academic. They are always asking questions.

Through this type of activity, learning community students clearly indicated that they saw their peer mentors as models of success who had information that was valuable to them.

Supervision

Supervision was another category that emerged as important in the focus groups. Supervisors served as models for the peer mentors to observe, especially in the areas of planning and problem-solving. Mentors discussed their supervisory needs, indicating that constant communication and guidance was desired. Specifically, mentors wanted supervisors to provide answers to questions, expectations and objectives, and resources

so that the mentors could perform their jobs well. A number of mentors mentioned that supervisors provided them with "ideas," presumably for activities and ways to work successfully with the students. Mentors said, "I depend on them a lot for their ideas on activities and stuff. ... They know a lot more than I do about activities. And they know about professors. They have contacts at places;" "She comes up with ideas for stuff to do, gives us suggestions, and makes sure we're on track;" "I would go in and consult [on] individual cases with the supervisor, and he would suggest a course of action." Supervisors were seen as valuable resources by these mentors.

Some mentors expressed gratitude for the support they received from their supervisors, while others expressed frustration at a lack of communication. One residential mentor commented on supervisory meetings, which involved communication about major issues and general happenings on the floor; she commented on her feelings of support through these interactions: "It's amazing support to have and I just can't say enough positive about that." Another mentor had a very different experience, not even knowing that there was a supervisor:

> We interacted with the professor in terms of the class and material of the class, but we didn't actually realize there was a peer mentor supervisor and there were expectations. A lot of us didn't know that, so it came as a shock later on in the semester when a certain amount of angst had built up.

One mentor mentioned a general lack of communication as an issue, and another mentor said it would be helpful to have a "news group" for mentors with information about speakers on campus. The suggestion of having meetings with all of the learning community peer mentors, for the purpose of sharing ideas and issues, also was

mentioned. This would have provided a greater opportunity for mentors to learn from each other since they had no regular contact with each other after the initial August training that was provided for peer mentors in all programs (not all mentors participated in training, however).

Improvement to the mentor experience

Improvement to the learning community experience, as identified by the mentors, would involve having purposeful activities for the learning community participants that may include "credit" for attendance. After observing and noting behavior patterns regarding learning community student participation in activities, mentors determined that a "credit" approach may best serve the interests of the program and the students. Mentors indicated a desire to have a list of "proven" activities, those that worked in previous years, to use to get the students involved and active in the learning community. Having some type of reward system attached to the activities also was suggested. As one mentor stated:

> [I]t's making the activities more, not profitable, but that the students get something out of it. Say they do an activity; well, maybe that helps their grade out. I guess I don't know what I'm trying to say in wording exactly. Instead of just, "Well, I'm gonna do this activity and participate in this; what good is it gonna do me?" Sometimes they don't see the idea behind it. But if there's some extra credit points or something like that involved, then it becomes a lot more, they want to do it a little more.

They seemed to focus on activities and attendance at these events as important to the student experience; thus finding ways to improve attendance improved the program from the mentors' standpoint.

Meetings for mentors to discuss general mentor issues were suggested; mentors then would serve as models for each other. Some mentioned the benefit of being in the focus group and learning about other people's experiences as helpful. They also wanted to send a reminder to supervisors that they (the mentors) have direct contact with the students and as a result have a better understanding of the students' needs and wants. Statements from two mentors illustrated this point:

> I think, although the work supervisors do is obviously necessary, ... I think the people who work with the students are sort of the ones who know the students best. I think they are the ones who will be able to figure out what is gonna work with the students in terms of when are we going to study, when are we going to do this.

> [Supervisors need] to keep in mind that we do work with the students, and we are a reflection of the students.

As students, mentors saw themselves as student models for their supervisors.

Transition issues emerged for both the students and the mentors. For the mentors, having a documentation or history of the experience that is passed onto new mentors would aid in their transition issues to the mentor role. One mentor shared the experience of having no previous information, stating, "We had nothing from last year. We had to start at square one. And we were absolutely petrified. We didn't know anything."

Background information, providing observations and suggestions from the previous year's learning community peer mentors, would be beneficial to new mentors to serve as a blueprint for getting started in the role.

Development of mentors

The development of the mentors themselves also was a result of the experience of mentoring. Mentors discussed their greatest challenges, which included participation by students in the activities they planned, idea generation for the activities, diversity, balance of approaches (a "happy medium" between being directive and being non-directive), and outreach to students versus waiting for students to seek them out. When determining how to approach students, one mentor stated:

> I think one of the tougher things is definitely knowing when enough is enough in trying to enforce something or trying to motivate a student. ... I know from experience the hardest thing about being a peer mentor or a seminar leader is getting to those who won't come and ask.

Others indicated that establishing the relationship initially with students was a challenge but that they were able to build trust and rapport, and eventually the students sought them out. Two mentors discussed the use of office hours as an opportunity for students to seek them out. One indicated that the challenge was getting students to stop in during office hours. Another mentor decided, during second semester, to ask the students when they wanted her to have office hours. Having learned what did not work in the first semester, she took their recommendations for office hour times and indicated that more students stopped in during the hours they requested that she be available.

Mentors identified having benefited from their roles through their interpersonal development. They stated that they were more open, and accepting of different personalities, and have developed sociability as a result of being peer mentors. One mentor mentioned having learned how first-year students change over the course of a year. She said:

> I've learned a lot about people. I thought when I entered this that I knew a lot about people. I could pretty much read people. But freshmen are just wonderful 'cause they are so different and they have their ways that they want to be. And you can tell that it's a new start for them, so you can really tell. In the beginning, you can really tell who they want to be or who they should be, and then who they are. There's just different aspects to watch. It's just great; I love it.

Learning about first year students through observation was a powerful experience for the peer mentor.

A mentor also asserted that through discussing and teaching the material for the courses with the student participants, the mentor learned the material better. One of the mentors said:

> I think one thing for me is in discussing material and in some cases rehashing it or reteaching the material to some students who don't understand it or to those maybe not present in class that day. You learn so much more by teaching and actually having to explain something and discuss it. It only makes that material so much more clear to you. So that's a big benefit, getting to know the material much better.

Thus, an opportunity to gain content knowledge also surfaced as a benefit for this mentor, and students in the discussion could observe model student behavior through participation in the dialogue.

Advice to new mentors

Based on their experiences and observations about students in learning communities, mentors were asked what advice they would provide for new mentors. Two primary themes emerged: relationships and involvement. They encouraged new mentors to meet the learning community participants right away and establish that relationship, noting that first impressions counted. They also encouraged the development of friendships with the learning community participants. Getting students involved was a highlight in the area of involvement. Mentors' own involvement, in their role and outside of that role, caused them to advise new mentors to maintain balance.

Two comments by mentors suggested their concern about balance and their own limits: "[S]ometimes you may get sidetracked but you gotta keep it balanced, your school work ... with social life. Your time gets constrained and you have to find a balance." "Don't be afraid to pass the buck if the buck gets too big. There are other people to help you do your job. You are never on your own." These mentors learned the value of being realistic about their own issues of balance and utilizing their resources.

Continuing the mentor program

Finally, mentors were asked to comment on reasons to continue the peer mentor programs. Most of the responses focused on continuing the learning communities in general. Mentors believed that the learning communities had an impact on grades and admission into professional programs, helped with transitions, increased retention, and

were appealing to students given the high demand for the programs. Two general references to maintaining mentor programs were that mentors ease anxiety and that mentors are voices of experience. The modeling role of the mentor is clear in this mentor's statement: "I think a voice of experience in the same practice or areas is good. That's another way that students learn, from other people's experience as well as their own."

Discussion

Peer mentors serve as role models who are observed, and simultaneously seek models to observe in their supervisors and in the learning community participants. Learning community students identify these typically older, more experienced students as individuals to emulate, or at least as individuals who have achieved some level of success. They are informed of the peer mentors' experiences and encouraged to utilize them as resources about the institution and about college life. As Bandura stated, "It follows from social learning theory that observational learning can be achieved more effectively by informing observers in advance about the benefits of adopting modeled behavior than by waiting until they happen to imitate a model and then rewarding them for it" (1977, p. 37). Peer mentors are established at the very beginning of the academic year as the models to observe and whose behaviors students may want to adopt to be successful.

It is clear that peer mentors themselves did a fair amount of observing in order to learn, especially in learning how to do their jobs well. Mentors observed their supervisors, their students, other mentors, and previous mentors through direct observation, through reading reports that were left behind (if any were), through their

own previous experiences as new students, and, for some, as experienced mentors. If, as Astin (1993) stated, "'students learn what they study'" (p. 423), mentors learned by studying all with whom they interacted within their role as a peer mentor. Reflection as a form of observation surfaced for some of the mentors as they tried to remember what it was that they needed and wanted to be successful as new students, to provide that for the learning community students.

Supervisors were identified as important individuals in mentor success. Much of what was desired from mentors was expectations and objectives. They also looked to these experienced individuals for ideas about how to work with the students and what types of activities to plan. While they did not speak a great deal about their supervisors, it is clear that they view them as models, individuals with information and answers, who the mentors observed through individual interactions, meetings, and sometimes in class. One mentor even shared that the relationship with the supervisors was extended beyond the specifics of the classroom: "I have been to each of the supervisors' homes, met their families and had dinner with them as peer mentors in groups." The supervisors' opening of their homes had an impact on the mentor, who, in turn, may have chosen to emulate that welcoming behavior with the students in the program.

Peer mentors also indicated learning from each other and a greater desire to do so. One mentor mentioned that she felt the focus group was a great opportunity to hear what other mentors were doing in their programs: "I think that it would be beneficial for me as a peer mentor to be able to know all of you as peer mentors. ... I'm very excited and didn't know this was going to be this much fun to meet everyone." Knowing that all the learning community programs are uniquely structured, mentors still were able to gain

ideas and perspectives that might enable them to do their jobs more effectively. Mentors, then, served as models to each other, and even asked for an opportunity to stay in contact beyond the focus group. While a desire, or perhaps a need, for mentor discussion meetings was expressed, attempts thus far to provide such meetings have met with minimal interest from mentors.

The individuals the mentors observed the most and learned the most from and about were the students; again, they learned what they studied. While they may not have been observing behaviors that they hoped to emulate, mentors observed students' actions, and these actions suggested to the mentors what approaches they might take to the different aspects of their jobs. They commented on the out-of-class activities and the challenges of finding times and appealing activities. Bandura stated, "Much social learning occurs on the basis of casual or directed observation of behavior as it is performed by others in everyday situations" (1977, p. 39). By observing students in their everyday situations, whether that was on the residence hall floor or in the learning community classroom, peer mentors learned about new students and their attempts at college success. Peer mentors living in a residential learning community may have a unique opportunity to observe and influence students in everyday situations by virtue of being present in a daily living situation. This merits further exploration.

Ultimately, what mentors expressed as most critical were communication and relationships. Communication, between themselves and their students, between the mentors, and between mentors and supervisors, emerged as critical. As one mentor stated, "[Y]ou need to make the most of those [first impression] moments like introducing yourself the first day or slipping them a note or making sure they know that

you're there and that you're there to help. ..." By communicating with students individually and in groups, mentors modeled behaviors that indicated the importance of the learning community connections and the individual students' personal and academic successes. When supervisors' communication with mentors was clear, indicating expectations, goals, and methods for addressing issues, mentors felt that they could be more successful and effective with students.

Relationships and assisting in the establishment of such relationships appeared to be the most important experience that mentors had and that they felt students had as well. A great deal of emphasis was placed on becoming a "friend" to the learning community student. Mentors also mentioned the value of the out-of-class experiences and the importance of attending these events, possibly because these are the "casual" opportunities that Bandura referenced that allow students to observe modeled behavior from the peers and their peer mentor. Mentors mentioned getting to know students right away, making a good first impression, feeling challenged by establishing the relationships, learning about others' ideas through interactions, transition ease as a result of community, and comfort approaching faculty and other students (which all suggested that helping students establish relationships is a primary role that mentors play). Even their suggestions of mandating activities through the awarding of credit or by scheduling events during a time that is already designated for the learning community indicated that mentors see those opportunities for interaction and relationship building to be important to the students in the learning community. While mentors may not be aware of the literature that exists suggesting the importance of this type of involvement, they seem to be aware of the value of these interactions. According to one mentor, "They get to know

each other more personally [through out-of-class activities], so when they get to know each other really well, they're not afraid to go down and ask for extra help or something like that." The benefits appeared to be twofold: the students establish relationships, and they gain academic assistance from their peers. Much of the information provided during the focus groups centered on the out-of-class activities; this may be because these activities are the opportunities for casual interaction and observation to occur. If mentor job descriptions are a true indication of time spent on various aspects of the job, mentors most likely spend the majority of their time in the mentor role in planning, coordinating, and participating in these activities.

Conclusions

Peer mentors learn a great deal by serving in this student assistant role with learning communities. They are aware from the beginning that they are to serve as role models, displaying college success behaviors to the new students with whom they work. Mentors learn specific things from other mentors, from their supervisors, and from the students. Other mentors, whether previous mentors they observed or current mentors with whom they talk, may help them identify ways to get students more involved in the activities planned or in their academics. Supervisors provide direction and, when interacting with the student participants, potential behaviors for mentors to emulate when they interact with the students. The students themselves provide the mentors with a great deal of information. Through observing the students' behaviors, mentors learn how to coordinate activities and opportunities for the students that result in high attendance and positive feedback. They also learn what first-year student behavior generally is like.

Greater learning may occur for mentors if they are given more opportunities to interact with and observe each other. Some indicated that they learned from the experience of participating in the focus group and that they would be interested in having some communication mechanisms for themselves as a group. Attempts to bring the group together since the focus groups have proven only moderately successful. Like the students in the programs, mentors may need more of an incentive to add something to their already busy schedules. While pizza or some type of meal typically was provided during planned mentor gatherings, this may not be enough to compel mentors to take additional time out of their schedules to teach and learn from each other about their experiences as mentors.

Acknowledging the value of relationships and communication were key features in the responses of the mentors. They identified as valuable for their roles such things as becoming friends with the learning community students and working with supervisors to identify activities to provide for student interaction. For the students, mentors also identified the value of relationships among the students for success and comfort in their new environment. For learning communities in general, mentors seemed to recognize the value of the relationship and communication opportunities for student success. As one mentor stated when asked why learning communities should continue, "[I]f [students] want to learn in a community, they should be able to learn that way." Learning communities provide some structured opportunities for students to do just that. Many also provide the added benefit of peer mentors to assist that community with academics, community and relationship building, and transition issues. Peer mentors, in turn, have learning experiences that may be both academic and interpersonal, experiences that may

be unique to the learning community peer mentor role.

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Author Note

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Appendix A

Electronic Survey

1. What attracted you to the peer mentor position?

2. If you are a mentor who lives on the same house as mentees, what value do you see in living with learning community students?

3. What duties do you typically perform in your role as a mentor?

4. What out-of-class activities or programs have you coordinated for the students in your learning community?

5. Describe the most common issues that your mentees seek your assistance with.

6. How will your mentor role change in the second semester? What duties will you perform then?

7. Discuss any challenges you have encountered in your role as a peer mentor.

8. Discuss successes you have experienced in your role as a peer mentor.

9. In August, mentors were offered the opportunity to attend a training session, which explored topics such as team building, ice breakers, time management, and campus resources. As a result of your mentoring experience, what additional training topics do you see a need for?

10. What did you expect your duties and responsibilities to be when you applied for the mentor position?

11. In what ways have your expectations been met or unmet?

12. After reviewing the goals of the learning community team, I think we need to work more in. . . .

13. What suggestions would you make to help the peer mentor program work more effectively?

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

Out-of-Class Experiences

1. How do you determine what out-of-class activities to develop/continue:
2. How do your mentees respond to out-of-class activities that you sponsor/advertise?
3. How do you define success in an out-of-class experience?
4. In what ways do students benefit from out-of-class experiences?
5. Discuss whether or not out-of-class experiences support student learning. If so, how?

Supervision

6. What types of support or guidance do (or did) you need from your supervisor?
7. When facing a challenging situation, how do you determine when to get additional support or assistance?

Improvement Areas

8. What recommendations would you make to supervisors to help them improve the learning community?

Development of Mentor

9. Describe one or two of the most challenging aspects of this position.
10. In what ways have you benefited through this position?
    a. Learned about self
    b. Learned about others
11. Based on your mentoring experience, what advice would you offer to help new mentors be successful?

Parting Thoughts

12. If you had to convince President Seagrave to fund peer mentors in the future, what reasons would you give him?