Listening to Undergraduate Peer Tutors: Roles, Relationships, and Challenges

Sophia Abbot, Anne Jumonville Graf,
and Beverly Chatfield
Trinity University

Peer tutoring in undergraduate education can provide many benefits to students and instructors. However, the roles and responsibilities of peer tutors can be complex and varied, even within a single program. In particular, navigating between students and faculty can challenge peer tutors' sense of purpose and role clarity. In order to bring the voices of peer tutors themselves into the scholarly conversation about peer tutoring in higher education, this article provides a case study of a peer tutoring program at a small, private, primarily undergraduate institution. We find that professor-student relationships, role clarity and expectations, and tutor positionality are significant themes in peer tutors' understanding of, and satisfaction with, their tutoring experiences.

Peer tutoring has grown increasingly common as a support structure in higher education, relying on the knowledge and wisdom of students to supplement faculty teaching. Numerous studies have shown the benefits of peer tutoring for students through a range of tutoring practices and roles. Far fewer have asked tutors directly about their experiences. Tutors must inhabit a position between students and faculty, navigating relationships complicated by different levels of power and authority. In surveying and interviewing peer tutors, we hoped to better understand the complexity of these roles and relationships by listening to the voices of the peer tutors themselves. To situate those voices, we first examine the current trends in tutoring in higher education, then use survey data and interviews with peer tutors at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX, USA as a case study, focusing on tutors' understanding of their roles and the accompanying challenges and benefits. We conclude with recommendations for other peer tutor programs based on our findings.

Literature Review

Peer Tutor Programs

Much of what is now called "peer tutoring" or "peer mentoring" emerges from the literature and practice of Supplemental Instruction (SI). SI's emergence in the 1970s offered an alternative vision of tutoring, shifting it from assistance for at-risk students to additional support for all students (Zaritsky, 1994). The latter approach is now common in many university peer tutoring programs today, though of course remedial tutoring programs also exist. Given the varieties of peer tutoring programs, Falchikov's (2001) comprehensive review of peer tutoring provides a helpful schema of the types typically seen in higher education: 1) peer tutors in the same class and level as students tutored; 2) peer tutors in the same class as students tutored but given a special status by the course instructor; 3) students tutoring other students in the same institution, but at a different level or grade; and 4) students

tutoring students at different levels and from different institutions (p. 9). For the purposes of our research, we focused most on literature describing models closest to our own: students tutoring other students in the same institution but at a different level or grade.

Benefits of Peer Tutors

Many studies about peer tutoring are case studies that present program results, typically focused on the impact of tutoring on students tutored. Frequently noted benefits include improved academic performance (Colver & Fry, 2016; Comfort & McMahon, 2014; Ochse, 1995; Topping, 1996; Topping & Watson, 1996) and greater satisfaction with the college experience (Evans, Flower, & Holton, 2001; Falchikov, 2001; Gordon, Henry, & Dempster, 2013). Peer tutoring has also been shown to deepen tutors' own academic learning (Galbraith & Winterbottom, 2011; Wilson & Arendale, 2011) and develop their identities as leaders and teachers (Alsup, Conard-Salvo, & Peters, 2008; Clouder, Davies, Sams, & McFarland, 2012; Murray, 2015).

Student perceptions of tutors offer a less-explored perspective. Colvin and Ashman (2010) use a grounded theory approach to describe how student perceptions of peer tutors can extend beyond stated program objectives. In Colvin and Ashman's study, students viewed peer tutors as a "connecting link" to the campus and academic environment, in addition to roles as peer leader, learning coach, student advocate, and trusted friend (p. 126). Colvin and Ashman also discuss the benefit of tutors to instructors based on tutor feedback on the course, which others have shown can lead to changes in teaching practice (Gordon et al., 2013).

In addition to examining their impact on students and instructors, tutors are also part of a larger institutional context. Tutors' roles may include acclimating students to institutional values or alleviating faculty workload (Christie, 2014; Owen, 2011). A few studies also allude to the perception of tutors as cost-saving measures for the institution (Gordon et al., 2013; Murray 2015; Smith,

2008), though none have analyzed whether this is actually a cost-saving approach.

Peer Tutor Challenges

Peer tutors face a range of challenges, some of which stem from inadequate preparation. Peer tutor preparation varies widely, ranging from one-time orientation sessions (Hodgson, Brack, & Benson, 2014) to prerequisite courses (Alsup et al., 2008), to concurrent enrollment in practicum-style courses (Gordon et al., 2013; Smith, 2008) or courses that offer instruction in pedagogy and learning theory (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Programs in which tutors are working with a particular class of students may also involve regular meetings between the tutor and course instructor (Gordon et al., 2013; Murray 2015) or meetings between tutors and tutoring program advisors/coordinators (Christie, 2014; Hilsdon, 2014). In cases in which preparation consists of a one-time meeting, tutors may feel underprepared in terms of skills and content knowledge to succeed in their tutoring responsibilities (Falchikov, 2001; Topping & Watson, 1996). While many tutoring programs require that the tutors have previously taken the course for which they will now serve as tutors, some tutors also described the challenge of finding time to refresh their knowledge of the course material (Alsup et al., 2008; Evans et al., 2001).

Role clarity is also a significant challenge for peer tutors (Colvin, 2007; Wilson & Arendale 2011). This is an area where peer tutor voices are most visible in the literature. For example, when instructor expectations are unclear, peer tutors describe feeling unappreciated or vulnerable, sometimes taking on extra obligations that can leave them overworked and feeling guilty (Christie, 2014; Owen, 2011). In mitigating these challenges, Smith (2008) highlights the important responsibility of the instructor in clarifying and promoting the tutor's role. Students may also be confused about tutors' roles (Colvin 2007), turning to them for advice on non-course-related matters such as time management and adjusting to college, whether or not these are part of tutors' formal responsibilities. In these situations, it can also be difficult for tutors to maintain boundaries between formal tutoring and personal advice (Christie, 2014). While some tutors may enjoy the informal side of tutoring, others may find it difficult to establish and maintain personal boundaries, which can lead to burnout and overwork (Christie, 2014; Owen, 2011).

Developing the student-tutor relationship requires vulnerability from both parties, which is another challenge. While the student may experience what Christie (2014) calls "asymmetry of dependent trust" (p. 962), since the student is much more dependent on the tutor for knowledge and academic success, the tutoring role is not without discomfort as well. Tutors also experience feelings of vulnerability, especially when students reject their help (Colvin 2007, Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Owen, 2011). Students may distrust peer knowledge due to pre-existing beliefs about traditional sources of expertise, i.e., that knowledge should be transferred from professor to student (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Evans et al., 2001; Owen, 2011), thus tutors may struggle to demonstrate their credibility (Colvin, 2007).

While forming relationships can be a benefit of tutoring (e.g., Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Gordon et al., 2013; Hilsdon, 2014; Topping & Watson, 1996;), relationships between tutors, students, and instructors are themselves challenging and complicated by different levels of power and authority. Some studies concluded that the tutor-student relationship should be as symmetrical as possible (Hilsdon, 2014; Zaritsky, 1994), while others saw benefits in a more hierarchical relationship (Christie, 2014; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Encouraging students' trust in peer tutors in spite of this hierarchy can be a challenge for both students and tutors (Colvin, 2007; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Evans et al., 2001; Falchikov, 2001; Owen, 2011). However, few of these studies examined hierarchy from the tutors' perspective. In one exception, tutors and students alike were concerned about potential abuse of tutor power, though the study did not find any actual incidents of such abuse. It did find that tutors invest in relationships with students and may have difficulty letting go at the end of the course or tutoring session (Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

While tutors can provide a number of benefits to students, instructors, and institutions, as well as benefit themselves, the relational nature of tutoring creates challenges, especially around role clarity. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, more research on student perceptions of peer knowledge, faculty perceptions of peer tutor work, and peer tutor feedback processes is needed in order to fully illuminate peer tutor experiences and potential. It is also helpful to listen to peer tutors themselves as they describe the rewards and challenges of their position, as we will do here.

Institutional Context

While much of the literature on peer tutoring examines programs at large and/or public universities, few studies examine tutoring programs at smaller institutions. Our case study takes place at Trinity University, a private, selective, residential university in San Antonio, Texas, USA with roughly 2300 undergraduates and 200 graduate students. The undergraduate curriculum offers a mix of liberal arts and pre-professional coursework. In 2014, the faculty approved a new curriculum that added several components, including a required course to be taken in

a student's first fall semester called the First Year Experience (FYE), which was modeled on a previous first-year course structure that also incorporated peer tutors. Two instructors teach one FYE course, which meets five days a week (alternating instructors) and develops students' skills in the following areas: discussion and reasoning, oral and visual presentations, analytical and argumentative writing, and locating and evaluating information. Each course is part of a larger cluster on the same topic, and each course has at least one peer tutor, if not two (one for each instructor). Fall 2015 marked the first implementation of Trinity University's FYE program, and research for the case study to follow was conducted immediately afterward, in Spring 2016.

While the focus of this article is on peer tutor experiences, it is important to note that there is a wide range of experiences among instructors in terms of familiarity with first-year student instruction and working with a peer tutor, ranging from decades of experience to none. In addition, in the Fall 2015 semester, few peer tutors had actually taken the class they peer tutored for, since that semester marked the first implementation of the new FYE program; the exceptions were a handful of tutors who had participated in the course on which the FYE was modelled. Tutors earned three credits (a standard course amount) for one semester of peer tutoring.

Method

We began this research hoping to better understand the experiences of peer tutors in Trinity's FYE using a case study approach, in which we present "a detailed description of the setting or individuals, followed by an analysis of the data for themes or issues" (Creswell, 2014, p. 196). Of the three of us, Sophia Abbot approached the project from her position as Fellow for Collaborative Programs (a faculty development position focused on student-faculty collaboration). Anne Jumonville Graf's interest in this topic emerged from her position as First-Year Experience Librarian, interacting with multiple FYE instructors and peer tutors, as well as her own questions about how to effectively use a peer tutor herself as an FYE instructor. Beverly Chatfield, 2017 Trinity University graduate, had peer tutored in the FYE program and was interested in studying and enhancing peer tutoring efforts at the university.

For our case study we developed an IRB-approved convergent parallel mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2014), collecting both qualitative and quantitative data in order to get a broad sense of the lived experiences of peer tutors. First, we developed and administered an anonymous online Qualtrics survey (Appendix 1) sent via email to all Fall 2015 FYE peer tutors. Of the 76 peer tutors who received the survey, 49 completed it, for a robust response

rate of 64.5%. The survey included multiple choice and free-text questions on a broad range of topics: time spent tutoring, roles and responsibilities performed, tutor motivations and benefits, level of coordination with course instructor, perceived level of support and guidance, and general satisfaction with the experience.

To enhance and expand our survey results, the survey included a link for voluntary follow-up through focus groups and email interviews. Fifteen tutors volunteered to participate in these opportunities and ultimately six tutors participated in a focus group (focus group questions can be found in Appendix 2). We designed the format and questions for our focus group using Krueger and Casey's (2000) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. We hoped that these more in-depth and individual responses would help us understand both the varieties and commonalities of peer tutor experiences. In addition, we recognized being able to compare qualitative and quantitative data would allow us to look for contradictions, inconsistencies, and differences (Creswell, 2014, p. 222) in our data and triangulate our data sources (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). While we had planned for this follow-up to be a series of one-time focus groups with a range of participants, scheduling conflicts prevented many willing students from attending. Additional qualitative data sources, such as email correspondence with peer tutors, were included as well to incorporate the written reflections of four peer tutors who were unable to attend a focus group (email questions can be found in Appendix 3). The focus group and email responses make up the qualitative portion of our data along with the open-ended responses from the survey, though we acknowledge the smaller number of focus group participants and email respondents limits our ability to generalize from those sources.

Once we had the complete survey responses, transcription of the focus group and accompanying notes, and copies of email correspondence, we examined our data. To start, Anne and Sophia each hand-coded the complete data at the sentence level to identify themes and categories of themes. Beverly then reviewed the full data and codes as a form of member checking (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). For the most part, our coding of themes was well-aligned, but we discussed as a group any discrepancies we noticed between coding in order to come to a consensus. Following this process and a review of peer tutor literature, we developed a shared set of codes and each re-coded our data using this codebook. Our list of shared codes is as follows:

- Tutoring responsibilities (formal and informal)
- Learning about FY students
- Observations about faculty-student relationships
- Peer tutor relationship to professor
- Positionality (power, course/ program insights from tutor position)
- Tutor role clarity / guidance / expectations (communication with professor)

Table 1
Primary tutor roles

	Number	Percent
Helping students find sources	15	31%
Editing or commenting on student writing	46	94%
Helping students prepare presentations	11	22%
Facilitating or participating in class discussions	42	86%
Hosting review sessions	10	20%
Helping students understand course readings	25	51%
Managing classroom housekeeping (e.g. taking attendance, returning papers)	36	73%
Other	11	22%

Our last step was to select a set of themes to analyze for this article; after consulting gaps and existing discussions in the literature, we narrowed our scope for this article even further to explore three themes in greater detail:

- The professor-student relationship
- Tutor role clarity and expectations
- Tutor positionality

Results

At least one tutor from each FYE group offered in Fall 2015 participated in the survey, for a total of 49 completed responses. Thirty-one percent of tutors were sophomores, 43% juniors, and 27% seniors. Half were majoring in a humanities discipline, 16% in a social science, 22% in a STEM field, and 12% in a pre-professional field. We did not collect demographic information from our focus group or email respondents because they had already provided this information as survey respondents. As an analysis about the results of each FYE group would likely be of most interest to individual FYE instructors at Trinity, we have focused our results and analysis here on shared peer tutor characteristics and experiences, though, of course, different FYE methods and instructors influence those experiences.

Almost half of the tutors surveyed (48%) had never tutored before serving as an FYE tutor. Twenty-eight percent had tutored previously, but not at Trinity. Some (20%) spent upwards of 8 hours per week on tutoring responsibilities outside of class time, and a few (16%) spent as little as one to two hours per week. However, the majority (64%) of tutors spent an average of three to five hours per week on tutoring.

The range in specific tutor roles was quite varied (Table 1). The most common role for tutors across FYEs was editing or commenting on student writing (94%), followed by facilitation or participation in class discussions (86%). Least common were tutors who led review sessions on the course content (20%). The survey question for tutor roles allowed for multiple selections, as tutors usually performed multiple tasks in their roles, hence the percentages will exceed 100.

Despite the variety of specific tasks, we observed several themes regarding tutors' personal experiences of their role as reflected in free-text survey responses and underscored by focus group data and email reflections. The three main themes we explore here are (1) the professor-tutor relationship, (2) role clarity and expectations, and (3) tutor positionality.

Theme 1: The Professor-Tutor Relationship

Tutors' relationships to the professor played a significant role in their tutoring experience. More than half (65%) of the tutors said the opportunity to work with a particular professor was the most important reason for their participating in the FYE program as a peer tutor. Tutors believed that the professor played a large role in whether students used the peer tutor outside of class, which seemed to be a major criterion by which tutors evaluated their own success. In seven instances – four in the survey, two in email reflections, and one in the focus group – tutors stated that professors should mandate or strongly encourage students go to tutor office hours. One tutor reflected through email on the impact of the professor's legitimization of her role, writing that "[the professor's] constant referral to/calling on my knowledge and experience in class…really allow[ed] me to help in class to my full capacity…I felt that the students respected me more outside of class."

Tutors appreciated when the professor gave them a chance to lead the class. In one email reflection and one survey comment, two tutors described the opportunity to lead a class discussion as a valuable opportunity to gain responsibility. While this particular responsibility did not seem to be widespread, tutors saw their relationship with the instructor as one that required earning the instructor's trust, i.e., "We appreciate the trust you [instructors] vest in us." As another tutor explained in the survey, a close working relationship was integral to success:

That is one of the biggest things that I felt contributed to my own role in my section's success: that the instructor and I were on the same page. We met weekly to discuss student progress and lesson plans, and I felt that the instructor trusted me, which was critical to our success.

Theme 2: Expectations and Role Clarity

If mutual trust and the professor's validation of the tutor to students contributed to positive experiences for peer tutors, so did a clear understanding of the professor's expectations. In fact, the two themes (professor-tutor relationship and role clarity/expectations) were closely connected in tutor comments. In written responses to the survey question, "What would you like future FYE instructors to know about working with their tutors?," 49% of tutors strongly recommended professors regularly and clearly communicate their expectations across a range of tutor responsibilities. As one survey respondent suggested,

It's helpful to meet regularly with your peer tutor and to give them firm directions early on about things like: their role during class, whether they should attend every class and lecture, whether they should access and assess everyone's homework... and to what extent they should be assessing the work, and so on.

Importantly, it is possible this response comes from tutors' experience of receiving such guidance and should not be taken to mean that in this case professors did not communicate with their tutors. Still, given the strong preference for clear expectations and regular communication, it seems likely that both tutors who received such communication, as well as those who did not, advocated for its importance in responding to our survey.

In continuing to examine the theme of expectations and role clarity, we noted a divergence between the quantitative and qualitative data when examining role clarity and tutor expectations. Survey responses show 76% of tutors agreed or strongly agreed that "peer tutoring was what I expected it to be," yet in the free-text response following this question, almost a third (31%) of that 76% *also* wrote about feeling unclear about particular aspects of their role. The nature of the role confusion varied. Five of these tutors (11% of survey respondents) said they were surprised by the time commitment tutoring required. Six (12%) of these tutors expected first-year students to be more interested in engaging with the tutor.

We also examined the relationship between tutors' role expectations and frequency of meetings between tutors and instructors (Table 2). While six students were neutral about whether the role met expectations and four disagreed that it did, when broken out by meeting frequency, the data were too small to analyze. However,

looking at tutors who felt the role *did* meet expectations revealed interesting results. The desire for additional support was noticeable even among tutors who felt the role met their expectations and met frequently with their instructors throughout the semester.

The eight tutors who met often with their instructors, agreed that the role was as expected, and they also commented that they could have used additional support or guidance on their responsibilities and mentioned a variety of support needs. Suggestions ranged from wanting a better understanding of their overall role to desiring guidance on more specific tasks, such as how to provide feedback on students' writing assignments. On the other end of the spectrum, of the 14 tutors who seldom met with their instructors (1-3 times a semester), the majority (eight) still agreed that "being a peer tutor was what I expected it to be," though six of those eight wanted more support. Finally, six of the 13 tutors who met sometimes (4-6 times) and agreed the role was as expected also described areas in which they could have used additional guidance. While it is difficult to know how accurately tutors reflected on their initial expectations for the role after having been in it for a semester, it is interesting to see that regardless of how frequently they met with the instructor, many still wanted additional support and guidance.

Tutors wanted additional guidance and support in areas that were also the major areas of responsibility, as seen in Table 3. The free text survey responses and focus group data help illuminate the connection between tutors' primary roles and desire for more support and guidance: "I wasn't entirely sure of the nature of the added suggestions [to student writing]. Over time it got refined, but in the beginning it was rocky." For this tutor and others, lack of clarity around writing feedback did not prevent them from performing the task of commenting on student work, despite feeling unsure about what kind of feedback to provide. This tutor's comment also suggests that initially challenging roles became less so over time, suggesting perhaps the need for greater guidance early on.

In dealing with another role, facilitating class discussions, one tutor wrote in a free-text survey response,

I was never sure how much I should stay quiet and let the class talk. Sometimes my professor would ask a question that I knew the answer to but I felt like I should let the class try to figure it out themselves rather than me give it to them.

This feeling about class discussions appeared in four other responses to the survey (10% total), and came up once in the focus group, suggesting it may be a more widespread feeling for tutors who are newly inhabiting an in-between space between student and professor.

Table 2
Relationship Between Frequency of Meetings, Tutor Expectations, and Desired Additional Support

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
Number of tutors who meet with instructors…	Number from column 1 who agreed or strongly agreed tutoring met expectation	Number from column 2 who wanted additional support
Seldom (1-3 times): 14	8	6
Sometimes (4-6 times): 13	11	6
Often (7+ times): 22	16	8

Table 3
Areas of Primary Responsibility and Desire for Additional Support

Tutor responsibilities	Primary Role?	Total who wanted more support/guidance?
Helping students find sources	31%	12%
Editing or commenting on student writing	94%	41%
Helping students prepare presentations	23%	16%
Facilitating or participating in class discussions	86%	27%
Hosting review sessions	20%	11%
Helping students understand course readings	50%	20%
Managing classroom housekeeping (e.g. taking attendance, returning papers)	73%	9%
Other	22%	9%
None	N/A	27%

However, given the limited number of responses, more investigation among a larger sample would be necessary to generalize to our entire peer tutor population or other tutors.

The new format of the FYE course itself also contributed to the desire for additional guidance. One tutor wanted guidelines for "helping students understand the purpose and format of the course," and they explained, "Many students seemed confused and overwhelmed by the magnitude and format of the course." When asked later in the survey about what tutors would like faculty to know about working with tutors, six tutors in the survey suggested that better understanding the overall course design and purpose would enhance the clarity of their roles. One wrote explicitly that understanding the behind-the-scenes aspects of the course helped with the tutor's success: "I really enjoyed being able to sit in on the weekly meetings that our professors had. It really helped me know what to communicate to the students and I was even able to give input for the lesson plans." Another tutor, who did not have this same experience of regular meetings about the course content and plans, wrote in the survey, "Sometimes I felt like I wouldn't know entirely what the overall goal of the semester was, which led to students wondering what the overall goal of the class was." Until we can repeat the survey, it is difficult to know how much of this is related to the newness of the course format—new not only to tutors but also instructors—and how much was part of experiencing the classroom from a different perspective. A follow-up study would help clarify these issues and allow us to further explore the impact of tutors' previous experience on their tutoring role, especially the need for further support and guidance.

Theme 3: Tutor Positionality

Tutors navigate an in-between space in working with both students and instructors. Two tutors in the focus group described their role as "a good liaison," and, "the person everyone was supposed to go talk to." One of these tutors explained:

I didn't realize how big the disconnect between the professor and the freshman students can be. I remember being afraid of my professor but I didn't realize how much… Sometimes it helps if I put it in student-speak instead of professor-speak.

The in-between positionality of the tutor helped her to act as a translator between the professor and the students. A tutor who sent us an email reflection echoed this and explained her role as a kind of intermediary between her peers and the professor who could not only improve student-professor relationships, but also support students' development of interpersonal skills. She wrote: "If I am approachable, the professor is more approachable, and it

becomes easy to not only help kids succeed, but also teach them to not be afraid of their superiors, and to have confidence and people skills." This tutor felt her "approachability" directly impacted the professor's. However, another tutor in the focus group described a different dynamic: it was the *difference* between the tutor's and instructor's approachability that was beneficial. Students felt comfortable talking about the class with him in ways they did not feel comfortable communicating directly to the instructor. His in-between position allowed him to convey the students' concerns to the instructor, who fortunately took them seriously and responded. Because we did not collect data from the first-year students enrolled in the FYEs, it is unclear to us how much impact the approachability of the peer tutors had on the course more broadly, but it does seem that these tutors enhanced the level of communication between first-year students and the faculty.

Of course, this responsibility to students and navigation between professors and students also presented challenges. Sometimes tutors identified the challenge as a desire to be viewed by the professor as being on a different or higher level than the students in the class. One tutor wrote in the survey: "It's a waste of our time being middlemen between the teacher and the students without having a real role in the class." One tutor in the focus group described feeling "like [another] student in the class." Another tutor in the focus group said, "I felt like my role got lost sometimes,' and explained, saying the following:

> If I have to do all the readings and have the same level of knowledge as [the students] do, and go to class like they do, what is the difference [between me and the students], besides that I'm not getting a grade for it…? Having more defined roles, definitely super important.

Because most of these responses came out of our smaller focus group, we do not know how representative these sentiments were for other tutors, but they are worth noting because of their strong potential to negatively affect tutors' experiences.

Tutors wanted students, not just professors, to see them as inhabiting a different role than the students in the class. One tutor in our focus group explained:

> I think being a peer tutor was really hard to, first of all, not get annoyed by some of [the students], because they're not that far away… Your role of being two or three years older than the first years was really important. They didn't really respect me initially…but there was a certain amount of experience where you could give advice and stuff.

While this tutor initially struggled to be viewed as someone worth listening to because of his proximity to students, he also discussed building more of a rapport with the students as the semester progressed. Indeed, many tutors in our survey took care to differentiate themselves from students. We found six instances of tutors referring to the students they worked with as "kids" in their survey comments and four more survey comments explicitly labelling the students "first years" or "freshmen," implying a sense of distance and advanced experience in spite of their proximity to the students in age.

Navigating between students and professors is a challenging aspect of tutoring. Yet in general, tutors seemed to appreciate being able to take on this intermediary role. We noted earlier that many tutors were interested in tutoring for the chance to work with a particular professor; however, many ended up most appreciative of their experiences with the students. In fact, when asked in the survey about the most rewarding aspect of tutoring, 83% of tutors said it was the opportunity to work with students. As one tutor surveyed said, "I was really pleased that [the students and I] developed a repore [sic] and were able to question each other's thoughts, not just me challenging them… it helped them to learn to question things." A tutor in our focus group expanded on how this relationship went beyond academic assistance:

> The most rewarding part is that relationship that you get with [the students]. Not only was it just paper writing, but the first few weeks it was the transition to college. We would talk about not just [the FYE], we'd talk about classes, registration ... the stresses of being away from home for the first time. It was really good. It felt good to be there.

This tutor and others highlighted the social role they played in helping students transition to college, having conversations not only within the boundaries of the course content or specific course skills, but also extending to more holistic student support. This ability and their knowledge of college life put tutors in a relative position of power in spite of their "peer" status. Tutors clearly appreciated the opportunity to positively influence newer students: despite the challenges, 91% of tutors surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their tutoring experience was a positive one.

Discussion

Our peer tutors perceived themselves not only to be writing coaches and class discussants, but also liaisons, intermediaries, and connectors, linking the world of professor and student. These results confirm Colvin and Ashman's (2010) analysis of peer assistants as a "connecting link" to the campus and academic environment, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate, and trusted friend. In fact, Colvin (2007)

recommends that "...those involved in training peer tutors should stress the liminality or 'in-betweenness' of the position … [Peer tutors] can also be a bridge between instructors and students, with characteristics of both and yet neither fully student nor fully instructor" (p. 178). To this we might add that those training peer tutors also acknowledge the challenge of this "in-betweenness," as well as its positive aspects. In her analysis, Smith (2008) even highlights the importance of the words "mentor" and "tutor" in helping to clarify roles, noting that in her context peer mentor more effectively communicated the desired role to students in the course (p. 61). Regardless of the language chosen, our study suggests that liaison or "connector" positions may be at particular risk for role ambiguity and require additional work in clarifying expectations.

In listening to our tutors, it appears that a lack of role clarity led to frustration or confusion for them and for students. These results echoed a number of findings from other peer tutoring studies. Most significantly, they highlight the importance, but also complexity, of peer tutor role clarity. Colvin and Ashman (2010) also noted in their study that "clarification of instructor and student roles, particularly in a first-year experience class, would...be helpful" (p. 132). Trinity University peer tutors expressed appreciation for clear expectations where they existed and the desire for such guidance where it did not. Yet it also seems that the types of roles inhabited by peer tutors could make setting expectations a more complex and involved process than it may initially appear. While tutors expressed the most anxiety about specific peer tutor tasks, such as providing feedback on student writing or contributing to class discussions, they also expressed a desire for clarity about the nature of their positions and identity as peer tutors. Our results also imply that peer tutors learn what it means to be a peer tutor through practice and experience, which suggests that expectations and role clarity may need to be addressed in multiple and evolving ways throughout a peer tutor's tenure with an instructor and class.

In addition to the complexity of setting clear expectations, our analysis echoed Colvin and Ashman's (2010) findings that "issues of power...were not blatant but rather couched in terms of mentors feeling powerful because they were helping students succeed rather than because they felt the role itself was imbued with inherent power" (p. 132). Trinity University tutors expressed a strong desire to help students and drew power from that position, but not until the professor had given them that power by clarifying the role of the peer tutor for *students* as well. One peer tutor's desire for expectations from the professor—"[J]ust tell us what you want us to do!"—also illuminates the degree to which peer tutors did not experience the position of the peer tutor as automatically meaningful or powerful without the professor's trust and support.

For our peer tutors, the instructor's role in setting expectations mattered enormously not only for the peer tutor but also in helping students understand how to utilize the peer tutor, a finding echoed by Smith (2008) and Colvin (2007). Our peer tutors expressed their sense of the importance of the instructor's role using the language of trust: they were aware that the peer tutor position involved the professor entrusting them with responsibilities. Their experiences also suggested that the trust displayed by the professor in giving them responsibilities influenced the trust of the students in the peer tutor. Furthermore, a professor's acknowledgement of the tutor's abilities and importance in the classroom setting was crucial to a good student-peer tutor relationship. Thus, our findings enhance Smith's (2008) and Colvin's (2007) findings on the significance of clear expectations by clarifying where those expectations need to be set: not only between peer tutor and professor, but publicly in the classroom.

A review of even just a few peer tutor programs reveals the significance of different institutional contexts on opportunities for peer tutor support. Some programs are heavily formalized, such as the Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (UTA) program at Virginia Commonwealth University. As described by Murray (2015), the UTA program serves as a teaching practicum, service learning experience, and leadership seminar; it thus has a host of accompanying outcomes and learning objectives. At the moment, Trinity's FYE peer tutors do not have shared learning objectives; those are determined, if at all, by each professor in an atmosphere that prizes faculty autonomy, especially in the classroom. It will be interesting to observe, going forward, how a culture of individual faculty autonomy functions within the FYE structure, which not only pairs faculty together to teach an FYE course but also groups faculty into FYE clusters, some of which share syllabi and assignments completely while other clusters organize themselves more loosely. Such a structure may make it difficult to implement the recommendation of Wilson and Arendale (2011):

> [P]eer educators benefit when they receive training and education that seeks to develop their understanding in both the content and process of the services they will be providing. *They should have multiple avenues for professional development and be closely supervised by professional staff who can help the peer to understand the boundaries of their roles"* (p. 49, italics added).

Not only do smaller schools like Trinity not have "professional staff" who supervise PTs outside of the instructor, but also they may not have either the

resources or the interest for developing more formal tutoring programs.

Wilson and Arendale's recommendations also highlight a discrepancy in the literature on supervising and training peer tutors: do peer tutors "save" instructor time (Gordon et al., 2013) or require more of it (Owen, 2011)? Although we did not survey instructors at our institution to see if they also had the impression peer tutors "save time," we were able to look at how often students reported meeting with instructors outside of class as a rough measure of instructor time. As we found, while students were more likely to report that peer tutoring met their expectations of the role if they met more often with the professor, many still expressed a desire for additional support and guidance whether they met frequently or less often. We suggest that one reason for this may be that the peer tutor experience is one of continual learning, much like the learning environment of the semester-long classroom. After all, few professors would expect students to receive instruction a few times at the beginning of the semester, disappear for weeks, and then be able to demonstrate their new skills and knowledge perfectly without additional support. Yet this is the model of many peer tutor programs with a one-day orientation structure. As we saw, even tutors who understood what was expected of them described areas in which they would have liked additional support as they gained experience in their tutoring responsibilities. Whether this comes in the form of additional meetings with the instructor or additional workshops/training sessions, we cannot say from our data, but one thing is clear: working with a peer tutor requires a significant amount of time and should be treated as an ongoing learning experience, as our tutors' accounts of learning throughout the semester suggest.

We acknowledge that the students responding to our survey were self-selecting, and those who volunteered to participate in a focus group or respond to us via email were even more self-selecting. This may mean that we heard from students who were especially likely to take their responsibilities as peer tutors seriously (i.e., likely to want additional support), and/or feel dissatisfied by their experiences. Variations in how different instructors used and related to peer tutors are also significant and worth additional investigation, as is the variable of peer tutor age and previous experience. Nonetheless, our strong survey response rate (64.5%) suggests that our results are a good start in listening to the experiences of Trinity University's FYE tutors. Also, while our study was explicitly intended to bring the voices of peer tutors themselves into the conversation about peer tutoring, faculty perspectives on working with peer tutors would also illuminate the issues substantially, especially in regard to issues of workload. Finally, additional research on how tutoring contributes to tutors' own learning would further illuminate the lived reality of peer tutor experiences in higher education.

Recommendations

Despite the significance of institutional context in creating and sustaining a successful peer tutor program, we believe listening to the voices of peer tutors themselves can lead to insights with broad applications. Our research and review of existing peer tutor literature suggests the following take-aways for institutions of all types:

1. Peer tutors appreciate clear expectations in terms of both specific responsibilities and the meaning of being a tutor more broadly. Frequent and open communication between the tutor and the instructor, then, may help lend clarity and structure to the tutor role.
2. At the same time, role clarity is challenging for those in "in-between" positions: the unique positionality of being situated between faculty and students is both the opportunity and challenge of peer tutoring. Framing it as such, as well as giving tutors opportunity to reflect on the learning that emerges from this navigation may help tutors to accept some of the uncertainty and liminality of their position.
3. Additionally, instructors can and should help establish these roles, not only in conversation with peer tutors themselves, but publicly in the classroom setting, with and for students.
4. In addition to setting student expectations about peer tutor roles, instructors can legitimize those roles by speaking specifically about the peer tutors' knowledge and credibility. This affirms the tutor, both in one-on-one settings and in the classroom, thus building tutor trust with the students in the class.
5. Finally, tutors and instructors should recognize that working as a tutor is a learning process, and they should make ongoing support and guidance key to tutors' senses of success.

With these suggestions in mind, peer tutors can experience successful and purposeful relationships with students and instructors.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we find that tutors value the opportunity to work with professors and help students through an intermediary role, but especially so when all parties understand that role. When tutors, students, and professors have a better sense of what role tutors should play in and out of the classroom, tutors are better able to support students, enjoy the experience of tutoring, and

feel connected to the purpose of the course and work of the instructor. Instructors are not only key in deciding and communicating expectations to tutors, but in defining the tutor's role for students throughout the tutor's tenure. Thanks to their reflections, we now have a deeper understanding of the complexity of the tutoring role as experienced by peer tutors themselves.

References

Alsup, J., Conard-Salvo, T., & Peters, S. (2008). Tutoring is real: The benefits of the peer tutor experience for future English educators. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture, 8*(2), 327-347.

Christie, H. (2014). Peer mentoring in higher education: Issues of power and control. *Teaching in Higher Education, 19*(8), 955-965. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2014.934355

Clouder, D. L., Davies, B., Sams, M., & McFarland, L. (2012). "Understanding where you're coming from": Discovering an [inter]professional identity through becoming a peer facilitator. *Journal of Interprofessional Care, 26*, 469-464. doi:10.3109/13561820.2012.706335

Colver, M., & Fry, T. (2016). Evidence to support peer tutoring programs at the undergraduate level. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 46*(1), 16-41. doi:10.1080/10790195.2015.1075446

Colvin, J. (2007). Peer tutoring and social dynamics in higher education. *Mentoring and Tutoring, 15*(2), 165-181. doi: 10.1080/13611260601086345

Colvin, J., & Ashman, M. (2010). Roles, risks, and benefits of peer mentoring relationships in higher education. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 18*(2), 121-134. doi: 10.1080/13611261003678879

Comfort, P., & McMahon, J. J. (2014). The effect of peer tutoring on academic achievement. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education, 6*(1), 168-175. doi: 10.1108/JARHE-06-2012-0017

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Evans, W., Flower, J., & Holton, D. (2001). Peer tutoring in first-year undergraduate mathematics. *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology, 32*(2), 161-173. doi: 10.1080/002073901300037609

Falchikov, N. (2001). *Learning together: Peer tutoring in higher education.* New York, NY: Routledge/Falmer.

Galbraith, J., & Winterbottom, M. (2011). Peer-tutoring: What's in it for the tutor? *Educational Studies, 37*(3). doi: 10.1080/03055698.2010.506330

Gordon, J., Henry, P., & Dempster, M. (2013). Undergraduate teaching assistants: A learner-centered model for enhancing student engagement in the first-

year experience. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 25*(1), 103-109. Retrieved from http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE1402.pdf

Hilsdon, J. (2014). Peer learning for change in higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 51*(3), 244-254. doi: 10.1080/14703297.2013.796709

Hodgson, Y., Brack, C., & Benson, R. (2014). Introducing case-based peer-assisted learning in a professional course. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 11*(2). Retrieved from http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol11/iss2/4

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Murray, J. W. (2015). Articulating learning objectives for an undergraduate teaching assistant program: Merging teaching practicum, leadership seminar, and service learning. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 15*(6), 63-77. doi: 10.14434/josotl.v15i6.19099

Ochse, R. (1995, November). *Writing partners: Improving writing and learning through supplemental instruction in freshman writing classrooms.* Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, San Diego, CA.

Owen, J. (2011). Peer educators in classroom settings: Effective academic partners. *New Directions for Student Services, 2011*, 55–64. doi:10.1002/ss.384

Smith, T. (2008). Integrating undergraduate peer mentors into liberal arts courses: A pilot study. *Innovative Higher Education, 33*, 49-63. doi:10.1007/s10755-007-9064-6

Topping, K. J. (1996). The effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: A typology and review of the literature. *Higher Education, 32*(3), 321-345. doi:10.1007/BF00138870

Topping, K. J., & Watson, G. A. (1996). Same-year paired peer tutoring with first year undergraduates. *Teaching in Higher Education, 1*(3), 341-357. doi: 10.1080/1356251960010305

Wilson, W. L., & Arendale, D. R. (2011). Peer educators in learning assistance programs: Best practices for new programs. *New Directions for Student Services, 2011*, 41-53. doi:10.1002/ss.383

Zaritsky, J. (1994, May). *Supplemental instruction: A peer tutoring program at Laguardia Community College.* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Community College General Education Association, Albany, NY.

_____

SOPHIA ABBOT is Fellow for Collaborative Programs at Trinity University's Collaborative for Learning and

Teaching. As a staff member there, she explores opportunities that foster student-faculty collaboration, including leading a pedagogic consultancy program, and organizing speaker series and events for educational development. She has published previously on students as partners, translation as a metaphor for partnership, and engaged pedagogy.

ANNE JUMONVILLE GRAF is Associate Professor and First-Year Experience Librarian at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. She collaborates with faculty on information literacy instruction across disciplines and teaches in Trinity's first-year experience program. Her research interests include information literacy, college readiness, teaching and learning, and self-reflection.

BEVERLY CHATFIELD is pursuing her Masters of

Arts in Teaching through Trinity University since graduating from their Bachelors program in May of 2017. When she begins teaching in 2018, she plans to approach her high school math and science courses as collaborative efforts between the students and herself. She hopes to stay engaged with the academic research community as she proceeds with her career in secondary education.

Acknowledgements

Appendix 1
Survey

Consent

This survey, which should take 5 to 10 minutes to complete, is part of research is being conducted by [First Author] in the [Center for Learning and Teaching] and [Second Author] in [Library] to better understand the experiences of FYE peer tutors. Neither faculty and staff (including those involved with the FYE) nor [First and Second Author] will be able to connect names or other identifiers to your responses. Your participation or non-participation in this survey will have no impact on your ability to work as a future FYE peer tutor. As an online participant in this research, there is always the risk of intrusion, however small, by outside agents (i.e., hacking) and, therefore the possibility of being identified exists. No absolute guarantees can be made regarding the confidentiality of electronic data. However, the data collected in this survey will be transmitted in encrypted format to provide additional safeguards against hacking. This helps ensure that any data intercepted during transmission cannot be decoded and that individual responses cannot be traced back to an individual respondent. Participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to answer and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. By continuing this survey, you indicate that you have had any questions you wanted answered and agree to participate.

Background and Demographics

When is your expected graduation date?
❍ December 2015
❍ May 2016
❍ December 2016
❍ May 2017
❍ December 2017
❍ May 2018
❍ December 2018

The disciplinary area I most identify with is:
❍ Humanities (e.g. Philosophy, Spanish)
❍ Social Sciences (e.g. Political Science, Anthropology)
❍ STEM (e.g. Biology, Engineering)
❍ Pre-Professional (e.g. Business, Education)

Which FYE were you involved in? (You may select more than one if applicable)
❑ Arts and Ideas
❑ Being Young in Asia
❑ Creative Genius
❑ Food Matters
❑ Great Books of the Ancient World / HUMA
❑ Happiness
❑ Inventing Mexico
❑ Science Fiction
❑ Social Justice
❑ A Successful Life
❑ A Warming World / Climate Changed
❑ What We Know That Just Ain't So

Approximately how many hours per week did you spend working as an FYE tutor outside of FYE class time?
❍   0-2 hrs
❍   3-5 hrs
❍   6-8 hrs
❍   9+ hrs

Before serving as an FYE peer tutor, had you previously been a tutor at [University Name]?
❍   Yes
❍   No, but I tutored before attending [University Name]
❍   No, I had never tutored before this

Why did you opt to tutor for this particular FYE?

Tutoring Role

My primary roles as an FYE tutor were (select all that apply):
❑   helping students find sources
❑   editing or commenting on student writing
❑   helping students prepare presentations
❑   facilitating or participating in class discussions
❑   hosting review sessions
❑   helping students understand course readings
❑   managing classroom housekeeping (e.g. taking attendance, returning papers)
❑   other _____

In what (if any) aspects of your role did your FYE professor provide guidelines or support? (select all that apply)
❑   helping students find sources
❑   editing or commenting on student writing
❑   helping students prepare presentations
❑   facilitating or participating in class discussions
❑   hosting review sessions
❑   helping students understand course readings
❑   managing classroom housekeeping (e.g. taking attendance, returning papers)
❑   other _____
❑   none

In what (if any) aspects of your role would you have found more guidelines or support useful? (select all that apply)
❑   helping students find sources
❑   editing or commenting on student writing
❑   helping students prepare presentations
❑   facilitating or participating in class discussions
❑   hosting review sessions
❑   helping students understand course readings
❑   managing classroom housekeeping (e.g. taking attendance, returning papers)
❑   other _____
❑   none

Please explain your answer to the previous question.

My FYE professor asked for my input on (select all that apply):
- ❑ syllabus
- ❑ reading list
- ❑ assignments
- ❑ daily lesson plans
- ❑ discussion facilitation
- ❑ comments on students' assignments
- ❑ student well-being
- ❑ other _____
- ❑ none

If your FYE section had another tutor, how often did you collaborate with that tutor over the course of the semester?
- ❍ Never
- ❍ Seldom (1-3 times)
- ❍ Sometimes (4-6 times)
- ❍ Often (7+)
- ❍ N/A

Approximately how many times during the semester did you meet with the FYE professor outside of class?
- ❍ Never
- ❍ Seldom (1-3 times)
- ❍ Sometimes (4-6 times)
- ❍ Often (7+)

Learning and Tutoring

Over the course of the fall semester...

	Never	Seldom (1-3 times)	Sometimes (4-6 times)	Often (7+)
I reflected on the way I learn as a result of tutoring.				
I helped the FYE students reflect on their learning while tutoring.				
I talked to the FYE professor about my own learning.				
I talked to the FYE professor about the FYE students' learning.				

As a result of tutoring in the fall semester...

	Yes	No
My own writing improved.		
My own research skills improved.		
My own ability to facilitate discussion improved.		
My own confidence in the course content improved.		

Overall Reactions

The most rewarding part of my tutoring experience was:

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I felt I contributed to the success of the FYE.					
My experience tutoring for the FYE was a positive one.					

If offered the opportunity, I would tutor for an FYE again (or would if on campus).
❍   Yes
❍   No

Overall, being a peer tutor was what I expected it to be.
❍   Strongly Agree
❍   Agree
❍   Neutral
❍   Disagree
❍   Strongly disagree

Please explain your response to the previous statement.

What would you like future FYE instructors to know about working with their tutors?

Appendix 2
Focus Group Questions

1. Welcome and thanks for participation
2. Our introductions
3. Overview of topic/reason for gathering:
   a. As you know, we're here because we are interested in better understanding your peer tutor experiences, especially with the new FYE program. There are a wide variety of ways that peer tutors contribute and a variety of ways students and professors interact with their peer tutors, as we learned from the survey. We hope that better understanding peer tutor roles and experiences can help the FYE program in a number of ways, like ensuring that the PT experience is a positive one for future PTs, and to help FYE professors who may not have worked with a PT before have an idea of what to expect and how to use PTs.
   b. Today, we are interested in finding out not just what worked well or didn't work, but gathering a more nuanced sense of what your experience was like. That means there are no right or wrong answers. We expect you might have differing points of view and hope that you'll speak up especially when your experience might differ from someone else's. Positive and negative responses are valuable.
   c. During the session, [First Author] will be asking most of the questions and [Second Author] will be taking notes; we'll also be recording this so we don't miss any of your comments. No names will be included in our published findings.
   d. During the conversation, feel free to respond to each other and look at one another; you don't need to just respond to [first and second Authors].
   e. We really want to hear from all of you, though we recognize some people are chattier than others. If you end up talking a lot, we may ask you to hold off for a second to give someone else a chance, and if you haven't said much, we might ask you a question directly.
   f. Finally, feel free to keep eating snacks, get up and go to the restroom if you need to, etc.
   g. Ok? Let's begin by… (first question).

QUESTIONS, revised for 3/22/16

Opening Question
Make sure to have each person answer - something like,
    1. "Tell us your name and what you enjoyed most about being a peer tutor."
Avoid info that emphasizes differences between people.

*Introductory Questions (*Think about connection to the topic)

2. "What did you learn about FY students through your PT experience?"
(or "What was it like working with FY students as a PT?")

Transition Questions
3. "What was the best thing your professor did to support you?"

4. "Think about when you had the most contact with your students...what kinds of assignments or class activities seem to facilitate the most interaction between you and the students?"

Key Questions (2-5)

6. "How did being a PT impact your own abilities in those areas?"

7. "Think back to the summer PT training...now that you've actually been a PT, what aspects of that training helped prepare you to help students? What other training might be beneficial?"

10. Many of you mentioned in the survey that your professor asked for your input on issues of student well-being; can you say more about what that entailed?

11. Are there things that could be done to encourage students to make better use of you as a resource? (IF TIME)

Ending Questions
11. What was your most successful moment as a tutor?

12. "What would make the peer tutor role even more enjoyable and satisfying?"

13. "Have we missed anything/is there anything we should have talked about that we didn't?"

Notes on introduction and question structure drawn from *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Krueger andCasey, 3rd ed.).

<div align="center">

Appendix 3
Email Questions

</div>

1. What did you learn about FY students through your PT experience?
2. What was the best thing your professor did to support you in your role as PT?
3. Think about when you had the most contact with your students… what kinds of assignments or class activities seem to facilitate the most interaction between you and the students?
4. Think back to the summer PT training… now that you've actually been a PT, what aspects of that training helped prepare you to help students? What other training might be beneficial?
5. **What would make the peer tutor role even more enjoyable and satisfying?**