

# Effects of Work Experiences for Academic Peer Educators

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## Abstract

*This study examined outcomes for paid peer educators who worked as Supplemental Instruction leaders or walk-in tutors in an academic support center at a large public university. The investigators employed qualitative research methodology; thirteen experienced peer educators participated in one of three focus groups. Findings indicated that the peer educators strengthened intellectual, personal, and professional skills. The authors concluded that measuring learning outcomes for peer educators is a valuable component in the assessment and accountability of postsecondary academic support programs. Results reinforced the importance of thorough, formal training for academic peer educators.*

## Background

The bulk of the research regarding the effectiveness of academic support programs has focused on assessment of outcomes for students who participate in the support sessions, that is, students' knowledge of course content, final grades, satisfaction, and rates of persistence. For instance, more than thirty years of research underscores the effectiveness of Supplemental Instruction (SI) in regard to improving participants' learning outcomes (International Center for Supplemental Instruction, 2010). Arendale's (2004 & 2005) comprehensive examination of research on effective peer cooperative learning programs confirms that the focus of assessment is on measurements of outcomes for participating students. Similarly, Bolan (2010) did a literature search on the efficacy of face-to-face Supplemental Instruction sessions and retrieved 57 articles, eight reports, and six conference papers, all of which focused on learning outcomes for participating students.

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An aspect of academic peer assistance infrequently addressed in literature is learning outcomes for the undergraduate student leaders who deliver the academic support sessions. Stout and McDaniel (2006) described the benefits for SI leaders that they and colleagues at the International Center for Supplemental Instruction observed. Additionally, gleaned information from articles and descriptive literature, Stout and McDaniel summarized the positive effects of SI leaders' work within the categories of academic skills, communication and relationship-building skills, personal skills, and professional skills. They contended that SI leaders improved their

- Academic performances because they needed knowledge of course content in order to facilitate the study/review sessions.
- Communication and leadership skills because they clarified information that others considered difficult and discerned whether or not students understood the material.
- Self-confidence and self-esteem because they learned to balance being a leader and a peer, which included setting boundaries to facilitate participation and learning.
- Professional development because they learned to work as part of team, to receive praise as well as constructive criticism, and to work in a supervisory relationship—skills that were transferable to the work force.

The investigators for this study used Stout and McDaniel's summary as a starting point for assessing the effects of work experiences for undergraduate peer educators working in an academic support center at a four-year, public university in Pennsylvania. This academic support center provided two types of peer assistance, Supplemental Instruction and walk-in tutoring, for which undergraduate peer leaders—termed peer educators—guided students on how to learn

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content for challenging subject matter. The peer educators were chosen for the paid position because they excelled in the targeted course(s), had high cumulative quality point averages, and had faculty recommendations. All were required to successfully complete a one-credit training course in which they demonstrated an understanding of key elements of peer assistance including their role as facilitators of learning; how to implement an active, collaborative model of learning; ways to integrate subject matter with strategies for learning; and how to incorporate higher-level thinking and discussion within peer-led sessions. Peer leaders were trained to provide both SI and walk-in tutoring.

### Methodology

The investigators were a faculty member who selected, trained, and supervised the peer educators and a doctoral-level graduate student in psychology. In order to obtain in-depth information about peer educators' perception of their training and work experiences, the investigators employed focus groups and qualitative research methodology (Sofaer, 2002).

Since the investigators wanted participants who likely had sufficient on-the-job experience to delineate benefits gained from work, they recruited only peer educators who worked at least two semesters. These peer educators received a formal letter inviting them to participate in an hour-long focus session facilitated by the graduate student during which they would discuss their work experiences and how these experiences helped them to develop academically, personally, and professionally. Thirteen peer educators responded, and each participated in one of three focus group sessions.

In designing the qualitative study, the investigators incorporated key factors recommended by Sofaer (2002): a skilled moderator (doctoral-level graduate student in

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psychology with a research background); creation of carefully planned, open-ended questions and prompts in advance; and development of an explicit process for tracking, managing, and coding data. In addition, Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor (2003) suggested identifying broad categories to help structure the scripted questions and overall management of data. Thus, using Stout and McDaniel's (2006) categories as a guide, the investigators anticipated collecting data within the categories of intellectual, personal, and professional skills. The investigators developed open-ended questions to reflect these three categories, as well as possible prompts the graduate student could use to expand discussion, as needed. The scripted questions included:

*In what ways have your experiences working as a peer educator impacted you?*

*Has your experience as a peer educator impacted your intellectual skills? If so, how?*

*Has your experience as a peer educator impacted your personal skills? If so, how?*

*Has your experience as a peer educator impacted your professional skills? If so, how?*

*What have you learned by working with students? (Both those attending your sessions and other peer educators.)*

*In what other settings have you used the skills that you have acquired as a peer educator?*

*How important was your training and work experience as you developed as a university student? Has your experience as a peer educator been valuable when thinking about your life after college?*

*Has your experience as a peer educator influenced your career choice or options for graduate school?*

*In the future, how do you see yourself using the skills you have acquired as a peer educator?*

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The three focus group sessions were taped and subsequently transcribed. Participants were not identified by name in the transcripts; instead, each was assigned a number. As an example, Figure 1 is an excerpt of a transcript from a focus group with four participants.

### [FIGURE 1]

To sort and synthesize the data (Sofaer, 2002), the investigators worked independently at first, each systematically reading through the transcripts three times. The first reading was to color-code areas according to the three broad categories: intellectual, personal, and professional skills. The second reading was to refine each category by identifying specific themes and subtopics, as well as areas that the investigator was unsure about. The third reading was to confirm each investigator's initial findings.

Next, the investigators met to compare their work, looking for overlapping areas and common analyses. They read each other's color codings and markings, methodically noting sections of agreement, disagreement, or uncertainty. To aid them in listing common subtopics and patterns within the transcripts, they created a master chart, divided according to the predetermined categories (intellectual, personal, and professional skills). Together they worked on refining categories and patterns within the transcripts while retaining the language of the respondents as much as possible (Ritchie, et al., 2003).

### **Findings**

A general finding was that the peer educators cited many benefits from both their work experiences and their experiences in the credit-bearing training course they completed before starting their jobs. Overall, the peer educators developed skills within the three skill categories:

- Intellectual – knowledge of subject matter, learning strategies, and higher-level cognition.

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- Personal – listening, interpersonal communication, time management, leadership, and self-confidence.
- Professional – work and career-related knowledge and self-efficacy.

### **Intellectual Skills**

Similar to what Stout and McDaniel (2006) noted, these peer educators indicated strengthening their knowledge of the subject matter. In addition, they reported an improvement in their knowledge of strategies for understanding and remembering this subject matter. In other words, they increased their repertoire of effective learning and study strategies while also refining their knowledge of which strategies could be applied most appropriately to specific content coursework. Comments from two peer educators underscore this gain: “Preparing for SI, figuring out how to present the information, organizing the information, thinking of activities and topics that [I] want to talk about really made me make sure that I knew it.” “I felt absolutely obligated to [try] new study strategies. ...I want to know how the strategies work before I give them to my students.”

The peer educators also appeared to increase their higher-level thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Given the demands of their jobs, they reported that they became more adept at clarifying difficult content and complex situations. Peer educators described the need to “break down concepts,” “incorporate lots of questions,” and “guide students’ thinking.”

Finally, a number of peer educators indicated that their work experiences increased their commitment to learning and academic help-seeking behavior. Interestingly, several peer educators indicated that, for the first time, they sought assistance with their own coursework from their peer educator colleagues.

### **Personal Skills**

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Most of the peer educators felt the need to become more skilled with managing time and organizing their days. They expressed a deep sense of personal responsibility to complete job-related tasks. In particular, SI leaders were paid to prepare independently for each session, which included planning strategies and activities and creating handouts and learning materials. They recognized that this was a crucial aspect of their job and required a significant amount of self-direction, initiative, and personal management skills. This SI leader's comment typifies what others noted: "I have to set my priorities in order to complete my schoolwork and to complete my job. Prioritizing and time management is a big factor in what I've learned so far at my job."

Furthermore, the peer educators noticed how their job helped them to "think on their feet," be flexible, and adapt at a moment's notice to the variety of situations. Those working as walk-in tutors were especially aware of their increased abilities to deal with fluctuating situations, as noted by this peer educator: "It [tutoring] taught me to be able to deal more with spontaneous things coming at me, being on my toes, being able to think of things on the fly and being able to be okay with that."

In a related vein, many peer educators described becoming more patient and understanding in their dealings with others. This seemed to be especially true when working with students who repeatedly could not grasp concepts or who were not as academically responsible, committed, or prepared as the peer educators.

Finally, most peer educators expressed feelings of increasing confidence with their leadership skills and increased appreciation for their position as a leader among their peers. They felt personally fulfilled and rewarded—often for the first time—by their work-related experiences. The words of this peer educator exemplified the personal confidence and affirmation that many discovered in their jobs: "It's so exciting to see the light bulb go off. And

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you [say], 'Yeah! Good job!' It's fulfilling when you see that maybe you helped them get to that point.”

### **Professional Skills**

The peer educators appeared to greatly increase their knowledge of the world of work. They became more aware of various skills that were valued in a work environment (timeliness, initiative, follow-through, willingness to “go the extra mile”) and how these skills impacted their professional opportunities and mobility, especially regarding their supervisor’s perception of their accountability and dedication. Many realized that workplace roles were not necessarily stagnant; professional opportunities arose throughout their tenure. In other words, they became increasingly aware of how they could negotiate roles and move up the professional ladder. For example, after working at least a term in their initial position as SI leader or walk-in tutor, they could assume other leadership duties and extra work hours in the roles of peer observer (performing structured observations of other leaders’ sessions) or evening manager (overseeing program operations during evening hours). In addition, some of the peer educators were given opportunities for research, presentations, and networking; they realized the advantages and value of pursuing these extra opportunities.

Additionally, peer educators expressed that their work experiences instilled a sense of confidence with their choice of majors, career goals, and future world of work. In particular, peer educators majoring in a field of education tended to comment that their work experiences helped to solidify their professional path. Other peer educators expressed a desire to modify their career path in order to incorporate some form of teaching, as exemplified by these comments: “I’m flirting with the idea of teaching a neuropsychology class to either graduate students or college students. I like the idea of teaching.” “This job has opened me up to the possibility that I might

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want to work with high school or young adults in my career.... It's given me more information about what my career might look like.”

### **Discussion**

Peer educators participating in this study benefited from both their work experiences and their experiences in the required training course. This finding reinforces the importance of a thorough and formal training experience for academic peer educators such as tutors and SI leaders.

The peer educators gained skills within the intellectual, personal, and professional arenas. Consequently, measuring learning outcomes for paid peer educators appears to be another valuable component in the assessment of postsecondary academic support programs. Academic support services are not immune from the increasing expectations of accountability in higher education; thus, including reports of peer educators' gains would help to underscore the positive impact of academic support programs and learning centers.

Finally, at the conclusion of the focus groups, participants expressed how worthwhile the experience of sharing and discussing was for them. Supervisors of peer assistance programs could introduce similar discussion groups among staff members during regular staff meetings or through other on-the-job training. As with participants in this study, informal discussions might increase peer educators' awareness of the varied aspects and benefits of their jobs, enhance their job satisfaction and performance, and even increase their overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience.

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**4:** Something I learned this semester was as simple as learning how to deal with your colleagues. Sometimes you can't change your environment- I'm working with two or three people at a time- and we all handle things differently. Different students react to us differently, and sometimes they play us on each other and we have to know how to get over that. It's been really hard, but that's what happens in the real world. It's been very, very interesting.

**GS:** So it's helped you learn how to negotiate your role and negotiate communication with co-workers.

**4:** And remain professional all the while!

**GS:** That's related to the earlier discussion about patience. *Everyone nods & smiles.*

**1:** Just to cut in- my experience regarding professional aspects is self-discipline. I'm the only SI leader in general biology, so I really had to learn how to do things on my own because I didn't have a template to go off or any help from the SI leader prior to me. So I really had to learn how to do things on my own, and learn when to do them- so my self-discipline has increased.

**GS:** So it's taught you about responsibility.

**1:** Mm-hmm.

**GS:** Other professional things that people in previous focus groups have talked about were about how to move up in the professional ladder, research and other professional opportunities, like going to conferences- have you guys experienced any of those things?

**4:** I don't know so much about moving up, but I quickly progressed from last semester, being the one new person to this semester being the only person remaining person with experience. So, I had to switch from the follower/mentee position to the mentor position quickly and take on that new role. So, it was kind of interesting- especially because, like I said, all the tutors this semester were very, very different. It's kinda nice to be the "Mama bear"- I like that.

**GS:** So you feel good about yourself because you can teach other people things, you can mentor other people, help other people. So, it's really like a big network of helping.

**4:** Sure, I guess.

**GS:** If that's not accurate, tell me.

**4:** No, accurate! *The group giggles.*

**GS:** What about other professional things that you guys have learned, things you think you might take with you into other workplace environments. I'm guessing that for some of you this was your first work opportunity. If not, how was this different from your other work opportunities? What do you think you gained from here that you can take with you to other places?

**4:** It's real, you know. I've worked at convenience stores and fitness centers. This is real- it's good training and practice. And, it means something to other people- so it's not just a meaningless job- I have to be here from 8 to 5 to get this done kind of job- pushing papers or something. People remember you for what you do, for what you give to them. It's rewarding for both parties involved, I think.

**3:** I think for me, one of the big teaching skills I learned that I'll definitely use is the cooperative learning and encouraging people to learn on their own, where you're just guiding them. I even noticed a big difference in my class this semester, where we had to do presentations where we taught a lesson in class. I noticed a big difference between the way I would interact with my "students" in the class and how other people interact- how I captured a lot more. The other students would give the whole lecture and just ask questions at the end- whereas I was probing them throughout the entire thing. They probably don't want to answer questions, but *(laughs!)*. But I definitely noticed a difference in my teaching style- and these students are other education majors, probably, that have more teaching experience than I do, as far as their coursework goes. So, I just thought that it was interesting that I noticed a big difference between my style- which is something I like and think that it's important for my major because it deals with language and communication, being really interactive is really important. So, I think having that kind of learning model has been good for me.

Figure 1: Example of Transcript. Key: **GS** represents graduate student; **1**, **2**, **3**, and **4** represent the four participating peer educators.