Pathway to Leadership: The Peer Tutor Coordinator Role at West Chester University

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Abstract

Peer tutors at West Chester University's Learning Assistance and Resource Center have the opportunity to advance in their professional roles by becoming Peer Tutor Coordinators (PTCs). PTCs supervise peer tutors within the learning center and are instrumental to its overall success. PTCs acquire time management, communication, problem-solving, professionalism, and adaptability skills that are beneficial to their learning center roles as well as their professional endeavors. To help fill the gap in the literature, this article highlights the PTC role, competencies that promote professional development and leadership, learning center goals, and implications for future practice in this important area of research.

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Tutoring is a long-standing practice of providing academic support and enrichment to students and plays an instrumental role in student success at higher education institutions in the United States (Calma, 2013; Dvorak, 2004; Kim, 2015). It is a process in which an individual who is trained in an academic discipline, the tutor, provides instruction and remediation to students enrolled in discipline-related courses. Tutoring reinforces learning and encourages the academic growth of students. Kim (2015) noted most tutoring programs enhance students' math, reading, writing, communication, and leadership skills. Tutoring not only assists academically underprepared or at-risk students, but it also benefits the entire student population (Dvorak, 2004).

The Learning Assistance and Resource Center (LARC) at West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCU) provides tutoring and educational support services to the entire undergraduate student population. In addition to supporting students' academic success, the LARC is also committed to the professional success of its peer tutors. The LARC provides opportunities for experienced tutors to advance to a leadership position, and this unique undergraduate leadership position is the driving force behind the learning center's success. This best practice article surveys the literature on peer

tutoring, tutoring training, and the competencies that promote professional development and leadership while highlighting the Peer Tutor Coordinator (PTC) role and the necessary transferable skills required.

Background

The LARC at WCU was established in 1987. The mission of the LARC, which has not changed since its inception, is ultimately to promote autonomous learning. The LARC provides academic support services, such as tutoring and academic coaching, which assist students in becoming independent and active learners (Learning Assistance and Resource Center, n.d.). The main objective of the center is to assist students of the university with succeeding in their academic endeavors throughout their college career.

Like most learning centers, the LARC provides opportunities to cultivate the professional growth of tutors. For the past several years, the LARC has maintained a membership with the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), through which the department certifies tutors at three different levels: Level I - Certified, Level II - Advanced, and Level III- Master. The CRLA is internationally regarded as a credible agency to verify tutoring program credentials and set forth standards for learning centers in the United States and other countries (Dvorak, 2004). All levels of certification training provide an opportunity for tutors to focus on the various aspects of the tutoring experience. Common tutor

training topics include the initial tutoring session, cultural awareness, managing records, communication, problem-solving skills, etc. (College Reading & Learning Association, 2018).

An additional professional development opportunity for the LARC tutors, and the highlight of this article, is a unique position titled the PTC. PTCs obtain the CRLA Level III certification and become undergraduate supervisors of their undergraduate peer tutors. In the PTC role, tutors have the autonomy to supervise, facilitate training and meetings, and participate as a contributing staff member of the LARC. This article will further explore the PTC role, the competencies developed through this role, and implications for future practice in this important area of research.

Literature Review

Despite the abundance of literature regarding the experiences of tutors and tutor training, research regarding leadership development in tutors lacks breadth. Therefore, the following literature review presents relevant knowledge regarding student leadership and peer tutoring development as justification for the peer tutor coordinator role.

Student Leadership Development

While previous research describes leadership as a trait that individuals acquire at birth, current studies define leadership as "a process that can be learned" (Northouse, 2010, p. 15). In the same manner that an individual can improve in a task with proper

instruction and practice, leadership competencies can also be acquired through learned experiences. This skill-centered approach for understanding leadership also implies that leadership development is attainable for everyone, despite their inherent abilities, background, and knowledge. Individuals can potentially adopt these habits through a concerted effort to shift their thinking and actions.

Another central element of leadership, especially evident in peer leadership roles like the PTC position, is the bi-directional influence between a leader and followers.[1] Northouse (2010) defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 5). In this sense, leadership is a transactional and interactive event that impacts both the leader and the members of an organization. A positive leader-follower relationship can enhance a sense of community and satisfaction within an organization (Hollander, 1992). A potential threat to the leader-follower relationship is the tendency for leaders to abuse positional power to coerce compliance. Such abuse of power, often fueled by threat and punishment, devalues the potential contributions of others.

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[1] The term *followers* is a broad term understood to be "those to whom leadership is directed" (Northouse, 2015, p.6).

Research points to the importance of context when considering effective leadership development (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Osteen & Coburn, 2012). Leadership is a concept addressed in the context of process, effect, audience, and purpose (Cansoy, 2017). The extent to which individuals master leadership skills relies heavily on the working environment. Career experiences, according to Northouse (2010), "have an impact on the characteristics and competencies of leaders" (p. 24). Individuals are more likely to develop knowledge and problem-solving skills, for example, when exposed to novel, challenging experiences (Mumford et al., 2000). The same is true for student leaders in higher education. College students benefit from serving in various leadership positions on campus (Hilliard, 2010). Students who hold leadership positions or who are employed as student workers on campus can develop their leadership skills from those direct experiences and by working with peers and other professional staff.

Benefits of Peer Leadership and Tutoring

There are several benefits associated with student leadership at the higher education level. Some of the benefits, related to the PTC position, gained while serving in leadership positions include a few of the following from Hilliard (2010):

- create a sense of ownership and responsibility
- equip their peers with knowledge related to team building and high importance of a team

- help to coordinate meetings, write reports, communicate important information about the university
- increase the impact on peer educational and personal development
- gain a sense of personal ethics and clarity of personal values
- gain improved conflict resolution skills and problem-solving at a broader level
- have ability to gain knowledge and process of better decision-making skills
- deal better with complex and uncertainties
- plan and implement programs better
- Use leadership theories and practices as they continue to develop (pp. 95-96)

Students in leadership positions have the opportunity to engage with peers, faculty, and staff, which allows the student leaders to enhance their leadership skills. Ford, Wilkins, and Groccia (2018) examined the role of undergraduate peer instructors (UPIs) in higher education and its benefits for students and institutions. Researchers found that UPIs experienced gains in communication skills, knowledge and understanding, problem-solving skills, attitudes, and confidence (Ford et al., 2018). UPIs also serve as powerful role models for other students, and they can "establish open and honest dialogues among peers and peer-instructors that

results in improved learning, an increased sense of accountability, and an increased sense of motivation and purpose" (p. 34).

Similar benefits are seen with students serving as peer tutors. The advantages of peer tutoring extend beyond the academic gains for students, as there is a correlation between peer tutoring and student academic success (Foran & Longpré, 2006). Cohen (1986) highlighted a social benefit of peer tutoring in that it "provides peers with an opportunity to interact, to get to know each other, and to develop the social skills of listening, understanding, soliciting and delivering help, and communicating clearly" (p. 179). Students who participate in tutor training enhance their leadership, communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, and "peer tutoring is an effective way to support students' academic success and intellectual development" (Kim, 2015, p. 5). Overall, peer tutoring has proven to be an effective method of providing quality services to students while enhancing both the tutors' and students' social and communication skills.

The Peer Tutor Coordinator Position

The PTC position is a vital role in the success of the LARC. To attract the most qualified candidates, the LARC professional staff incorporated a comprehensive application process. First, and most importantly, all applicants must have a minimum of a 3.0 or higher cumulative grade point average and have received the CRLA Level III certification. The PTC position attracts many of the Level III

certified tutors, as the position provides opportunities for tutors to expand their résumé, to enhance their transferable skills, and to gain new experiences in college. Students who are actively involved on campus and seek new educational experiences are the students who perform well academically and look for leadership opportunities (Miller, Rocconi, & Dumford, 2018). The PTC role gives undergraduate students opportunities to cultivate their leadership style and competencies.

Applicants complete an online application with questions about their interest in the PTC role since the LARC staff need to have a clear understanding as to why the applicants are interested in the position and to understand the students' strengths and weaknesses. In addition to the online application, PTC applicants must participate in the following activities to be considered as a candidate: shadow a current PTC on duty, assist a PTC with a prospective tutor interview, and complete three formal tutor observations. Finally, the applicants must interview with the professional staff and current PTCs.

The PTC position was created to assist the professional staff in the direct supervision of undergraduate peer tutors, and in this supervisory role, the five to six PTCs are the first point of contact for their 20-30 assigned peer tutors. PTCs are required to meet the competencies for effective leadership, and through this position, students are provided many opportunities to expand their

leadership skills when working one-on-one with tutors, as well as with the professional staff. Competencies developed through this position not only assist students during their undergraduate career but also enhance their résumé for future employers or applications for graduate or professional school. To foster the development of transferable skills necessary for future employers, universities are encouraged to provide students with appropriate opportunities to develop these skills (Dickinson, 2000). The PTC position provides such an opportunity for students at WCU to develop their transferable skills while gaining supervisory experience.

Some of the primary job duties of the PTC include the following: supervise assigned peer tutors, facilitate small group bi-weekly tutor meetings, facilitate tutor training sessions, conduct tutor observations, assist the professional staff with data collection and reporting, and participate in prospective tutor interviews. The PTCs have the autonomy to make decisions and as undergraduate students supervising undergraduate peer tutors, the PTCs must demonstrate the necessary professional competencies to be successful in this position.

Examination of the PTC Role and the Development of Professional Competencies

When the process of selecting new PTCs begins, transferrable skills like those noted in the previous section are necessary for the LARC staff to consider when making their final decisions. Previous

tutoring experience, high CGPA, and other relevant work experience are important for this role, but certain leadership qualities are necessary. According to Mustafa (2013), it is a challenge for higher education professionals to foster leadership development, as students are developing certain competencies outside of the classroom. The LARC staff can foster this development, as PTCs conduct CRLA tutor training, facilitate tutor bi-weekly meetings, and complete specific job tasks and responsibilities. This article highlights five of the top professional competencies, with examples, developed through the PTC role.

Time Management

Each PTC is assigned certain tasks or duties throughout the semester, which allows the professional staff to dedicate more time to improving and expanding services provided by the learning center. The PTCs take on a heavy load of responsibility in addition to their coursework. PTCs are full-time students, which translates into attending at least 12 hours of class time each week. On top of class time, students should be studying at least two to three hours for every hour in class (Laitinen, 2013). On top of class time, coursework, and other obligations, PTCs are contracted to work 15-20 hours per week. PTCs must possess excellent time management skills, as they are unable to shirk their LARC responsibilities because of other obligations. PTC duties and responsibilities begin a

few weeks before the start of each semester and continue after the end of each semester.

The following job tasks are typically assigned to the PTCs: monitor tutor attendance, attend weekly staff meetings, lead bi-weekly meetings, hold drop-in hours for tutors and students, keep constant communication with supervisors and tutors, create resources, assist in prospective tutor interviews, and mentor new tutors. To complete all the assigned tasks promptly, the PTCs need to stay organized throughout the semester and prioritize responsibilities. In a study conducted by Talib and Sansgiry (2012), time management skills were significantly correlated with higher GPAs. Therefore, the skills the PTCs learn on the job enhance their potential for academic success.

Communication

Effective communication is critical because there is a constant exchange of information between the professional staff and the PTCs. PTCs act as a liaison for the department, communicating policy reminders, programmatic changes, and performance updates regarding peer tutors. Therefore, PTCs must listen effectively and express ideas both orally and in writing. For example, they must have the ability to represent the LARC during a university marketing event, yet also compose a clear and concise email message to their peer tutor team. Furthermore, they must critically discern which communication approach would be appropriate for

the given task. Cansoy (2017) found that when students are exposed to leadership positions or programs, it improves their communication skills.

The LARC offers several opportunities through which PTCs can refine their communication skills. PTCs are responsible for conducting bi-weekly meetings with their assigned peer tutors. In the absence of the director or assistant director, the PTC is the sole facilitator and provides department updates, addresses tutor questions, and resolves tutor-related issues as a team. Similarly, PTCs are responsible for facilitating tutor training sessions for CRLA Level II trainees. Another task requiring effective communication skills is the tutor observation process, as "peer assessment is to be understood as an educational arrangement in which students comment on the quality of their fellow students' work, for formative or summative purposes" (van der Pol, van den Berg, Admiraal, & Simons, 2008, p. 1804). PTCs conduct formal tutor observations each semester to provide feedback on tutoring approach, style, delivery, and suggests how the tutor could improve or make changes to their tutoring approach. After conducting a formal observation, PTCs are required to review the evaluation form with tutors immediately following the tutoring sessions. In doing so, they must tactfully and professionally offer constructive criticism for improvement.

Problem-Solving

With so many components of the LARC office (i.e. tutoring, training, academic mentoring), problems in the department are inevitable. Oftentimes, the PTCs are at the forefront to triage the multiplicity of issues that arise among tutors. Whether addressing a student's concern that arises in a bi-weekly meeting or approaching a tutor to discuss his tardiness to sessions, PTCs must be ready to resolve issues and make appropriate referrals when needed. Therefore, as the first point of contact to address tutor issues, PTCs become adept in asking appropriate probing questions to resolve issues first-hand or to quickly redirect tutors to the appropriate staff member.

While problem-solving is a highly-utilized skill in the PTC role, it is one for which PTCs can never fully be trained. The LARC provides scenario-based training to expose PTCs to unique student and tutor situations. Additionally, PTCs are made fully aware of the support services at WCU in the event a referral is necessary. Despite these training efforts, however, the true skill-building occurs when students are handling issues. Such issues include but are not limited to: complaints regarding tutor performance, concerns regarding student academic readiness, tutors having difficulty conveying course content, or inappropriate tutor or student behavior. One issue that occurs annually is when a tutor has the desire to resign as a result of work and academic demands. PTCs are instrumental in

assisting overwhelmed tutors either to reduce their tutoring load or develop time management strategies to more effectively balance responsibilities.

Professionalism

Professionalism is an important aspect of any corporation. The existence of a corporation demands the need for professionalism (Wilson, Åkerlind, Walsh, Stevens, Turner, & Shield, 2013). According to Wilson et al. (2013), there are three main characteristics of professionalism. The first is knowing to complete a task while using sound judgment. The second is building a community based on shared values and determining what behaviors are most appropriate for a given workplace. Finally, qualities such as obligation and responsibility, combined with a sense of purpose and dedicated service to an organization, complete the professional worker. Professionalism is a skill that, if learned while in college, enhances graduates' chances of being hired and adapting to the professional workforce.

One of the responsibilities of the PTCs is to conduct interviews of other undergraduate students for potential peer tutor positions, which requires a high level of professionalism. Tutor interviews are an important aspect of the learning center since it employs over 100 tutors per semester. Not typically expected from an undergraduate student, interviewing skills require the PTCs to act professionally and to be thorough during the process. Examples of this type of

professionalism include learning communication from an experienced interviewer, dressing appropriately, and responding to candidate questions.

Adaptability

Finally, as explained by Calarco and Gurvis (2006), leaders need to be adaptable and be able to respond effectively to changes within the environment. While the LARC professional staff provides leadership and structure to the daily activities, the PTCs must adapt to changing situations or events. For example, the LARC is in operation from Monday through Thursday until 9:00 p.m. even though the professional staff completes their official workday at 4:30 p.m. PTCs are responsible to close the LARC each night, and part of their duties is to answer the phone, register students for tutoring, and handle any situation that may arise. While most nights have no issues, they need to be ready for any situation and adapt accordingly.

Also, the PTCs are responsible for conducting the CRLA Level II training. A PTC needs to be adaptable to different types of tutors' learning styles, the various course subject matter, and varying personalities amongst the group. "Level 2 topics are more reflective than those of Level 1, and [the] outcomes and underlying activities and assessments should, therefore, provide more opportunity for reflection and introspection on the part of the tutor" (Schotka, Kondopoulos, O'Neil, & Sheets, 2015, p. 4). To develop competent

certified tutors, the PTCs must adapt training materials and instructional methods effectively to enhance trainees' tutoring skills.

Goals and Implications for Future Practice

The PTCs learn many skills they can transfer into their professional careers or continued education. This position creates opportunities for students to develop important transferable skills that can be applied beyond their undergraduate careers. "Universities are increasingly active in promoting higher education as an experience that develops generic and transferable understandings, skills and behaviors alongside disciplinary learning" (Wilson et al., 2013, p. 1222). The PTC position promotes learning outside the classroom and prepares recent graduates for the workforce or higher degree programs.

The team of authors who produced this article has presented on this topic and is currently working in WCU's learning center or closely partnering with it. They are committed to student success and understand the importance of creating student leaders and providing quality training experiences for tutors. As a future goal, the team would like to continue this research, with both qualitative and quantitative methods. The goal of this project would be to expand on this topic by researching multiple learning centers, tutor training programs, and leadership opportunities that exist for tutors to establish a model for other institutions while closing the gap in the literature.

An additional future goal of the learning center is to design and implement a leadership certificate program that would operate in conjunction with the CRLA certification. The leadership program would tie theory into practice to expand and improve the services offered by the LARC. A limitation of the PTC position is the transferable and leadership skills learned impact only five undergraduate students per year. By creating a leadership program, this would allow over 100 peer tutors to develop leadership competencies. If tutors are trained in leadership theory, the skills gained could extend beyond their current responsibilities. A few of the main challenges in creating and implementing this type of program would be time, funding, and participation.

Conclusion

In closing, the PTC role at WCU's LARC is instrumental to the learning center's success. This leadership role within this learning center is considered unique as compared to other higher education institutions. This role demonstrates PTCs' skill development in time management, communication, problem-solving, professionalism, and adaptability skills supports the mission and growth of the LARC when supervising the peer tutoring program. The literature on professional advancement opportunities for peer tutors and the peer tutor coordinator role is extremely limited. It is recommended that research be conducted in this area to highlight leadership and professional development opportunities for peer tutors. Quality

instruction and academic support are linked to successful learning outcomes in higher education learning centers (Koselak, 2017). The PTC's position serves as the glue that binds and promotes the academic success and leadership development of undergraduate students at WCU.

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