Motivational factors of communication center tutors

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Student motivation in higher education has changed over time and will continue to change, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning. Life priorities such as work, family, health, emotional and psychological needs often impact college students who still take classes and possibly work for an on-campus organization such as a communication center (Crone & MacKay, 2007). Communication centers are a resource that students can go to for oral communication assistance but an often-overlooked part of the communication center are the student tutors who do most (if not all) of the consulting with those who utilize their services. Some student tutors may only work a semester or two with their center but many choose to stay and work even longer with some working past their undergraduate years and into graduate school. But why? This research study seeks to find the motivating factors for communication center tutors and what keeps them returning to work. This study presents results from several years of data collection from over 100 student tutors that illuminates why tutors stay with the organization and ways that faculty supervisors and directors can further motivate their tutors to want to return semester after semester. While motivation research has looked at many dimensions of classroom learning and motivational aspects of peer tutoring in other settings, there is no current research on motivational aspects of peer tutoring in communication centers.

Literature Review

Communication Center Tutors

Communication center tutors are trained to listen to the assignment requirements and needs of the student and provide targeted feedback for improvement (Yook, 2006). Tutors work with the student toward creating a clear rhetorical purpose (Berry, 2017) which sets the foundation for how to organize and ultimately deliver the presentation. As peers to the students they help, they can sympathize with their tutees' situation, offer a non-authoritative perspective, and are considered an ally to the student (Turner & Sheckels, 2015). Power dynamics often seen in classrooms between teacher and student are almost eliminated because sessions are facilitated outside of the classroom environment and tutors are also students.

Tutors do not do the work for the tutee, but rather offer information and suggestions to help the tutee create a stronger presentation. Communication center tutors should have some common attributes needed to be helpful assistants and to create a positive learning environment. Such attributes include being welcoming, responsive to a tutees' concerns, identifying and making suggestions, and asking questions that will help the tutee discover both the problems of their presentation and possible solutions (Turner & Sheckels, 2015).

Student Motivation

Education is concerned with how people learn within multiple levels of organizational, social, and cultural groups. These factors, in combination with the internal processes of the individual, impact motivation and affect both cognitive growth and actions (Schoen, 2011). When students realize they have control of an activity, such as their schooling, they find it in their interest to learn and become engaged (Roth, 2012). Margolis (2005) describes motivation as "the desire to achieve a goal, the willingness to engage and persist in specific subjects or activities" (p. 223). The focus of student motivation is whether or not students have made educational activities a true priority and if they have chosen to fully invest their time and energy into their college experiences (Crone & MacKay, 2007). Through increased levels of motivation, students believe they have the confidence and capacity to achieve (Nukpe, 2012). Student motivation does not solely apply to that within the classroom, but also the motivation they bring when working at an on-campus job.

Tutor Motivation

The study of human tutoring provides a means through which student motivation can be examined closely (Boyer, Phillips, Wallis, et.al, 2009). Tutoring programs can influence tutor motivation, may affect tutor satisfaction and, subsequently, the reputation of a tutoring center (Fresko, 1988). Peer tutor motivational factors have been studied in peer-assisted learning (PAL) tutors. The personal motives and a key reason for their high level of commitment to tutoring were the enthusiasm and motivation for the discipline of teaching (Bugaj, Blohm, Schmid, *et al.,* 2019). PAL tutors cannot represent all college tutors but generally speaking, satisfaction from tutoring is gained from integrating skills and knowledge for benefits (Datt & Aspden, 2015). The motivational factor(s) is/are dependent on the individual and perhaps the specific area of tutoring, but overall, a tutor's perceptions of their role motivated them to learn (Galbraith & Winterbottom, 2011) and continue to work as a tutor.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

The concept of 'intrinsic motivation' comes from the psychologist Robert White (1959) who described it as an element of 'competence' – the capacity an individual develops over time to transact efficiently with their environment. Intrinsically motivated tasks tend to be interesting and enjoyable to perform, while extrinsically motivated tasks are done for an external reward (Steers & Porter, 1979). Lepper (1988) discussed intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in a student context in that one who is intrinsically motivated undertakes an activity for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment gained while an extrinsically motivated student performs a task to obtain some kind of reward or avoid punishment such as a bad grade or teacher disapproval. An intrinsically motivated student will focus on details and processes, while the extrinsically motivated student will focus on results and rewards for achievement (Nukpe, 2012).

The motivation of a tutor might be modified through personal encouragement, feedback on their work, or focusing the tutors' attention on intrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards can nurture selfless feelings, and thereby alter tutors' self-perceptions of their own motives (Fresko, 1988).

Intrinsic rewards can cause tutors to feel better about themselves, the work they are doing, and the satisfaction that they are making a difference in someone's life. External rewards for a tutor may take the form of a paycheck or stipend, academic credit, or the avoidance of social disapproval (Fresko, 1988).

Method

Methodological Rationale

Student engagement, such as being a part of a campus organization, is often the first step on the path to student motivation (Crone & MacKay, 2007). But what motivates a student to work as a tutor in a communication center? Research is needed to explore and determine the motivational factors of why tutors continue to work at a communication center semester after semester and what those in supervisory positions can do to enhance their tutors' motivation. This quantitative study was conducted from 2015-2020, from institutions across the United States that vary in size, demographics, and number of personnel. A statistical analysis of the data was conducted to assess the motivational factors for communication center tutors. The following questions guided the research:

RQ1: Are tutors in a communication center motivated intrinsically, extrinsically, or both?

RQ2: How can directors and supervisors motivate tutors to remain engaged while at work?

Participants

Responses were collected from 165 tutors (36 male, 128 female, 1 non-binary) from 10 different colleges and universities across the United States. Participants included 13 (7.87%) freshman, 41 (24.84%) sophomores, 32 (19.39%) juniors, 62 (37.57%) seniors, 9 (5.54%) graduates, and 8 (4.84%) who chose not to respond. More than half (52.1%) of participants worked only 1-2 semesters at their center. 31.5% worked 3-4 semesters, 13.3% 5-6 semesters, 2.4% 7 or more semesters, and .6% did not respond. The average age of participants ranged from 18 to 48 (mean = 20.87) years old.

Procedure

The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the survey before distribution and participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the research. The survey was administered by the project coordinator from 2015-2019 at the National Association of Communication Centers Conference (NACC) and in 2020 at the primary researcher's university (due to COVID-19 and the conference's shift to online). During these years, the cities of Fredericksburg, Virginia, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Allendale, Michigan, Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Greensboro, North Carolina hosted NACC. From 2015-2019, all participants attended the 'Student forum' session at the NACC conference where time was given to complete the survey. In 2020, all attendees of the 'Student forum' were from the primary researcher's university and had already taken the survey in a previous year. This forum consisted of tutors from various universities coming into one room during the conference to discuss current issues they faced in their workplace and tutoring sessions. The first few minutes of the forum were dedicated to explaining the research, asking for volunteers, and giving participants time to complete the survey. Anonymity of responses was

assured by not including participant names on the survey.

Research Instrument

The survey consisted of seven questions: four demographic questions and three closed-ended questions consisting of one ranking question and two multiple-choice questions (see Appendix A). The ranking question allowed the opportunity for participants to decide which of the options listed was their "top motivator" (rank of 1) down to their bottom motivator or "non-motivator" (rank of 5). The list of motivating factors was generated from two collaborative brainstorming sessions with tutors from the project coordinators' communication center before the survey was generated and those tutors did not take the survey. Brainstorming sessions included students who had varying levels of tutoring experience from one semester to several years.

Self-determination theory guides this research as the theory of motivation aims to explain an individuals' goal-directed behavior and why people feel motivated by activities that are enjoyable and driven by intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The self-determination continuum was used to classify the list of motivating factors. This continuum proposes varying degrees of individual autonomy. Intrinsic motivation represents the most self-determined behavior regulated by inherent interest and satisfaction while extrinsic motivation represents controlled motivation directed by external incentives (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, the motives *of helping others* and *community* were classified as intrinsic motivation since these bring internal pleasure, enjoyment, or satisfaction. *Resume opportunities,*

money, and *location/accessibility* were classified as extrinsic motivation as these focus on rewards, control, or personal importance.

Survey responses were digitally recorded in an excel spreadsheet and a statistical analysis was conducted on the three closed-ended questions to interpret the results and make inferences applicable to the profession (Ott & Longnecker, 2016), in this case, of communication centers. The data was analyzed to determine the top motivating factors for tutors and ways directors and supervisors can also influence motivation.

Results

A broad look at the data indicates the following rank of tutors' top motivational factor: 37.6% indicated *helping others*, 23.8% noted *resume opportunities*, 19.3% *community*, 12.2% *money*, and 7.1% *location/accessibility*. Although tutors ranked these five factors, only the top factor is presented to determine the most important factor for communication center tutors and to gain specific data about participants' preference of one factor over another.

Question six on the survey asked participants, "What can supervisors do to motivate students?" and to select an option between: 1) verbal praise; 2) food; 3) written notes; 4) coffee, and 5) games. Of participants, 30.3% indicated *verbal praise*, 26% *food*, 17.7% *written notes*, 13.8% *coffee*, and 12.2% *games*. Table 1 breaks down the top motivational factor by the number of semesters worked by each participant.

When broken down by the number of semesters worked, *helping others* remained the top motivational factor across the board (See Table 1). Participants that worked between one and two semesters had a wider distribution of motivational factors with

each category being represented by at least several tutors. Those who worked three semesters reflected similar data by those who worked one or two semesters with the exception that *location* was not a top factor. The top motivational factors were more centralized by those who worked four semesters as only three categories (*helping others*, *resume opportunities*, and *community*) represented nearly 90% of responses.

Tutors with five semesters of work noted only two categories: *helping others and community* as factors. Participants with six semesters of work did have representation in each category, but nearly 50% of tutors mentioned *helping others* as their top motivation. Lastly, those with seven or more semesters of work all indicated *helping others* as their only motivation.

Discussion

It may not be surprising that the top motivating factor for participants across all semesters was *helping others.* Tutoring in itself is about the desire to help others and tutors in communication centers are no different in their desire to help others succeed. Ideally, communication center supervisors and directors want to hire and employ intrinsically motivated students who find value in the work and people they assist. One way to encourage greater motivation is to use a student's relationship with a group of people or organization. An organization such as a communication center seems ideally positioned to develop a sense of self-determination (an intrinsic motivation) in their staff (Schwartzman & Boger, 2017) and the data supports this view that the longer tutors work at a center, the more they want to be a part of an organization that helps others. Although many tutors did rank

resume opportunities as their second highest motivator, this became less of a motivator over time. The results in this study mirror the findings from a study by Bugaj, Blohm, Schmid, *et al.* (2019) that the qualities of a good peer tutor are personal motivation/ intrinsic motivation. Although the motivation of *helping others* dropped for tutors who worked for two semesters, motivation rose in subsequent semesters, and was the highest for tutors with several years of experience. Tutors with five or more semesters at their center are overwhelmingly intrinsically motivated and those with seven or more semesters only indicate one single intrinsic factor as the reason they tutor. It could be generalized that the longer one works at a communication center, the more that helping others is their motivation over other self-serving interests and far surpass any money earned for tutoring.

The results also support previous findings that verbal reinforcements tend to enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1971; 1972) and that tutors want to know when they do a good job and appreciate when their supervisors acknowledge their effort. Many students have learned to expect feedback, and if feedback is not given, they suspect that something is wrong (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Many tutors receive feedback from their tutees via post-session surveys but may not receive any verbal feedback from their supervisors who do see their everyday tutoring sessions or know first-hand how helpful their tutees found the session. Verbal praise has often been recognized as an important factor in the development of students' motivation in the classroom (Handcock, 2000) and is also true for communication center tutors. Tutors desire verbal feedback from their supervisors and are more motivated to

work when they receive it (especially when doing something well).

Communication centers are largely built around the efforts of student and faculty collaborations (Kast, 2019), and the interaction between students and faculty supervisors plays an important role in why tutors stay to work in their center because research has shown that people do not leave jobs, they leave managers (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, *et al.*, 2002). Communication center supervisors and administrators can use the data from this survey to inform their decisions on how to motivate their student employees. Supervisors who can adopt a leadership style rooted in individual considerations that promote relationships and meet the needs of the individual will most successfully attract, motivate, and retain their employees (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Deci (1971) noted that positive relationships play a large role in enhancing intrinsic motivation. For communication centers, leaders can give verbal praise when tutors do something well and can also offer food to show their appreciation. Both actions will promote positive relationships and help retain employees.

Limitations

Despite the moderate sample size, the surveys were only distributed to tutors who were able to attend the NACC conference during the years of 2015-2019 and could physically pick up a physical copy since electronic surveys were not offered. Also, although participants represented 10 different universities which ranged in size from small liberal arts colleges to large research universities, more geographical locations of communication centers should be

included as most universities represented in the study were from the east coast (mid-Atlantic to Northeast) and upper Midwest. This might coincide with the geographical locations of the NACC conference and that students who were able to travel to the conference were from places near the host site. Many colleges and universities such as those on the west coast and in the deep south were not represented in the sample.

The results of the study might also apply primarily to females. The gender distribution of participants was heavily imbalanced with 77.5% self-identifying as female. This gender skew could represent the female-to-male ratio at many communication centers or simply that women are more likely to participate in surveys than men (Curtin, Presser, & Singer, 2000). It remains unclear if a greater sample size will yield more male participants as there is no comprehensive demographic data on tutors in higher education, only general data from the Census Bureau that women account for 63.4% of tutors (DataUSA, n.d.). More male participation might not be significantly important since the data was not separated by gender, but is still a limitation.

Finally, it should be noted that there were predetermined responses for each of the non-demographic questions on the survey. The study did not allow for qualitative responses to write additional answers and thus was limited to the options provided. This study treated the options listed on questions four and six as the only possible motivational factors of participants.

The limitations of the study and the study design offers others to conduct more research on tutor motivation and further explore how

motivation can impact administrators' practices in recruitment, training, and engagement. More research on student employee motivation may offer further insight into how communication center administrators can adopt practices and techniques from other disciplines. Future research should continue to obtain more information from tutors about other possible motivational factors with the goal of retaining student employees over time.

Conclusion

Participant data reveals that communication center tutors are primarily intrinsically motivated to work because they want to help others. Their motivation aligns with other tutor research in that the main motivational factors are intrinsic while financial compensation is deemed as secondary (Bugaj, Blohm, Schmid, *et al.,* 2019). Although tutors are intrinsically motivated, supervisors and directors can further motivate their staff with verbal praise and providing food. When students see they are involved in achieving a greater good, they are much more inclined to persist (Crone & MacKay, 2007). Communication center tutors achieve a greater good by helping their peers on oral communication assignments and are thus motivated to return to work at their center semester after semester. Communication center tutors are motivated to work because they want to help others, but administrators and supervisors must acknowledge there are always more ways to create an advantageous work environment for their staff.

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Table 1: Top motivational factor by the number of semesters worked

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7+		Total
Motivation	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	
Helping others	14	35.9	14	30.4	6	42.9	13	34.2	3	50	8	47.1	4	100	62
Resume	9	23.1	12	26	5	35.7	9	23.7			3	17.6			38
Community	5	12.8	8	17.4	2	14.3	12	31.6	3	50	2	11.8			32
Money	5	12.8	8	17.4	1	7.1	3	7.9			3	17.6			20
Location	6	15.4	4	8.7			1	2.6			1	5.9			12
Total	39		46		14		38		6		17		4		164

*one survey was not included as there was no indication of the number of semesters worked

Appendix A
Motivation Survey

Age: _____   Classification/Year:_____   Gender: _____
How long have you worked at your Center? _____ semester(s)

What motivates you to continue to be a tutor at your Center?
(**RANK 1-5**.................**1=top motivator 5= non-motivator**)
Helping others
Money
Resume opportunities
Location/accessibility
Community

How often does your Center incorporate food? (circle one)
Daily
Weekly
Monthly
Once a semester
Never

How can directors/supervisors motivate tutors to remain engaged and happy while at work?
Verbal praise
Written notes
Coffee
Food
Games