Barriers to Accessing Tutoring Services Among Students who Received a Mid-Semester Warning

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Abstract

For this focus group study we recruited from a population of 345 university students who had been informed of their poor academic performance in at least one course, but who had not utilized peer tutoring in the semester they received the warning, in order to determine if stigma played a role in their decision not to seek help. We learned from these students that perceived stigma does play a role, but other barriers emerged as well—personal obstacles, lack of knowledge about services, the availability of easier options, and systemic obstacles.

Tutoring at the college level, throughout the history of Western higher education, has experienced varying degrees of stigma (Arendale, 2010a; Arendale, 2010b). At our institution (a small, private college in the Pacific Northwest), we heard comments from tutors working in our learning assistance program (LAP) that indicated stigma might play a role in students choosing not to use our tutoring services, even when they might have benefited from those services. A common question for faculty, advisors, and those

in the learning assistance profession is why college students who are struggling the most seem the least likely to seek academic help (Dembo & Praks Seli, 2004; Karebenic & Knapp, 1991; Pellegrino, 2012; Pillai, 2010; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Because we hypothesized that stigma was a factor, we began by reviewing previous studies for evidence of stigma associated with tutoring or other forms of learning assistance. While the concept of stigma appeared frequently in the literature, there was no definitive evidence of active stigma against students utilizing tutoring services. Perceived stigma or self-stigma (Arendale, 2010b; Winograd & Rust, 2014), however, emerged frequently as a barrier to help-seeking. Other barriers such as stereotype threat (Thoman, Smith, Brown, Chase, & Lee, 2013; Winograd & Rust, 2014), lack of sense of belonging (Robert & Thomson, 1994; Thoman et al., 2013; Winograd & Rust, 2014), and personal and motivational factors (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Perry, Hladkyi, Pekrun, Clifton, & Chipperfield, 2005; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001), also seemed to impact students' decision making regarding the use of learning assistance services.

Stereotype threat and issues of personal belonging were barriers faced primarily by students from underrepresented and minority populations in college settings (Thoman et al., 2013; Walton & Cohen, 2007; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Stereotype threat, "the worry of confirming a negative stereotype" (Thoman et al., 2013, p. 212), has been shown to have detrimental effects on academic performance. Robert and Thomson (1994) found, in their study at UC Berkeley, that their students of color felt it would be "discrediting" to seek help and many of them didn't do so (p. 6). Though Winograd and Rust (2014) focused primarily on students from underrepresented populations in their research, they noted that students from even well-represented backgrounds who are in the process of failing do not seek academic help; the more serious the trouble, the less likely that the students will seek help. They cite barriers such as not knowing about services or how to access them, not acknowledging difficulty, and fear of failure even after receiving help (p. 21).

Several studies addressed variations on the themes of motivation (Fowler & Boylan, 2010), self-regulation (Perry et al.,

2005), and learning-goal orientation (Dembo & Praks Seli, 2004; Pillai, 2010; Ryan et al., 2001; Thoman et al., 2013), which are personal characteristics that influence students' ability to recognize the need to seek help or make other changes in academic behaviors, and then to act on those changes (Dembo & Praks Seli, 2004). Prochaska and Prochaska (1999) suggested four reasons why students don't employ self-regulatory strategies: students believe they can't change; they don't want to change; they don't know what to change; or they don't know how to change (p. 84). If students believe they can't succeed, they develop low self-efficacy. That is, their beliefs, or perceptions, about their ability to achieve results on specific tasks are poor. Researchers have found an important connection between self-efficacy and students' self-regulatory habits (Dembo & Praks Seli, 2004; Pajares, 1996; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).

Pillai (2010) surveyed students about how they identified a need for help and decided whether to act on it or not. Students in Pillai's study viewed asking for help fairly positively but expressed some ambivalence about actually seeking help themselves, wishing to remain as independent as possible (p. 129). Students in this study also expressed concern about confidentiality, not wanting other people to know they were struggling (p. 131).

Method

Focus Group Rationale

To explore why some students do not access free peer tutoring services and to test the hypothesis that stigma was the primary barrier to accessing services, a series of focus group interviews was conducted. Focus groups were chosen because this method of data collection allows researchers to understand the "conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious psychological and sociocultural characteristics and processes" of the group being studied (Berg, 2007, p. 144). Thus, participants were encouraged by other participants to consider ideas about resistance to peer tutoring that they might not have previously recognized or fully contemplated. The topic of interest was what students as a group thought about academic assistance and the reasons why they decided not to utilize tutoring. Focus groups were also more expedient than individual

interviews and allowed for observation of the dynamics within the group, which may affect the construction of stigma (Crocker, 1999).

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students at a liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest. Students eligible for the study were those who had received a mid-semester warning in at least one of their Fall 2014 classes but did not pursue tutoring services through the LAP in the same semester (participants may have used the LAP in previous semesters, but they were not screened for this). LAP services were available to all undergraduate students at this institution regardless of whether or not they received a mid-semester warning. LAP services include individual appointments, walk-in tutoring, or various group study options. Mid-semester warnings were sent to all students who earned a C- or lower in a class at the middle point in the semester. Mid-semester warning letters recommend that students meet with their faculty members or advisors to discuss progress in their classes and provide helpful links, including information about the LAP. Participants were recruited from this population because a mid-semester warning indicates that a student is struggling academically and may need support to successfully complete a class.

Upon IRB approval, 345 eligible participants were recruited by email and invited to take part in the study. Potential participants were told that the study explored students' perceptions of the LAP and that they would receive $10 in "campus cash" for their participation. The recruitment letter clearly stated that if students consented to participate, they would be participating in a focus group with others who also received mid-semester warnings; by participating, they would automatically disclose that they received a mid-semester warning. Due to a low initial response to the email, the researchers asked the professional advisors at the advising center to reach out to eligible advisees. With recruiting help from the professional advisors, 32 students indicated interest in participating in the study.

Of these 32 students, 24 participated in a focus group. The sample represented all class standings with 13% first year students, 33% sophomores, 29% juniors, and 25% seniors. On average, participants were 23 years of age (age range: 18-50). The majority (83%) of participants were women. Of the sample, one participant

was American Indian/Native Alaskan, three were Asian American, two were Black/African American, five were Hispanic, ten were White, and one was two or more races. Additionally, two were international students.

Procedure

All interested participants were assigned to a focus group based on their availability. When participants arrived at their focus groups, they were asked to sign both a confidentiality agreement and consent form before the focus group interview began. The confidentiality agreement requested that participants not share any information that was brought up by other participants or disclose who participated in the focus group. The consent form reminded participants of the purpose of the study, procedures, and that the researchers could not guarantee confidentiality.

Two undergraduate research assistants facilitated four focus groups, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Each focus group consisted of four to ten undergraduate students with a total of 24 participants. Participants were asked questions that encouraged them to reflect on both what they knew about the LAP and their own decisions to not use LAP's peer tutoring services. In particular, we asked them to answer questions exploring five topic areas: 1) what they had heard about the LAP from peers, staff, and faculty at the university; 2) what they thought occurred in a tutoring session; 3) their ideas about the kinds of students who use LAP tutoring; 4) whether they had considered tutoring and why they decided not to use the services despite their recent mid-semester warning; and 5) what services they wished the LAP offered. Throughout the focus group, a research assistant asked follow-up questions and probed participants' answers to gain a deeper understanding of their ideas. All focus group interviews were audio-recorded. At the end of each focus group, a research assistant debriefed the participants about the purpose of the study.

Data Analysis

The research assistants transcribed the digital recordings of the focus groups. Upon completion of transcription, the researchers individually coded the transcripts for emergent themes. Following this coding, we met to discuss our individual coding and to agree

upon a list of key codes. We then coded the four transcripts as a group; this process allowed us to discuss whether particular quotes fit within a code and to further define each code, which allowed us to achieve intercoder reliability. Upon further analysis of our coding, we determined that students chose not to utilize tutoring services for five key reasons: perceived stigma, personal obstacles, lack of knowledge, easier options, and systemic obstacles.

Results

Stigma

Based on previous research, we expected to find evidence that a negative stigma associated with tutoring kept students from coming in for help. While we found evidence of this in our focus groups, most of the students who identified stigma as an obstacle to seeking help did so not with actual evidence of themselves or others being stigmatized, but rather by citing their own assumptions about the stigmatized nature of tutoring.

Some students were afraid that they would be judged harshly, not by their peers, but by the tutors themselves, who would see their academic work as inferior. As one student expressed, "I don't know, I guess I had the preconceived notion that I'd go in and they would be like, 'your paper is horrible, you need to rewrite it,' and I didn't, like, want anyone to judge my paper, so I didn't go." This sentiment prompted agreement from other members of the focus group. This concern was, in part, due to the perception that, because tutors were fellow students, they would hold the same prejudices as the general student population. Students in our focus groups were worried specifically about peer tutors judging their work, indicating that, were the tutors professional staff members, the fear of being stigmatized would be substantially lessened. One student commented:

> So it would be nice to have someone who maybe was graduated, and coming back and it was like, "hey, like no connections on campus, we're not friends, we haven't had classes together, you don't know my roommate, or friends," so you know, so, and it's not like "hey, you're my tutor."

Of note, tutors in the LAP do receive training regarding building rapport with clients and working to eliminate any stigma around tutoring. As a possible corollary, no participants in the study cited specific instances in which they felt judged by a tutor, instead voicing a generalized fear of potential judgment.

Several students acknowledged that the stigma they felt stemmed not from external sources, but from their own, internalized thoughts and feelings. Students felt that they would be perceived as "dumb" even if there was no direct evidence to support that assumption: "Cuz [sic] you know sometimes you have internal thoughts in the first place when you are going to the tutor and so you like, 'ahhh, I figured that I must be dumb' or, you know, some people think that way."

Other students expressed concern that specific individuals would view their seeking help as a disappointment. One student identified both classmates and parents as possible sources of stigma:

> I know there shouldn't really be any shame with needing extra help, but getting a tutor implies that you're not able to keep up, I suppose...I kind of became self-conscious of myself and also what my parents might think of me needing a tutor when I worked so hard to get here and me not being able to make it.

Another concern for students was that seeking tutoring was socially acceptable in some cases, but not in others. Specifically, students believed that while they would not be looked down on for seeking tutoring for general education courses, seeking tutoring for a course within one's major (and presumed area of academic excellence) would be seen as failing. As one student explained:

> I feel like it's whether classes are within your major or not. Like if a class is within my major, I don't feel like I should go to tutoring for it, because it's my future. I feel like it's expected, like I, well, I chose this, so why don't I understand it? … But if it's like a [general education requirement], then that just isn't my strong point, so... and it's like easy to say that, but you can't say that your major is not your strong point.

Despite the recognition that this stigma was mostly self-imposed, however, this internalized stigma was still a major obstacle to students seeking help.

Personal Obstacles

Several students identified personal obstacles that kept them from seeking help through academic assistance. These included concerns about one-on-one face time, a belief that the professor was the problem (not the student), and other psychological barriers. Students also frequently cited work or other commitments as obstacles to seeking help.

Students expressed emotions ranging from discomfort to outright fear toward getting one-on-one help from tutors. One student stated that she would be reluctant to go to tutoring at all, without bringing along a friend: "I hate the idea of going alone someplace, unless I knew I had a friend going with me, um I don't know it's just a weird thing for me, I probably wouldn't unless I had a friend with me that also felt comfortable going." Other students employed faulty logic to justify their decision to avoid tutoring. For example, one student concluded that earning a bad grade, instead of being a reason to seek out tutoring, was a reason not to do so: "Like sometimes it's like once you realize, like 'wow, I did really bad on the test,' you didn't think you were going to do bad on the test, like you studied a lot for that test and you thought you were studying the right way, so you get the test and see that you didn't do well, and wow you're like 'I should have gone to a tutor,' but too late at that point."

Other students used similar logic, such as, "I've told myself I should go so many times and then I've been like, 'I'll just write the paper three hours before'" and "I would honestly try to weed my way through the class, before going and getting any assistance. Try and solve the problem myself, yeah." Still others assumed that tutoring could not help them if they were struggling with a poor instructor, arguing "I didn't go last time, to this other session, but it was mostly because I thought the problem was the professor, not me."

Perhaps the most often cited personal obstacle was time. Many students simply felt that they did not have the time to come in for tutoring, or that their schedules conflicted with the timing of study sessions and tutoring hours. Some students cited poor time

management, and a few cited living off campus as a hindrance to coming in for tutoring, but most cited work as the primary obstacle to utilizing the LAP. The demographic of our focus groups was skewed toward older students, suggesting that some students may have had financial constraints that influenced their decisions to work rather than seek academic help.

Lack of Knowledge

Although the LAP does advertise its services via classroom visits, bookmarks, social media, and the campus daily flyer, another barrier to students seeking help was a lack of knowledge about the services offered, the qualifications of the tutors (e.g., "Are they majors in the areas they're tutoring in?"), the tutoring center location and hours (e.g., "I don't think I even knew there was one"), or what was likely to happen during a tutoring session. Several students were very intimidated by the LAP, citing a fear of the unknown. One student remarked, "...you're just, like, okay, I'm going to do it, and I feel like the only reason it takes so long for you to get to that point is because it's like a black box and you have no idea what's going to happen on the other side."

Some students went so far as to construct their own ideas about what a tutoring session might entail, often based on the (mistaken) belief that the tutor would chastise them for asking for help. For example:

> Sometimes when I'm feeling overwhelmed, and I need help, it's usually because so many things are so confusing to me and you just feel overwhelmed, and I don't think I'd express that to a tutor. They'll be like, "how are you doing, what don't you understand?" And I'll be like "everything" in that moment and I'll feel really stupid in that moment, so I'm like, "let's not."

While, on the surface, this sort of comment may seem to indicate that students are afraid of being stigmatized, such comments actually point to a deeper, internalized fear of rejection. In addition to being afraid of judgment by their peers, students were afraid that their academic work would be harshly criticized by the very tutors they sought out for help. While this fear is potentially a personal obstacle, it is also one rooted in a lack of understanding about what actually

happens in a tutoring session. It is reasonable to assume that if students knew how they would be treated (with respect and without judgment) by the tutors, they might overcome their internalized fears.

Easier Options

Some students simply found easier or more comfortable options to meet their tutoring needs. Several students mentioned studying with an outside tutor, friends, or a study group, citing both the ease of access and the ability to seek help at any time of the day (or night). For example, one student commented, "I think I talk to my friends more, because I can call them at 11, when I'm doing my homework; I can't call a tutor at 11, or they'll live on my floor so I'll just walk down there." Conversely, even though professors and teaching assistants had more restrictive hours than the tutoring center, many students felt more comfortable seeking help from a known quantity. For instance, one student stated: "I kind of weigh my options; if I know the professor pretty well, then I would say if I feel more comfortable with the professor, I would rather go to their office."

Systemic Obstacles

Although many of the obstacles that kept students from seeking tutoring were internal, students also cited several barriers that were more systemic in nature. Specifically, students cited a lack of tutor availability, the absence of a qualified tutor for the subject in which they needed help, and appointments not lasting long enough to get the help they needed.

Tutor availability was the most commonly cited concern, due in part to what students perceived as limited hours (specific tutoring by appointment Monday through Friday 8:30am-9:00pm, not continuously, and drop in Sunday through Thursday evenings until 10:00pm) during which the LAP was open. Students often advocated for late night and weekend hours. "Especially during finals week, I, like, lived in the library. I would have gone at, like, two in the morning or three in the morning or whatever time that need be, if there was just, like, increased hours, more people to talk to." While this may reflect poor time management skills (a personal obstacle), for some students regular tutoring hours were simply inaccessible.

The limited availability of tutors for specific courses was also

a barrier for students. While tutors do receive extensive training, completing the College Reading and Learning Association guidelines to become certified level 1 tutors, proficiency in tutoring does not always correlate to expertise in a specific course. For most courses, tutors are required to have successfully completed the course before providing tutoring for it; if no tutor has taken the course, tutoring for that course is not available (though tutoring for the general subject is still available). As one student said, "I went to the library to sign up but, um, they were full. The tutor for my class was full for, like, the next, like, three weeks, so I just ended up not going, because I didn't have three weeks to waste. So that kind of sucked." In addition to the limited availability of tutors, some students felt that, even when they were able to get in to see a tutor, the length of the appointment was too short to accomplish all of their goals. This was evident from student comments like, "I mean I know that the tutors are, like, smart in what they are teaching, but if you only get them for 30 minutes, you can't really get to talk to them about it then…"

A final systemic concern for students was that there were no knowledgeable tutors available to help them. Often this was because there was no tutor available for them in a specific subject or course (or at least students believed this to be the case), as with this student:

> Absolutely would have come to tutoring, but there's nothing for the class I was in, computer science, high level computer science, there's no tutor, there's computer science classes [that] often have a person who is attached to a particular course you can go to, but there was no one like that for this course, uh, so there was no help for me to go to the [LAP].

Discussion

Through analysis of the focus group data, the researchers discovered that students chose not to use free peer tutoring because of perceived stigma, personal obstacles, lack of knowledge, systemic obstacles, and easier options. These findings add to the existing literature on academic assistance services at the university level. Like Karabenick and Knapp (1991) and Winograd and Rust (2014), the current study explores barriers to seeking academic support

services. In contrast to the previous literature, this study examined these obstacles among a sample of students who were struggling academically in at least one course.

There are multiple explanations for the key barriers faced by participants. In particular, some barriers to seeking academic support services may come from students' high school or community college experiences. In high school, accessing academic support may have been stigmatized and these ideas may have carried over to the university experience. Likewise, if students excelled academically in high school or community college, they may be resistant to seeking help at the university level because they do not believe they are the kind of student who needs assistance; they think they will look stupid if they ask for help, or they fear stigmatization by their peers. If students hold these beliefs, it is not surprising that they would look for easier options, such as friends and study groups, even if they could receive better academic support from a trained, certified peer tutor. These findings may also be explained in part by research on millennials. McGlynn (2005) argued that millennials "have a preference to learn in their own time and on their own terms" (p. 15), which may help to explain their choice of easier options. Likewise, Bland, Melton, Welle, and Bigham (2012) found that millennials engage in "avoidant coping strategies" and that the coping mechanisms they utilize are not effective at decreasing stress.

We expected that students would face both personal and systemic obstacles to using the LAP. First, students will always face personal obstacles based on their individual circumstances and personal beliefs. Although it would be difficult to overcome students' time constraints, their concerns, misperceptions, or doubts about one-on-one tutoring might be addressed with a strong informational campaign. Second, we expected systemic obstacles to be a barrier to seeking support because there are limitations associated with any student service. Since the LAP tutors are themselves undergraduate peers who must prioritize their own studies, their hours are limited.

Overall, this research is limited by some key methodological concerns. First, we had difficulty recruiting subjects and had a low response rate. Based on the population from which the sample was recruited—students who were told they were doing poorly in a

class and did not utilize peer tutoring services—this response rate was not surprising. Receiving the midterm warning might have also made potential participants feel stigmatized and contributed to the low response rate. Second, the sample might not be representative of students who do not access tutoring services. The sample was comprised of students who were motivated to participate, possibly by the $10 in campus cash, and had time to participate in a focus group. Likewise, by only sampling students who were struggling academically, this study leaves out the perceptions of the LAP from students in good academic standing. Finally, as with many qualitative studies, there were limitations regarding sample size and generalizability. In particular, when utilizing focus groups as a research method, there is always concern over how the presence of others in the group shapes fellow participants' comments.

Conclusion

Based on the findings from this study, there are two key ways universities can work to overcome the barriers associated with seeking peer tutoring services. First, students need to be better educated about what peer tutoring looks like in practice. It may be beneficial for peer tutoring offices to better advertise—whether that be through visits to classrooms or videos that show a typical meeting with a tutor—exactly what their services entail so students do not avoid using services based on their lack of knowledge. Second, universities could use social norming campaigns to address some students' belief that there is a stigma associated with using tutoring services. Similar to social norming campaigns surrounding binge drinking (Werch, Pappas, Carlson, DiClemente, Chally, & Sinder, 2000), these campaigns could educate students about who attends tutoring sessions (e.g., students with a range of GPAs, students in general education classes and major classes, first-year students to senior students) and how students and faculty feel about tutoring services (e.g., students think tutoring is helpful, students do not stigmatize their classmates for using tutoring services, faculty like their students to attend peer tutoring).

To build on these findings, researchers should explore barriers to using peer tutoring services among a broader student

population. The current study is limited by the participation eligibility requirements. Students who are passing classes or excelling in classes may have different perceptions of peer tutoring and may face distinct barriers to tutoring that were not brought up by our participants. Additionally, scholars need to further examine what role stigma plays in discouraging students from accessing peer tutoring. Although stigma was a barrier to utilizing services in this study, students had varying perceptions of how, and if, stigma impacted using peer tutoring. Future research should specifically focus on stigma and the complex relationship between stigma and seeking academic support.

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