

# THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF PEER MENTORING IN A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY BASED ON THE ASSESSMENT, EVALUATION, AND RESEARCH COMPETENCIES

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We explored the benefits and challenges of peer mentoring for student affairs professionals who are learning about assessment. Participants benefited from gaining a different perspective, mentoring, and being mentored. Respondents reported that role issues and fewer meetings over time were challenges. Findings have implications for training student affairs professionals.

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Despite decades of attention to assessment in student affairs, and Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards that indicate that assessment, evaluation, and research be part of master's level student affairs preparation programs, the attention programs pay to assessment varies (CAS, 2013; Henning & Roberts, 2016). Assessment may be a required course, an elective or not included in a master's program (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Student affairs professionals may not be adequately prepared, believe that they do not have the expertise or time to assessment programs or they may fear assessment (Elkins, 2015; Fuller & Lane, 2017; Young & Janosik, 2007 as cited in Herdlein, Riefler & Mrowka, 2013). Further, assessment duties are most often assigned to those with other administrative responsibilities, so they may want an efficient way to understand assessment (Sandeem & Barr, 2006).

To promote a positive culture of assessment in student affairs and higher education, a collegial atmosphere is needed (Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Mentoring relationships may lessen the fear of assessment and increase skills. In the traditional mentor relationship, a person with more years of experience is paired with someone with significantly less experience whereas a "step-ahead" mentor is one level above his or her protégé in the organization and a peer mentor is at the same level (Ensher & Murphy, 2011, p. 255).

Mentoring may help student affairs professionals avoid common pitfalls in conducting assessment which include acting alone, poor coordination among student affairs areas, and assessments being too narrowly focused (Sandeem & Barr, 2006). Mentoring may help student affairs professionals understand a broader picture, lead to assessment coordination among student affairs professionals, and improve assessment practices.

Mentoring is vital to the success of student affairs professionals (Calhoun & Taub,

2014). Much of the literature on peer and near-peer mentoring in higher education has focused on faculty (Ockene, Milner, Thorndyke, Congdon, & Cain, 2017; Thomas, Bystydzienski, & Desai, 2015). Mentoring literature in the context of student affairs has concentrated on such things the impact of role models and mentors for entry-level men in student affairs (Calhoun & Taub, 2014), the importance of mentoring in the recruitment and retention of student affairs professionals (Calhoun & Taub, 2006), and the effects of mentoring on women student affairs administrators' career satisfaction (Blackhurst, 2000). However, the benefits and challenges of peer mentoring in a professional development course series on assessment have not been examined. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of student affairs professionals in peer and step-ahead mentoring relationships in a professional development course series on assessment. The research questions are:

1. What are the benefits of peer mentoring in a professional development opportunity series focused on assessment?
2. What are the challenges of peer mentoring in a professional development opportunity series focused on assessment?

### **Assessment in Student Affairs**

Assessment is an important student affairs task. As the focus of student affairs work has moved from student services to student learning, student affairs professionals have become educators who need to measure programs' success to justify their institutional value and meet accountability standards (Henning & Roberts, 2016). It is an area mentioned as one of the Professional Competencies, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) Standards, and the Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Standards (Henning & Roberts, 2016).

**New professionals' competencies in assessment.** Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER) is one of ten professional competencies areas for student affairs educators (ACPA/NASPA, 2015). This competency concerns

the ability to design, conduct, critique, and use various AER methodologies and the result obtained from them, to utilize AER processes and their results to inform practice, and to shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses in higher education (p. 12).

Growth is shown from moving from understanding to application and from program applications to "larger scale applications that cut across departments or divisions" (p. 12). At the foundational level, individuals understand the difference between assessment, evaluation, and research. They can effectively plan, conduct, and interpret assessments. Those who achieve intermediate proficiency may use more culturally appropriate methods to conduct research and be able to understand and apply "additional methodological approaches to AER" (p. 21). Leading assessment efforts is one way to demonstrate an advanced standing (ACPA/NASPA, 2015). The Assessment, Skills, and Knowledge (ASK) Standards also address assessment competencies including:

Assessment design, articulating learning and development outcomes, selection of data collection and management methods, assessment instruments, surveys used for assessment purposes, interviews and focus groups used for assessment purposes, assessment methods: analysis, benchmarking, program review and evaluation, assessment ethics, effective reporting and use of results, politics of assessment and assessment education" (American College Student Personnel Association, 2006, p.4).

**Barriers to doing assessment.** While student affairs professionals need to know how to conduct assessments and analyze

and implement the results, their attitudes toward assessment vary. Miller (2012) noted five ways student affairs professionals respond to assessment including "discovery, questioning, resistance, participation, and commitment" (as cited in Elkins, 2015, p. 42). Individuals learn about assessment, question its relevance in student affairs, resist making it part of their work life, meet assessment obligations of their workplace, and finally recognize its importance (Elkins, 2015). Barriers to achieving commitment to assessment included having a lack of time to engage in assessment and not using assessment data effectively (Elkins, 2015). When student affairs professionals can see how assessment helps students' experiences, they are more likely to commit to the assessment process (Blimling, 2013).

Another barrier to gaining commitment to doing assessment from student affairs professionals is their perceived lack of training. Entry-level professionals believe assessment is important. However, a survey of 280 entry-level student affairs professionals revealed that "26.4% of respondents rated themselves as *very proficient* on any assessment skill" and "at least 20% rated themselves as not at all proficient on 15 of 34 [assessment] skills" (Hoffman, 2015, p. 51). Respondents reported that assessment workshops and conferences were helpful ways to learn assessment with training videos (Hoffman, 2015). The most effective ways to learn assessment in graduate programs included taking specific courses on assessment, thesis work, and internships (Hoffman, 2015). In their jobs, participants anticipated that they were most likely to learn assessment on their own, in workshops or by shadowing other professionals (Hoffman, 2015).

**Creating a culture of assessment.** In addition to providing professional standards and working to eradicate barriers to learning assessment, there are other ways to create an assessment culture across institutions of higher education (Fuller, Skidmore, Bustamante, & Holweiss, 2016;

Schuh, 2013; Schuh, Biddix, Dean & Kinzie, 2016, Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Cultures of assessment are built on cultures of evidence which is using hard data to show program effectiveness and student learning (Culp, 2012). Cultures of assessment are self-critical and committed to improvement (Schuh, 2013; Schuh et al., 2016). Assessment is part of the routine where results welcomed whether they are positive or negative (Culp, 2012; Fuller et al., 2016; Schuh, et al., 2016; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Cultures of assessment and evidence focus on identifying program goals for student learning (Schuh et al., 2016). Everyone is part of the assessment process and staff training is provided so student affairs professionals feel confident in their abilities to create assessments, collect and interpret data (Culp, 2012; Schuh et al., 2016; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). A collegial atmosphere where the Senior Student Affairs Officers value assessment, resources are available for assessment projects, and where a team atmosphere develops is ideal (Culp, 2012; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Schuh, 2013). Last, multiple forms of assessment are completed and data drives decisions for the program and institution (Schuh, 2013).

Scholars surveyed 370 assessment and institutional resource directors and found additional factors that comprised a culture of assessment (Fuller et al., 2016). Faculty must buy into the assessment process. *Use of Data* referred to whether data was used in campus publications and whether senior leaders used assessment in their speeches or marketing (Fuller et al., 2016). If data was shared across campus, this helped create a culture of assessment. If assessment was seen as a normative process, this was also helpful. A sense that assessments were done out of compliance or fear worked against creating a culture of assessment (Fuller et al., 2016).

In summary, new professionals need competencies in assessment. When assessment is shown to improve student experiences, then student affairs professionals

tend to see its value (Bliming, 2013). Creating a culture of assessment includes making assessment part of the routine, focusing on student learning outcomes, providing training and creating a team atmosphere (Schuh, et al., 2016).

### **Mentoring**

Mentors provide support, friendship, and advice (Ockene et al., 2017) which could help create a culture of assessment by ameliorating some of the negative attitudes and barriers toward assessment. Roberts (2007) examined student affairs workers' preferred methods of professional development. She surveyed 778 student affairs professionals in NASPA Region III who were working in a non-faculty student affairs function. She listed 10 skill-based areas and asked respondents to list their top three ways of learning about these areas. Mentoring was listed an important method for learning leadership skills, student contact issues, communication skills, personnel management, fiscal management, and diversity issues (Roberts, 2007). "Discussion with colleagues" which may be considered "peer mentoring" was listed as a preferred method of professional development for all categories.

Traditional and peer mentoring occur in student affairs. Empirical research primarily focuses on the benefits of the mentor/protégé relationship. Blackhurst (2000) examined the effects of mentoring on the employment experiences and career satisfaction of women student affairs administrators. Of the 307 women surveyed, only 35% had mentors. 82% of the respondents identified as White. White women benefited the most from the mentoring relationship. Mentored White women felt less role conflict and ambiguity and more commitment to their organization than non-mentored White women. Women of color without mentors "reported higher levels of role ambiguity and sex discrimination—and lower levels of organizational commitment—than White women with mentors" (p. 582). Hence,

women of color without mentors may be at a disadvantage.

Scholars examined the mentor relationships of 22 entry-level men who had been in student affairs an average of 2.5 years (Calhoun & Taub, 2014). Mentorship was important to participants' recruitment and retention in the field. Participants who were mentored wanted to mentor others. More than half the men mentioned that the sex of the mentor mattered to them to "make the experience better" (p. 191). In a field dominated by women in entry-level positions, male mentors legitimized the traditionally "feminine" traits associated with student affairs professionals such as caring and nurturing (Calhoun & Taub, 2014).

Twale and Jelinek (1996) surveyed senior level women student affairs professionals about their mentoring experiences from graduate school to the present. Respondents reported the female mentors they met in graduate school provided emotional support and promoted self-confidence. When the respondents were new professionals, their mentors helped them navigate the workplace and learn job skills. As senior level professionals, respondents saw themselves as role models who "enriched the learning experiences of their protégés, offering advice and direction, boosting protégés' self-esteem, and helping socialize protégés into the student affairs profession" (p. 213). Women mentors were described as "knowledgeable, supportive, and caring" while men were seen as "visionary, guiding, and competent" (p. 214). Researchers noted the need for more qualitative work in mentoring.

Williams (2013) unearthed the mentoring experiences of new student professionals in student affairs. She defined mentoring as "a developmental relationship between a new professional and a seasoned professional, where the seasoned professional is able to provide advice, support, and guidance focused on skill acquisition and career development" (p. 31). Eleven participants who possessed a master's degree in stu-

dent affairs or a related field and had been in the field of student affairs between 5 and 8 years participated. Participants reported the following benefits of the mentoring relationship: help with career advancement and career transitions including career advice, feedback on resumes and documents, encouragement that helped with their self-confidence in pursuing positions, helping them connect to professional networks, being introduced to professional development associations and programs, helping with presentations at national conferences, giving advice on how to act and dress in professional situations, serving as role models and giving advice. Their mentoring experiences gave them a sense of belonging to the field. Because of their mentoring experiences, participants intended to stay in the field.

### **Research Context**

The Assessment Colleague Team (ACT) Project was implemented at a four-year primarily non-residential public university in the United States that enrolls approximately 15,000 students. The University offers bachelors, master's, Educational Specialist, and Doctoral degrees. Almost 60% of its population are in-state residents. The Division of Student Affairs includes three areas: Enrollment Management, Student Support Services, and Student Life and employs approximately 120 individuals including graduate students. Roughly 900 faculty and staff are employed at this university.

### **Method**

The Division of Student Affairs funded the year-long Assessment Colleague Team (ACT) Project. Staff and graduate assistants in Student Life were provided a flyer that explained ACT project eligibility and program activities. Those interested in the program signed up online and everyone who desired to participate were able to do so. Participants could indicate whether they wanted to be matched with someone with the same amount of experience in assessment or with more experience. ACT Program lead-

ers matched individuals based on their assessment experience preferences. Fourteen participants attended a fall kick-off meeting where they received an ACT Program manual that detailed the expectations of being an ACT Colleague, provided guidelines for giving constructive feedback to ACT partners, and advice for accountability measures. Colleagues were instructed to meet with each other to set goals and discuss assessment. In addition, ACT Colleague meetings were supplemented by assessment instructional activities sponsored by the Division of Student Affairs.

**Participants.** Eleven individuals participated in exit interviews. Seven are White, 2 are Latinx, and 1 is African American. Four individuals identified as graduate students and seven are working professionals. Four respondents identified as male and seven are female. All the staff possessed master's degrees in student affairs. All the graduate students were pursuing master's degrees in higher education. This cross section of staff included entry-level professionals and mid-level managers, university support staff, and a senior-level student affairs officer. The staff had between 1 and 8 years of experience in the field of student affairs. Graduate students had worked in student affairs between 1-3 years. Participants ranged in age from their mid-20s to early 40s. The assessment experience of participants ranged from less than a year to 12 years as some staff had assessment experience where they were previously employed or in their graduate programs. Staff titles included assistant directors, assistant coordinators, and directors. Generally, staff were matched with peer staff members and graduate students were paired with other graduate students. During the pairing process, the researchers ensured that peers were not paired within departments nor with a supervisor. The population being studied was representative of multiple functional areas within the larger landscape of higher education and student affairs. Staff involved in this study included those working in the areas of international

student services, student union administration, student involvement, student activities programming, diversity affairs, fraternity/sorority life, orientation/first year experience, persistence and retention, parent and family engagement, residential life, and student conduct.

**Data collection and analysis.** Participants signed a consent form, approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board, where they agreed to be audiotaped and they consented to voluntary participation in the study. Participants chose their own pseudonyms for the interview transcripts, or one was chosen for them if they had no preference. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted at a meeting room in the university and averaged one hour. Interview questions included: Tell me about your experiences with your ACT Colleague. What kinds of things did you discuss at your meetings? What challenges, if any, did you face during the ACT Colleague Project? What benefits, if any, did you have because of participation in the ACT Colleague Project? Why did you join the ACT Project? Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to participants for their comments and/or corrections. We corrected spelling and punctuation errors noted by one participant in his transcript.

The constant comparative method was used to analyze data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method involved looking within and between transcripts to arrive at categories. First, we completed the initial coding of each transcript. Initial codes for benefits to peer mentoring included "talking through stuff," "outsider perspective," "helping each other," "talking through process," "exchanging ideas," "insights gained," "getting excited," "valued discussion," "got new ideas," "collaboration," "learned more about different divisions," "things can be done another way". Initial codes that focused on the challenges of peer mentoring included, "uncomfortableness due to relationships in organization," "less focus in the spring," "fewer reminders in the spring for

meetings,” “Spring is busy,” and “ACT partner busy.” Next, axial coding occurred (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We collapsed codes to create more inclusive categories. What emerged from the data regarding benefits were related to sharing information in a variety of ways that was mutually beneficial and also getting support. The challenges to mentoring were mentioned less than the benefits. Our initial codes of “time issues” and “relationship conflict” became more focused and our final categories emerged after we read and re-read the transcripts.

We ensured credibility and consistency through adequate engagement in data collection. Data saturation was achieved in that no new information surfaced after the eighth interview. To ensure consistency, an audit trail was kept that described the data collection process and how decisions were made regarding themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Findings

Participants discussed the benefits and challenges of peer mentoring. The benefits of peer mentoring included gaining a different perspective, intellectual connections and collaboration, and emotional connections. The challenges included role issues, particularly for those who were in step-ahead partnerships. The peers mentoring meetings became less of a priority in the spring.

### Benefits of Peer Mentoring

#### Gaining a different perspective.

The most frequent benefit of peer mentoring was gaining a different perspective. Because individuals worked in different areas of student affairs (e.g., fraternity and sorority life and residential life), they learned about each other’s area. Their interactions strengthened assessments in their respective sub-field. Aaron remarked how working with a colleague in fraternity and sorority life allowed him to reflect on policies in his area of residential life:

My colleague worked in Greek Life, and so I learned a lot more about Greek

Life, and some of the Greek Life policies and then was able to apply that because we do have students who want to transfer from housing to Greek living and so, [I learned] kind of what their policies are, how that looks. Some of the rules we had in place for someone to be able to transfer to Greek housing . . . You know, they had to be approved by the university, they had to be in good standing—all these other things. Some of them, I was like, ‘Do we even check these things?’ I was able to learn that yes, we check most of these but maybe this one we don’t. Then it doesn’t make sense to keep that in our policies.

Joe also liked learning about a different area of student affairs from his ACT colleague

It was also an opportunity to share about our jobs as well. Because going into it, I didn’t really understand what the scope of his work was. He didn’t know what the scope of my work was. So, we were able to talk through what our job descriptions were. So, I think maybe that didn’t directly affect the assessment conversations, but it did kind of provide an outsider’s perspective on what we were doing. He would ask questions, and I would respond, and he would ask something that would make me think about my job in a different way. At times, maybe that was related to assessments and at times it wasn’t. But I think it was good in that aspect because I got to learn more about what he was doing, and he got to learn more about what I was doing. Some of the questions we asked each other were helpful.

Additionally, peer mentors helped each other realize the various ways assessment can be accomplished. Lisa remarked,

My partner is really great about talking through things and if I challenge him, he’ll challenge me. We both have a good working rapport so it seems like it—maybe we’ll have a disagreement about something but in the end, we come to a

conclusion or a consensus: 'Well, maybe this a good way. Maybe it can be done both ways.' It seems like it has been valuable to see his perspective and realize that there's [sic] many different ways. There isn't always the RIGHT way to do it. You can do it a number of different ways.

Betty valued having an outsider's perspective on assessment from her peer mentor. She stated:

I think I got some new insights when I brought projects forward. . . Talking it through with someone else who wasn't in the project. I think that's the biggest thing that I gained out of this is that when you talk to people who are in the trenches with you, like trying to figure out like, there's a lot of cooks in the kitchen. You can't necessarily make a decision about what you are going to do. But if you have an outsider's perspective and they are saying, 'Well, that doesn't really make sense.' It's like . . . the light bulb goes on: 'Yeah, we are trying to ask too many things in one survey or one assessment.' Or whatever. That was really helpful.

**Intellectual Connections and Collaboration.** Most respondents enjoyed the collaboration with a partner because it helped them advance their thinking about assessment. Respondents spoke about how they thought differently about assessment because of this collaboration. Roxanne's comment was indicative of others. Roxanne noted, "[The ACT program] gave me a good sounding board. We talked about what was the best way to collect this information and what [we] can we do with this information once we have it." Lisa stated,

It's good to talk with someone else because two minds are better than one. You can really share successes and frustrations because your colleague is kind of experiencing the same thing. So, if you have a frustration about, 'Oh, I can't get this learning outcomes quite right or it doesn't sound right. Can you

help me?' I think really just sharing very collaboratively with all of that.

Betty indicated that these conversations helped her "flesh out" assessment projects and made them better. There was a give and take to the peer relationship. Sailor Moon said, "My ACT partner show me how to do [a computer program] so I learned from her in that regard. Now, on the other hand, I'm a little more structured when it comes to program planning. So, I think we complemented each other pretty well there."

Participants also enjoyed having to defend their assessment choices because this made them think about these choices. Jessie May noted, "Just figuring out, 'how do I explain things to somebody who has no idea what I'm doing' has been beneficial for me." Joe said that that peer mentoring meetings helped him justify and understand some of the assessment choices he made. He stated, "I thought I had a pretty good understanding of what other people do and what I do but when it comes time to explain what I do—so in my meetings with my partner, if he'd ask a question, I'd have to think how to respond. I think it's given me a better understanding of why I do some of the things I do."

One person mentioned how in teaching others he learned. Andrew remarked, "In trying to help [my colleague] understand it and help her develop some of the programs' learning outcomes that she had, really gave me an insight on what it is and made me truly have to understand what it was so I could teach her and help her out."

**Emotional connections.** Although most participants mentioned the positive benefits of peer mentoring in terms related to thinking and planning, some alluded to the emotional or relational benefits. Jessie Mae admitted that before joining the ACT project, she was "not remotely" interested in assessment. Her peer mentor helped Jessie Mae become excited about assessment. Jessie Mae stated, "[My partner's] intentionality helped me stay on track and want to continue to do it. . . I think she really



cares about telling the story and she's been very good about telling the story. . . Her enthusiasm was contagious." She continued, "Being able to have those debriefing conversations with [my ACT partner] in the moment—that made me excited so I want to keep doing this."

Lisa enjoyed relating to her ACT partner on a more personal level. She said:

It was really fun just to connect with him a little bit more and learn kind of about what he's passionate about and why he's doing the assessment that he is. . . just having some of those deeper level conversations, too. We were there to talk about assessment but it evolved to other areas.

Mya appreciated the sense of trust that she and her peer colleague had. She said,

It was very nice because we have a really good relationship as friends as well as colleagues. So, that was something that was really nice because it was interesting too because we weren't afraid to kind of push each other to think differently.

### Challenges of Peer Mentoring

Respondents were more likely to report benefits than problems of the mentoring relationship. Role issues and difficulties with scheduling meetings in the spring were two challenges mentioned.

**Role issues.** In step-ahead dyads, there were sometimes role issues that surfaced. Betty was a step ahead of her partner. She stated,

Yeah. [Meeting] was hard for me because I think at times, I fell into the mentor role for her which was great, but she was really struggling in her work life and it put me in this really weird spot because she was supervised by a colleague, so it was really hard.

In contrast, Denny did not want to be mentored by his partner. He stated:

I would say what was less effective is that sometimes there was role confusion a little bit. She wanted to be a mentor

in more than just assessment, so 15-20 minutes of the hour was: How are you doing in classes? What's your job like? How is that working with your supervisor? This is role confusion because you are not that mentor. I already have another mentor on campus where I go to have those conversations. That was less helpful.

Challenges seemed to occur when individuals had different expectations about the mentoring relationship or when discussions between the dyad infringed on relationships outside the dyad.

**Meetings became less of a priority in the spring.** The spring semester tended to be busier for many of the participants. The peer mentoring meetings seemed like less of a priority for some. Denny's comments were representative:

With the second colleague, what was less helpful is probably the fact that she wasn't a participant from the beginning and also the schedule. It wasn't a priority on her list, so it didn't become as much of a priority for me. That's why it only went to once a month meetings instead of trying to push to meet every other week and continue progress on this.

This lack of spring meetings with Denny's partner and fewer large group meetings in the spring may have added to the dyad meetings becoming less of a priority, also. Denny made the following recommendation after noting there were fewer spring meetings:

I would probably implement more training throughout—the milestone check-ins. Because there was one on the assessment cycle, Bloom's taxonomy, learning outcomes and writing them but in the spring there wasn't any check-in. So, overall in the Colleague Project, it would have been helpful for the researchers and useful for everyone else to have a peer share with everyone. [I would have liked to share out what our colleague and I have been working on

and what the other teams have been working on so we can have a better understanding. Also, that's where you have a troubleshooting meeting of: So, we've been talking about this for two weeks now, and we can't figure it out. If anyone else has recommendations, please give them from the group. Or: Here's our idea for an assessment, what does everyone else think?

### Conclusions and Implications

Respondents benefitted from their meetings over the academic year. Participants gained a different perspective and benefited intellectually and emotionally from peer mentoring. They learned more about each other's areas in student affairs. They were able to compare their assessment experiences and practices with those in another area and critically reflect on their way of doing things. For example, Aaron's ACT colleague worked in fraternity and sorority life and Aaron worked in housing and he discovered fraternity and sorority life had rules about transferring to Greek housing and wondered, "Do we [residence life] even check those things?"

Participants valued each other's "outsider" perspective. Betty noted, "When you talk with people who are in the trenches with you. . . you can't necessarily make a decision about what you are going to do. But if you have an outsider's perspective. . . the lightbulb goes on." Individuals from different areas of student affairs were "outsiders within" and could offer helpful suggestions because they understood the field of student affairs but could give a fresh perspective on the assessment practices of their partner's area. These peer mentoring dyads may help in avoiding some of the pitfalls of conducting assessment which include acting alone and poor coordination among student affairs areas (Sandeem & Barr, 2006). When individuals understand other's areas, they can create more effective assessments.

Participants also engaged in critical reflection when they found they had to defend

their assessment choices to their ACT colleague. Having to articulate a reason for an assessment choice and defend that choice with an "outsider" can strengthen assessment practices, also. Critical thinking is a necessary characteristic of student affairs professionals (Dickerson et al., 2011). Participants engaged in critical thinking and problem-solving in the ACT project. Graduate students appreciated the opportunity to apply their assessment skills and participate in problem-solving activities with peers. Faculty and staff in student affairs may want to provide students opportunities for application of their assessment skills to strengthen students' confidence in that skill.

Another benefit from the dyads included the mutual teaching and learning that occurred. In teaching his colleague about learning outcomes, Andrew really had to "truly understand what [learning outcomes were] so [he] could teach her and help her out." In other cases, the teaching/learning transaction was mutual. Sailor Moon taught her ACT colleague to be more structured in program planning and her partner taught her a computer program that made assessment easier. The mentoring literature discusses proteges learning from mentors and mentoring other protégés (Twale & Jelinek, 1996; Williams, 2013). Our study shows that peer mentors teach and learn from each other.

Participants not only gained intellectually from their experience, but they also made emotional or relational connections. Jessie Mae became more excited about assessment because her partner's "enthusiasm [about assessment] was contagious." Mya and her ACT colleague were friends as well as colleagues, so they could push each other to think differently because there was trust between them. Having an emotional connection and support can increase commitment. Williams (2013) showed that mentors helped new professionals have a sense of belonging which resulted in their wanting to remain in the field. Results confirmed findings from previous studies on peer mentoring in higher education, also. The relation-

ships formed were an essential part of the peer-mentoring experience (Driscoll et al., 2009; Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015). Professional growth occurred for everyone (Harnish & Wild, 1993).

While there were benefits to peer mentoring, there were also challenges. The findings from this study confirm another (Brown, Nairn, van der Meer, & Scott, 2015) that notes that role conflict emerges particularly in next-step mentoring relationships where parties are at different levels of the organizational structure. To ameliorate this problem, perhaps partners in next-step relationships can discuss expectations for topics of conversation and come up with some tenets to abide by. Establishing expectations might be helpful when individuals are in a small student affairs division or people work on a small campus.

Last, participants noted that there were fewer reminders from ACT team leaders in the spring and the spring term was busier which led to fewer meetings with one's ACT partner. Program leaders may want to reinvigorate the dyad colleague meetings in the spring. Leaders could send email reminders or increase meeting incentives. In addition, participants could organize group meetings where everyone came together to share ideas. Staff members in another study who did this enjoyed the camaraderie and group learning that occurred as a result (Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015).

While this study focused on individual benefits and challenges of a peer mentoring program, programs like the ACT Colleague Program may help to create cultures of evidence and assessment. Discussing assessment in dyads may foster a self-critical environment committed to improvement (Schuh, 2013; Schuh et al., 2016). These types of programs can send the message that assessment is routine and part of a team effort (Culp, 2012; Schuh et al., 2016; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Funding initiatives such as this shows the institution wants to create a culture of evidence and assessment (Culp, 2012; Seagraves & Dean, 2010;

Schuh, 2013). The ACT program provided large group discussions about assessment which increased confidence in participants' abilities to do assessment (Culp, 2012; Seagraves & Dean 2010; Schuh, 2013). Last, collegiality occurred between individuals from different areas of student affairs which is important in creating an assessment culture (Culp, 2012; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Schuh, 2013). In summary, while much of the mentoring literature in student affairs provides evidence of the benefits of mentoring more generally, this study shows the benefits and challenges of peer mentoring in a particular context. This study has demonstrated the peer mentoring in a professional development series on assessment can: (1) help people critically examine their assessment practices, (2) gain a larger perspective of the field of student affairs if colleagues are from different areas, (3) help people get excited about assessment, and (4) help people learn skills that may help in assessment practices. Considering the challenges of peer mentoring including role conflict and a lack of commitment to regular meetings due to busy schedules, administrators who plan these types of meetings should urge dyads to create role expectations in their initial meetings and should provide more incentives for dyads meeting in the spring.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are several study limitations. Study participants were from one mid-size university in the Midwest. Participants from schools in different geographical locations with larger or smaller student affairs divisions may have different experiences. Second, all the participants volunteered for this study and non-volunteers' responses may be different. Third, regarding the selection of peer dyads, participants requested they be assigned with peers or near-peers and organizers honored their wishes. A different selection process for dyads such as random assignment may have different results. Third, most participants believed they had little experience in assessment before join-

ing the ACT Colleague Team. Participants with more knowledge or confidence in their abilities may have yielded different results.

While there is ample research on mentoring in student affairs (e.g., Blackhurst, 2000; Bolton, 2005; Calhoun & Taub, 2014), this study adds to the benefits of peer mentoring in student affairs. Future research could explore the peer learning that occurs in more detail. What kind of learning happens? How can that learning be enhanced? In addition, scholars have researched power and control issues in peer mentoring have been investigated among undergraduates at a university in the United Kingdom (Christie, 2014). How power and control manifest themselves in peer and near-peer mentoring dyads in student affairs may differ. How these dynamics affect learning assessment is also an area that could be explored. Last, there is much research concerning mentoring and gender (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011; Early, 2017) Examining the experiences of peer mentors in different gender pairings would add depth to the literature on peer mentoring in student affairs.

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