Preparing Learning Community Peer Mentors to Support Students' Transitions

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Abstract

Peer mentors in learning communities for first-year students aid new students in their transition to college. However, little is known about how these peer mentors address concerning student behaviors, particularly those that may suggest a psychiatric/psychological disability. This research addressed the issue by asking peer mentors how they were trained and how they attended to concerning behaviors in their learning community groups. Findings from this qualitative study, based on individual interviews with 11 peer mentors in one learning community, centered around the impact of peer mentor training on the mentors, their role in observing and addressing behaviors, and their observations about the ways learning community students responded to peers demonstrating concerning behaviors. Recommendations for the use and training of peer mentors are identified.

Keywords

peer mentors, student transitions

One benefit of learning community programs is the "community" element that offers opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction, which has been highlighted in the literature as valuable for students (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Noted positive effects from peer interactions include general learning, well-being, and retention/graduation, to name just a few (Mayhew et al., 2016). Peer interactions affect the college experience, and peer educator roles provide coordinated opportunities for students to assist students in a formalized way. Undergraduate peer educator roles can benefit both the students served as well as the peer educators themselves (Collier, 2015; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Mayhew, et al., 2016; Minor, 2007; Newton & Ender, 2010; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015; Williams, 2011). These students enact their responsibilities in numerous functional areas, from health education to academic success centers, and have titles such as peer educator, peer tutor, peer mentor, and resident assistant. While various definitions of mentor roles exist, Colvin and Ashman (2010) define peer mentors as more experienced students who help novice students by providing information and support as they aid peers' personal growth and academic achievement. Research indicates benefits to students who are mentored by peers that include greater integration, feelings of support, and institutional connection (Yomtov et al., 2017) as well as increasing mentees' intentions to stay and graduate and promoting mentees' academic success (Collier, 2015).

Peer mentoring can be formal, with specific structure for the role and students specifically assigned to a particular mentor, or informal, which occurs naturally as students meet more experienced peers who provide guidance through an unstructured relationship (Collier, 2015). In their study of peer mentors, Colvin and Ashman (2010) identified five roles mentors played, including "connecting link, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate, and trusted friend" (p. 125). These peer mentors helped connect students to the institution through their knowledge of campus resources and success strategies, served as liaisons between students and instructors, and developed friendships with the new students (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). For peer mentors and the students they serve, mentor training is critical in preparing them to take on these responsibilities (Benjamin, 2007; Collier, 2015; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015).

In their review of peer mentoring literature, Terrion and Leonard (2007) identified fundamental characteristics that support mentoring. The authors noted beneficial prerequisites for mentor applicants that included ability and willingness to commit time, university experience, and demonstrated academic achievement. Gender and race also may be salient. Characteristics that aided mentors' ability to perform career-related mentoring included having the same program of study as the mentees in order to be seen as credible sources of information and self-enhancement motivation, which led the mentors to focus on career-related elements of the relationship while also meeting their own professional goals. Eight

characteristics were reported for supporting psychosocial functions in mentoring. Communication skills were identified as the most important characteristic, followed by supportiveness, trustworthiness, interdependency, empathy, personality match with mentee, enthusiasm, and flexibility.

One venue for utilizing the talents of undergraduate students as peer mentors is learning communities. According to Lenning et al. (2013), learning communities are "small groups of students intentionally organized (structurally and process-wise) for student-student, student-faculty, and student-curriculum interactions that will enhance student learning both for the group as a whole and for individual members of the group" (p. 7). As such, these "small groups of students" can also be intentionally organized into even smaller groups with leadership from a peer mentor. Learning community peer mentor job responsibilities might include such tasks as facilitating study groups, coordinating community building activities, and meeting with individual students to provide support (Inkelas et al., 2018; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). Given that learning communities draw a diverse group of students and peer mentoring involves frequent student-to-student interactions, peer mentors are positioned to observe student behaviors, some of which may cause them to be concerned about the student, requiring focused training on addressing such concerns.

While some learning community programs may be structured with specific student populations in mind (e.g., women in science-related majors), many learning community programs are open to any interested student. As noted above, learning communities include a diverse array of students, including students who demonstrate behaviors that may suggest mental health or other concerns. Benjamin and Belch (2018) highlighted the importance of learning community coordinators attending to concerning student behaviors, recommending specific training about psychiatric/psychological disabilities for all those working with learning communities. They acknowledge that enlisting the expertise of mental health professionals is paramount. Another recommendation from that study is the use of peer mentors to aid coordinators in identifying and supporting students who need assistance. Daddona (2011) indicated that the increase in mental health issues for college students makes it likely that peer educators working in any area are likely to interact with students with these challenges. Often, peer mentors are the first to become aware of concerning behaviors that suggest a student may be struggling. Peer mentors may notice students being anxious, not interacting with others, missing class, or displaying other behaviors that may affect success. With appropriate preparation, peer mentors can be a critical support element for students. Others have recommended the use of peer mentors as well (Belch, 2011; Cox et al., 2017). As noted by Benjamin and Belch, "Within the structure of a learning community (e.g., grouping students by coursework, in residence halls, and/or for program-related activities), the needs of students with psychiatric disabilities may

be particularly salient" (p. 2). Thus, peer mentors can be particularly helpful in identifying concerning behaviors and providing resources, referrals, and support for learning community students.

One goal of many learning community peer mentor programs is to aid in the student transition to college and create a community for the participants, since many learning communities are structured for incoming students. Goodman et al. (2006) highlighted four factors that impact transitions, known as "the 4Ss" (p. 55). Transition theory posits that transitions are influenced by the situation (elements such as what control the person has in the transition, the role change resulting from the transition, and previous successful experiences with transitions), the self (personal characteristics, how one views life, coping skills), support (including relationships, communities, and the stability of such supports), and strategies (what one can do about the transition including options for modifying it or controlling how one views it) (Goodman et al., 2006). Any student may struggle with the transition to college, and as noted by Belch (2011), students with psychiatric disabilities may find it particularly challenging, making the learning community peer mentor responsibility of community building and transition support critical to student success. Peer mentors offer both the "support" and "strategies" to aid in learning community students' transition. While transition theory ascribes the transition factors to the individual making the transition, peer mentors regularly use their own transition experience to inform their work, drawing on and thus utilizing those factors to support the transition of the peers they serve. Because peer mentors are models of the "successful student," faculty and staff may assume that they are prepared for the variety of issues that may surface because they managed their own transitions successfully. However, it is imperative that they be properly equipped to take on their role.

Little is known about how peer mentors in learning communities are prepared to provide the transition "support" and "strategies" necessary to address concerning student behaviors, some of which may suggest a psychiatric/psychological disability. The research questions for this study are:

1. How were peer mentors trained and prepared to support new students' transitions?
2. How did peer mentors identify and address concerning behaviors within the identified learning community?

This qualitative research addressed the issue by asking peer mentors in one science-based learning community about those experiences, including how they were trained and how they attended to concerning behaviors in their learning community groups. Using the lens of transition theory (Goodman et al., 2006) this study identified training and techniques peer mentors used to help students with concerning behaviors, suggesting the value of employing peer mentors and training them appropriately on some specific topics to support students. Recommendations

for the use and training of peer mentors in learning communities, particularly as they relate to students with concerning behaviors, are included.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a case study approach to understand the meaning peer mentors made of salient elements of their experience, fitting the purpose of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Case study research focuses on a specific "bounded system," which serves as the case. Merriam and Tisdell stated, "For it to be a case study, one particular program . . . selected on the basis of typicality, uniqueness, success, and so forth, would be the unit of analysis" (pp. 37-39). The "bounded system" for this study is the specific learning community peer mentor program. Particular focus was placed on peer mentors' transition support and strategies role, specifically as evidenced through training about and efforts to identify and address concerning behaviors demonstrated by students within their learning community. This unusual training served as a "uniqueness" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 39), making this case particularly worthy of study.

The study site was a large, rural research institution in the Midwest. The learning community program was a science-focused, course-based learning community held during the fall semester for first-year students who had declared a specific science major; students were traditional-aged students (approximately 18 years old). Approximately 350 first-year students majored in the specific discipline during the time of the study. All first-year students were enrolled in a required orientation-type course taught by the learning community coordinator, which formed the learning community. Within that large course, students were divided into smaller groups of ten, and each group was led by an upper-division peer mentor. Thirty-five peer mentors were employed during the time of the study. Peer mentors were upper-division students in the same science-focused academic program. All but one peer mentor were former participants of the learning community. The one mentor who had not participated was not originally in the specific learning community academic program during her first year of college but subsequently changed majors, making her eligible for the peer mentor role.

Using a criterion-based, comprehensive selection strategy (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), all peer mentors working with the specific learning community being studied were invited, via email, to participate in an individual interview. Ten of the 35 mentors volunteered to participate. Additionally, mentors from the previous year were invited to participate; one former mentor volunteered to be interviewed. All eleven peer mentors were female, and the entire peer mentor staff for the year of the study was female, which was reflective of the academic program, as the learning community coordinator noted that the academic program was predominately female.

In-person individual interviews with the 11 peer mentors were conducted. A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) was used to explore the mentors' role preparation and overall experiences working with students, with a particular focus on their approach to students demonstrating concerning behaviors. After peer mentors provided informed consent, interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and returned to each participant for her review; seven responded with confirmation or edits. Additionally, the researcher observed the spring training session focused on working with students with concerning behaviors to better understand how peer mentors were prepared for this element of their role.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "[data] collection and analysis should be a *simultaneous* process in qualitative research" (p. 195). As such, while data were collected, memos were written to capture tentative themes to further explore. Interview transcripts were coded using descriptive words/phrases (Saldaña, 2012) and then categorized based on patterns that emerged, resulting in themes. These themes are elements that appear often or describe uniquenesses about the peer mentor experience. Jones et al. (2006) stated, "It is through the process of finding, naming, and elaborating a theme that understanding of the phenomenon is heightened" (p. 89). As such, themes noted aid in understanding how these learning community peer mentors prepared and provided support and strategies for learning community students' transitions, with particular attention to the peer mentor program's focus on students of concern.

Trustworthiness serves as an indicator of rigor for qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to demonstrate trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability were established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation and member checks were used to establish credibility. According to Schwandt (2015), triangulation "is a procedure used to establish the fact that the criterion of *validity* has been met. . . . The central point of the procedure is to examine a conclusion (assertion, claim, etc.) from more than one vantage point" (p. 307). The use of multiple data sources (interview transcripts from multiple peer mentors) allowed for triangulation, while member checking involved having participants review their interview transcript, indicate whether it represented their recollection of the conversation, and/or clarify elements. When credibility is established, dependability is typically assumed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). "Adequate engagement in data collection" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246) leads to credibility, and reaching saturation, or the point at which information is regularly repeated and no new information is forthcoming, indicates adequate engagement. In this study, saturation was achieved as peer mentors' stories became similar as the interview process continued. Peer review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) also was conducted for credibility. Thick description of the mentoring context and experience allows readers to determine if the findings are transferable. According to Lincoln and Guba, it is necessary "to provide sufficient information about the

context in which an inquiry is carried out so that anyone else interested in transferability has a base of information appropriate to the judgment" (pp. 124-125). The site description along with the description of the peer mentor job expectations, findings, and mentor quotes contribute to transferability. Finally, interview transcripts, memos, and field notes provide an audit trail to demonstrate confirmability (Maxwell, 1996).

Findings

Data from peer mentor interviews highlight two primary categories of findings for this study. Information about the impact of training as well as peer mentors' approaches for identifying and addressing concerning behaviors through the learning community peer mentor role are highlighted below. These data are examined through the lens of transition theory, examining how peer mentors aid learning community students by providing "support" and "strategies."

It is important to understand the expectations of this peer mentor role for context. According to the peer mentor job description, mentor responsibilities included attending training, coordinating monthly social or team building activities for their groups, maintaining an email list of mentees and communicating regularly with the students, familiarizing students with resources and making referrals, attending peer mentor staff meetings, facilitating weekly group meetings, helping students develop cover letters and resumes, facilitating study groups as needed, meeting individually with students, submitting written observations and activities of the group to supervisors each month, and coordinating and leading monthly break-out sessions.

When asked about their primary job responsibilities, peer mentors viewed helping new students establish a community and aiding with their transition to the university as most critical. Two primary job tasks were consistently identified by the peer mentors that focused on successful student transition and community: facilitating a weekly group meeting (connected to the orientation class) and meeting individually with mentees at least once per semester. Through these primary interactions, peer mentors were positioned to aid in the transition of learning community students and observe and attend to student behaviors. Peer mentor training prepared them to take on these various responsibilities.

Training Impact

"Support" and "strategies" were a focus of peer mentor training. Peer mentor training occurred at both the departmental and institutional levels. The institution held a university-wide peer mentor training; study participants were encouraged but not required to participate in this training. Participating in departmental peer mentor training was a requirement. This four-week training covered topics that ranged from

how to welcome students to the institution and plan activities to diversity training and a specific session on recognizing and responding to concerning student behavior. Of note, while peer mentors were trained to identify concerning behaviors, they were not to attempt to "diagnose" mental health disorders but were informed to support students and refer them to appropriate resources.

Videos created specifically for these peer mentors about concerning behaviors were a significant element of training. The genesis of the videos originated with a previous learning community student who approached the learning community coordinator with the idea of making videos to help students who were experiencing challenges like she had. Other former learning community students offered to do the same. As a result, with the permission of the students in the videos, departmental peer mentor training included viewing some of these videos. Example issues noted in the videos included a student whose depression and help-seeking were the result of being sexually assaulted. Another shared her story about being drugged in a local bar while socializing with friends. Peer mentor Faith (all names are pseudonyms) asserted the effectiveness of these videos and how they underscored the support needs of the students:

> They were very effective, especially last year, the first time seeing them. I almost cried for a few of them just because they really kind of hit home because you don't . . . think about it. And yet you see these girls who, it's completely affected their world. . . . You don't want them to be struggling. You want to be there for them because they talk about their friends who weren't there for them. Didn't believe them and it's just, it's really saddening, and you don't want that for someone.

As Faith noted, the videos reinforced her desire to help the new students through such difficulties.

In addition to the videos, the training session provided peer mentors an opportunity to practice verbalizing their concerns through role plays. Mentors were paired and given one of three "traumatic events" situations (a sexual assault; a suicidal student who was distraught after killing someone while driving drunk; or a student dealing with the aftermath of a parent's suicide). Again, Faith noted the importance of this activity:

> [The role play activity is] really helpful, you know, you don't normally practice saying the words, "Are you suicidal? Do you have a plan?" And by practicing face-to-face with someone, you're able to control your face and what it's saying. You just feel more prepared for that conversation . . . if you do have to say it in the future.

Peer mentors mentioned that these training activities helped with their awareness, both of themselves and their own emotions as well as the emotions and challenges of others. Jeanine stated that students often think they are the only one having a specific experience, adding,

But [the learning community coordinator and graduate assistant] and everyone has really made it the core goal to like show us that this happens to everyone . . . and freshman year's hard. . . . So I think their training has really opened our eyes to we're not the only ones, and probably at least a couple of our students every year are going to be facing these [issues] so you really need to be just mindful of that and really careful and try and look for it. But also just be there, be their person that will listen to them and just try and help them through.

Training served as a good reminder of common student challenges and the likelihood that the peer mentors would have to support students experiencing some of these difficult issues.

When it came to awareness about these challenging issues, peer mentors either found the situations familiar because of personal experience or were surprised by the issues because they lacked that specific experience. Some situations were not surprising to Nora, but others were not familiar, especially in her first training:

My first training I was [surprised by the issues] because I hadn't been exposed to it. . . . I wasn't surprised about eating disorders because you hear about that a lot. I was really surprised about the stalking because, I don't know, I just didn't think that happened. And definitely I was surprised when he said that it was an acquaintance that usually sexually assaults someone instead of a random stranger. And definitely when [the graduate assistant] talked about getting. . . drugged. That definitely shocked me because I was like, "Oh my god, that actually happens". . . I definitely told my kids because things that shocked me, I wanted them to know.

She assumed that situations that surprised her would also surprise the first-year students she was mentoring. During training, presenters highlighted assistance strategies for these situations, like information about campus resources to which peer mentors should refer students. Knowing the campus resources, as a result of training, was noted by peer mentors as a significant benefit of training.

While some situations were not familiar, there were other situations that peer mentors had personally experienced. The combination of training and personal experience made peer mentors both more aware and feel more prepared to address the issues. In particular, Theresa noted specific personal experiences that raised her awareness and comfort with issues:

I am LGBT and I wasn't as comfortable with that last year. . . And now it's a non-issue. And so I'm more open to learning about that and then hearing people with their struggles and like, oh I was there, but now I'm here. Maybe I can help. Also, my roommate, my new roommate, got out of a [sic] abusive relationship and her boyfriend was stalking her and

> coming over so that has hit home now. You know, last year I'd be like
> oh, [this town] is a safe place. This doesn't happen. And now it's like,
> you know, things do happen.

Ellie's personal experience during her first year made her aware of challenges as well:

> I know freshman year, I was so withdrawn. I went home every other
> weekend. I took a nap every day. I only went to work. . . . So because I
> went through that in a sense like I can kind of help pick that out and I
> can be like, you know, you're not alone. I went through the same thing
> freshman year. It's common. And I just kind of give them the resources.

The peer mentors themselves noted their lack of awareness about particular issues and how the training aided them in identifying concerns and helping their students. However, some peer mentors drew heavily on their own personal experience as training for helping students.

Identifying and Addressing Concerning Behaviors

Although learning community participants in the group also were positioned to observe and address concerns about their peers, it was the peer mentors who shouldered the primary responsibility for supporting the learning community students. Peer mentors were asked what behaviors they looked for and how they addressed concerning behaviors in their groups. Common indicators of concern included behavior changes, particularly when students stopped attending the orientation class; non-verbal behaviors; and vague answers to questions or remaining quiet and non-participative in the group. Sometimes students stayed after class to talk with the peer mentor, which was noted as another behavior that raised concerns since the assumption was that the student was seeking out the peer mentor as a result of a problem. Finally, when peer mentors noted students having negative experiences that the peer mentors themselves had, mentors concluded that the student might be struggling.

Alexis mentioned both identifying students who were quiet and noticing behavior changes, stating:

> I definitely look for those people who are a little more quiet. Avoiding
> eye contact with me or not talking to other people in the group. . . . So I
> look for that and then if somebody is normally talkative and I notice that
> they're not, then I definitely pay attention to that, too.

Faith commented on common behaviors and comments that would draw her attention, such as self-harm and substance abuse, identifying specific alcohol-related behaviors as important to address:

> So if I notice like one of my mentees, they're always talking about how
> hungover they are and how they're almost falling asleep in their classes

and how they had such a crazy night every single night that week. It's like, that's kind of like red flags.

Beyond what students said, mentors attended to non-verbal behaviors as a primary indicator of how students were doing. They mentioned seeing a student near tears or looking stressed as an indicator of concern. Jeanine emphasized the importance of noticing students' non-verbal communication:

> I've just always been . . . very good at non-verbals. That's what I mostly focus on more than what someone says. People will tell you whatever they want; they're thinking about what they're saying to you. It's their non-verbals that are actually what they're feeling and what they're doing . . . So I like to focus on non-verbals. I think that gives a truer sense of how they actually feel and what they're thinking.

Mentors were able to quickly identify both overt behaviors as well as non-verbal communication that drew their attention and resulted in them offering support for the student.

In order to address their concerns, mentors typically started with individual contact with students. Faith shared her approach:

> So the first thing I do is confront them individually, but do it in a non-threatening way, so they don't feel like I'm coming at them. I want to approach them more as like a friend but still have that bigger sister status so they understand that I am a little bit more than just a friend. But approach them, ask them if everything's going ok. What could be their problem? How I can help? This is also . . . when I offer, "Do you want to meet one on one?" And that really kind of helps if they're not comfortable explaining in a group setting. I'll take them away and we'll do [a] one on one later that week and over coffee or something. They feel more relaxed and then they can open up more to you, and then if they open up . . . depending on what it is I help them get the services and help they need, or I'll refer [them to the learning community coordinators] for help, too, with it.

Jeanine started with text messages but also utilized individual meetings, explaining, "Normally I sent out a text first. I'll just be like, 'Hey, noticed either you're not coming to class or you've been really quiet; is there something going on? Would you like to talk?'"

Beyond individual consultation, mentors addressed concerns by being specifically attentive to the students and trying to make sure all students felt like part of the community. Lizzie said, "The bubbly people will always have something to say, but I'd always be like calling out the other people, too." Kelsey also commented on trying to include someone who others noted as "weird." Encouraging students to use campus resources was another strategy peer mentors used to address concerning behaviors. While they tried to assist students themselves

initially, they noted various resources on campus for help, including the learning community coordinator and graduate assistant.

Due to their training and/or personal experience, peer mentors were able to identify concerning behaviors of students in their groups and offer support to the students. Mentors noted that students in the group, however, were not always aware of their peers' concerns or chose not to acknowledge them. Peer mentors indicated that students in the group either were aware that their peers were having issues and simply did not respond to the students or chose to ignore them. Some students were aware of an issue and reached out to the peer mentor regarding the concern, while others simply lacked any awareness of the concern. One peer mentor noted an instance when students in the community reached out to another student regarding a concern, but overall, the peers rarely offered support to each other. The responsibility of supporting students of concern fell to the peer mentors.

One peer mentor thought that students in her group chose not to respond to the student with concerning behavior because they saw responding as the peer mentor's responsibility. Jeanine stated that other community members noticed when a student was not fitting in, sharing, "They definitely noticed. I don't think they ever said anything. I think most of them felt like that's not my place, you know. That's why I was there [as the peer mentor] is to notice those things." Another mentor, Diane, recalled a student who was quiet, and she said other members of the group grew accustomed to that quietness and then ignored the student when she did share information: "She wasn't really a part of the other conversations that they would have because she would sit there. So when she presented her good and bad . . . everybody else just kind of like got on their phone." Peer mentors noted that students who were not active participants ultimately were ignored. As Shannon stated,

> What I noticed was if there was the one or two people that weren't
> clicking, always sitting on the outside of the group and then once they
> had separated themselves from the group and they didn't want to
> interact, then no one else would try to bring them in.

If a student decided not to actively connect with the learning community group, other group members tended to dismiss them.

In some cases, however, peer mentors noted that students in the learning community were aware of issues and did respond, but the response was usually to alert the peer mentor. Theresa shared what she called "subtle conversations," when learning community students informed her of their efforts to bring a disconnected student into the group by, for example, offering the student a ride to a learning community event. In general, students relied on the peer mentors to provide support as opposed to feeling any personal responsibility for directly helping fellow group members.

Finally, some peer mentors indicated that others in the learning community simply lacked awareness of students' struggles. While Faith highlighted the maturity of the first-year students in her group who made efforts to reach out to a struggling student, Maria indicated that first-year students are egocentric:

> When you're a freshman I feel like you're very focused on yourself and what you want to do. . . . I feel like they're so involved within themselves, trying to fit in themselves, trying to find friends by themselves that they don't really realize how other people are struggling and you're just focused on how you're struggling and not what other people are doing. . . . I think that's a big part of why people feel so lonely their first semester here just because you feel like the only one in the world that's alone and it's not the truth.

Ellie observed that the students who "were more self-sufficient and bubbly and excited and ready for college . . . form their own little clique" and are not aware of other students' struggles. Interestingly, despite incorporating the "highs and lows" activity that many used to share and normalize the challenging experiences of the first year, the peer mentors suggested that the students were not aware of each other's struggles and provided limited support for each other's college transition.

Discussion

Peer mentors in this study were a dedicated group of women who made critical efforts to aid new students in their college transition. Their description of their role and responsibilities suggested a focus on teambuilding, and they exceeded their written job expectations, particularly in meeting with individual students. Given their comments about noticing concerning behaviors and the general egocentrism of first-year students, these peer mentor efforts were important in communicating care and concern to students. Goodman et al. (2006) indicated that types and stability of supports, such as those created through relationships and communities, aids in transition. Peer mentors served an important support role in the transition of these first-year learning community students through the individual relationships that they developed with them, the community that they built for the students, and their role as a stable support for that first semester (and in some cases even longer in an informal manner). While some of the peer mentors set limits regarding communication, most allowed mentees to have significant access to them through text, phone calls, etc. This is not surprising since peer mentors saw it as their job to help students successfully transition and establish a community at the university as well as to retain students if the major and institution were a good fit for the student. Additionally, the primary job responsibilities mentors reported were group meetings and individual meetings with students, both primary vehicles for communicating care and concern. Community-establishing efforts included "highs

and lows" activities at group meetings, individual meetings, and encouraging or even requiring learning community students to join campus organizations. Fitting with the theory of transitions developed by Goodman et al., these activities aimed to help students manage stress (a transition "strategy") as well as establish relationships (a transition "support").

Training was a critical element of peer mentors' abilities to aid students, and the specific training regarding student concerns provided to this group of mentors was notable. One mentor even commented that she thought they were the only mentors on campus who received this specific training, which led to the mentors taking pride in their unique knowledge. Williams (2011) noted that "peer educators are not trained counselors, but this does not mean they won't find themselves in a peer counseling role" (p. 4). These mentors understood this, and despite their training, noted the importance of knowing and using campuses resources. They did not appear to think they could take care of all issues themselves but referred students to appropriate services and learning community faculty/staff as needed. In addition to their training, mentors regularly used personal experience to anticipate and address the needs of new students. Goodman et al. (2006) noted previous experience as an element of the "situation" factor of a transition. While the peer mentors themselves had successfully made the transition to their college student role, their own "situation" as first-year students informed them in such a way that they offered personal experiences to assist their students' transition.

Recommendations

Recommendations and implications for practice resulting from the findings of this study focus on both the hiring and training processes for peer mentors. Given mentors' strong reliance on personal experience as training for addressing concerning behaviors, it is important for learning community coordinators to gain information about each candidate's experiences so that they know what information the peer mentors will draw on that was not part of their formal training. While mentors had good intentions, their own coping mechanisms may differ from what will assist the students or what the learning community staff want them to convey to students. Since it is often the case that peer mentors have been participants in the learning community, learning community staff may have some familiarity with the mentors' first-year experiences, but they should ask mentor candidates questions about challenges they experienced as first-year students and methods they employed to overcome them. Knowing the mentor candidate's experiences allows learning community coordinators to understand what will guide the mentor in their helping role. Additionally, mentor candidates may not be aware of potential issues if they did not experience them as new students, making training on these issues critical.

Training about concerning student behaviors was noted as valuable by these mentors, and the videos created to train the mentors in this study were particularly effective. Training about signs that identify concerns needs to be provided for all peer mentors. Campus resources are another necessary element of training because of peer mentors' limited credentials. In addition, as pointed out by this study's participants, mentors need to practice communication skills for caring confrontations to feel confident. One topic that should be addressed, particularly when working with first-year students, is providing information on how to create community and establish a culture of care within the mentoring groups so the students notice and address their peers' issues instead of ignoring them, which occurred in most groups described by these mentors. While the "highs and lows" activity was intended to help students see that they were having similar experiences, the mentors' comments about the students being self-absorbed suggest that this activity could, but did not, sensitize the students to see and support their peers during difficult times. At a minimum, explaining the purpose of the "highs and lows" activity and mentioning to the students that they may be able to support each other while also having peer mentors demonstrate that support verbally during the activity would be beneficial but require training and practice.

Conclusion

Using peer mentors to support first-year students has been demonstrated as a sound practice for providing transition support. Within the context of learning communities, where a cohort of students shares similar academic interests and possibly even courses and other cocurricular experiences, a peer mentor can get to know students well enough to identify behaviors or changes that might indicate a need for additional support. Thorough hiring and training processes can be instrumental to ensuring that students will receive the assistance and support they need from the mentors in these roles.

There are limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, this is a single-institution and individual science-based learning community program study. Learning community programs at different institutions or in different disciplines may offer new information about peer mentor support. Additionally, all of the peer mentors during the time of the study were female. Although the academic program was predominately female as well, male peer mentors in learning communities may have different experiences to report that are worthy of study. Furthermore, future research on how the mentees experience and interpret peer mentor support also would be worthwhile. While understanding the experience from the mentor perspective is valuable, having insight into how students benefit from this support would further our understanding of supports and strategies that are salient for the students the mentors serve.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your job responsibilities as a peer mentor. What are you expected to do?
2. Why did you decide to become a peer mentor?
3. What do you do to try to make students feel comfortable/like part of the community?
4. How often do you meet with your students? Individually? In groups?
5. If someone does not seem to be fitting into the group, what behaviors or characteristics do you observe that indicates that to you?
6. What do you do when someone exhibits behavior that is concerning or does not appear to be fitting in (Seems like they are not connecting with the rest of the community or are disruptive in some way or struggle in ways that produce negative behavior, seem to struggle with being in college, etc.)? Can you give an example?
7. Has your training to work with these students helped you in your role? If yes, how? If no, what was missing? What more do you believe you need to know, given your experiences?
8. Have you had students in your group whose behavior has been concerning—such as interrupting others, being detached from the group, having extreme mood fluctuations? How do other students in the group respond to those students?
9. How do you help other students when someone in the group seems to demonstrate concerning behaviors like I mentioned previously?
10. What are some of the successes you have had in working with students who have demonstrated challenging behaviors?