First-Year Experience Peer Mentor Program

Laurie A. Sharp
Tarleton State University

Abstract

Peer mentoring involves a reciprocal relationship of mutual benefits to both the mentee and mentor. To help first time in college students experience a smooth transition to college and empower at-risk college students, South Central University (all names in this paper are pseudonyms) implemented a pilot study for a FYE Peer Mentor Program in fall 2019. This study employed a case study methodology to explore key outcomes and student success metrics qualitatively and quantitatively. Study participants included five FYS instructors, five peer mentors, and 49 FTIC students who were enrolled in 10 FYS course sections. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, documentary information, and a researcher-created questionnaire. Qualitative data were analyzed with thematic analysis techniques, and quantitative data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially using independent *t*-tests. Qualitative findings characterized the FYE Peer Mentor Program as a vital support mechanism for FTIC students academically and

socially, as well as a promising way to promote leadership development in at-risk college students who serve as peer mentors. While quantitative findings showed that FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course with a peer mentor earned higher final course grades and had higher fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall retention rates than FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course without a peer mentor, these findings were not statistically significant. A discussion of findings was presented, as well as limitations for this study and future area for research.
Keywords: at-risk college students, first time in college students, mentoring services, peer mentors

First-Year Experience Peer Mentor Program

Student engagement and retention have been long-standing concerns for institutions of higher education (Tight, 2019). Existing literature has advocated that engaged students are more likely to persist in their studies and successfully obtain a bachelor's degree (e.g., Kuh et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2005; Tinto, 2012). However, at-risk and underserved students, such as first-generation college students and students of color, often experience distinctive challenges that influence their ability to "thrive and graduate on time" (Pendakur, 2016, p. 4).

Peer mentoring has been shown to positively influence college student achievement and increase student retention at institutions

of higher education, particularly among at-risk college students (Albright & Hurd, 2018; Collings et al., 2014; Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Lenz, 2014; Sanchez et al., 2006; Yomtov et al., 2017). At-risk college students are the most vulnerable students who have a higher probability of experiencing lower levels of academic and social achievements (Horton, 2015) and higher levels of student attrition (Tinto (2012) than their counterparts. To address these issues, institutions of higher education have implemented peer mentoring programs to provide incoming at-risk, first time in college (FTIC) students (i.e., mentees) access to knowledgeable and skilled upperclassmen (i.e., peer mentors) who attend to academic, logistical, and social-emotional needs. Such programs have been shown to improve academic and social integration (Hartness & Shannon, 2011; Moschetti et al., 2018; Plaskett et al., 2018; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014) as peer mentors help their mentees experience "a smooth and successful transition to higher education" (Plaskett et al., 2018, p. 48).

Peer mentoring also has a strong potential to promote the development of leadership dispositions and skills among students who serve as leaders among their peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Woelk & Pennington Weeks, 2010). Students who serve as peer mentors have also reported experiencing transformative personal growth while engaged in their peer mentoring role (Bunting & Williams, 2017). Several researchers have contended that

peer mentoring involves a reciprocal relationship of mutual benefits to both the mentee and the mentor (Good et al., 2000; Marquez Kiyama & Guillen Luca, 2014; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). Through peer mentoring, mentees and mentors are well positioned to experience academic and social growth in college (Good et al., 2000; Marquez Kiyama & Guillen Luca, 2014; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014), as well as lifetime gains beyond college personally and professionally (Good et al., 2000). Although available literature for undergraduate peer mentoring is extensive, there is a need for more research to clarify the concept of mentoring and demonstrate its effectiveness in promoting student achievement (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991).

To address this concern, South Central University (all names in this paper are pseudonyms) implemented a First Year Experience (FYE) Peer Mentor Program as part of its first-year seminar (FYS) course in Fall 2019. The FYE Peer Mentor Program was designed to promote leadership development in sophomore-level students who are considered at-risk college students as they help prepare incoming FTIC students for a successful academic, personal, and social transition to college. There is ample empirical evidence that peer mentoring programs during the first year of college is beneficial for both the mentor (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Bunting & Williams, 2017; Dunn & Moore, 2020; Spaulding et al., 2020) and the mentee (Connolly et al., 2017; Flores & Estudillo, 2018;

Leidenfrost et al., 2014; Yomtov et al., 2017). The research goal of this study was to uncover emerging themes associated with the FYE Peer Mentor Program by analyzing the viewpoints of all individuals who are involved: FYS instructors, peer mentors, and FTIC students. Additionally, this study investigated the impact of the FYE Peer Mentor Program using common metrics for student success (i.e., final course grades and student retention rates).

FYS at South Central University

Since 2008, South Central University has offered a FYS course as part of the first-year experience to introduce FTIC students to the college environment. Over the past 12 years, the FYS course has been refined through several iterations in response to student needs. At the time of this study, the FYS course was designed to enhance and support students' academic and social transition to college and counted as one semester credit hour (SCH) of the State's required general education core curriculum. All FTIC students were required to enroll in a FYS course during their first 16-week fall or spring semester, as well as transfer students who earned less than 12 SCHs of post-high school college credits, and students under the age of 25. FTIC students enrolled in FYS courses aligned with specific disciplines in their selected majors (i.e., agriculture, business, humanities, natural and applied sciences, social sciences) and attended face-to-face class sessions held weekly.

FYS instructors at South Central University play a vital role in supporting FTIC students with their transition from high school to college. During FYS class sessions, FYS instructors create active learning environments, promote meaningful interactions about substantive matters, intellectually challenge students, and model and develop successful student behaviors and skills. FYS instructors establish student-centered classroom communities by interweaving content with hands-on, minds-on learning activities that address seven curricular components (i.e., academic advising, belonging, career exploration, communication, learning skills, personal responsibility, well-being), introduce students to the vast resources and opportunities available at South Central University, and share specialized disciplinary knowledge and expertise.

The FYE coordinator at South Central University monitors student success in the FYS course closely and shares relevant data regularly with executive leaders, particularly since South Central University serves an increasing number of at-risk college students. For analysis purposes, the Fall 2017 semester served as an appropriate baseline year for FYS data due to revisions made with the State-approved academic curriculum. As shown in Table 1, the FYE coordinator and executive leaders became concerned about the considerable increase in percentage of students who received a final grade of a D, F, or Withdrawal (i.e., DFW) in their FYS course and the reductions in student retention rates.

Table 1.
Student Success in FYS

FTIC Cohort	Final Grade A	Final Grade B	Final Grade C	Final Grade DFW	Spring Retention Rate[a]	Fall Retention Rate[b]
Fall 2017	74.55%	10.77%	6.13%	8.55%	88.87%	69.37%
Fall 2018	48.44%	17.81%	11.68%	22.07%	86.83%	64.86%

[a] fall-to-spring retention rate b fall-to-fall retention rate

FYE Peer Mentor Program at South Central University

To address the concerns about student success in FYS, South Central University developed a new initiative under the direction of the FYE coordinator, the FYE Peer Mentor Program. The purpose of the FYE Peer Mentor Program was twofold: to promote student success among FTIC students in FYS and to promote leadership development in sophomore-level students who are considered at-risk (i.e., first-generation, Pell eligible, and/or members of an underrepresented racial/ethnic group). In the FYE Peer Mentor Program, sophomore-level students who completed the FYS course in their first semester at South Central University successfully and considered at-risk college students were invited to serve as peer mentors.

Students who accepted the invitation to serve as a peer mentor were hired as student workers who were eligible to work up to 10 hours per week at the pay rate of $8 per hour. Peer mentors were assigned to work with an instructor who teaches a FYS course in their major. Once given their FYS assignments, peer mentors introduced themselves to the FYS instructor and scheduled an

introductory meeting to establish agreed upon duties and responsibilities for the FYS class. For example, the peer mentor may answer questions FTIC students ask during class, take attendance, share information via the learning management system, or co-teach a lesson with the FYS instructor. During the introductory meeting, peer mentors also made arrangements to meet with the FYS instructor on a weekly basis to help with planning instruction for class sessions. Beyond the FYS class, peer mentors made weekly contact with each FTIC student enrolled in their assigned FYS course to foster connections and give support during the first year of college. Weekly contact encompassed making phone calls, sending text messages, and holding in person gatherings. Peer mentors documented all interactions with FTIC students outside of the FYS class in the campus-wide student success management system. Throughout the semester, the FYE coordinator communicated with peer mentors via in person meetings, emails, and text messages to answer questions, brainstorm mentoring ideas, and provide guidance.

Methods

Research Design

This study explored key outcomes and impact on student success metrics associated with participation in a pilot study of the FYE Peer Mentor Program. To do so, a case study research design was employed that collected both qualitative and quantitative data. This

research design permitted access into the experiences and viewpoints of research participants, thereby allowing for holistic understandings about the phenomena under study (Stake, 2006). As noted by Yin (1984), case study methodology is appropriate to "investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" using "multiple sources of evidence" (p. 23). Previous researchers have used case study methodology to investigate peer mentoring within higher education contexts (Goodrich et al., 2018; Packard et al., 2014; Snowden & Hardy, 2012; Yaman, 2019), including during the first year of college (Abbot et al., 2018; Antoniadou & Holmes, 2017; D'Abate, 2009).

Context

This study was conducted at the main campus for South Central University, a regional, public institution of higher education located in the South Central Region of the United States. At the time of this study, South Central University served 13,178 students enrolled in 100 undergraduate and graduate degree programs. South Central University's student body was mostly comprised of full-time undergraduate students. At the beginning of the Fall 2019 semester, South Central University welcomed a cohort of 2,073 FTIC students (see Table 2 for student demographic information).

Table 2.
2019 FTIC Cohort Demographic Information

Category with Respective Characteristics	*n*	% of Category
Gender		
Female	1,276	61.55%
Male	797	38.45%
Ethnicity		
White	1,369	66.04%
Hispanic or LatinX	459	22.14%
Black or African American	128	6.17%
Multiracial	77	3.71%
Asian	16	0.77%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	9	0.43%
Not Reported	9	0.43%
Foreign	5	0.24%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	0.05%
First Generation Status		
Not First Generation	1,074	51.81%
First Generation	980	47.27%
Not Reported	19	0.92%
Pell Eligibility		
Not Pell Eligible	1,281	61.79%
Pell Eligible	792	38.21%

Participants

FYS Instructors

The pilot study of the FYE Peer Mentor Program included seven FYS instructors. Of these individuals, consent to participate in this study was provided by four FYS instructors who were full-time faculty members and one FYS instructor who was a graduate teaching assistant (see Table 3). Each FYS instructor participant was the instructor of record for one or more sections of FYS in their discipline within their academic college during the fall semester in which this study was conducted. Prior to this study, four of the five FYS instructors had previous experience with teaching FYS courses

at South Central University or previous institutions of higher education.

Table 3.
FYS Instructors

Instructor Name	Demographic Characteristics	Highest Degree	Position Held	FYS Course Assignments
Dr. Linda Smith[a]	Female, White, Not First Generation	Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)	Associate Professor & Assistant Dean in the Office of the Provost	1 section of FYS in the Department of Education with 23 FTIC students
Dr. Lois Healey	Female, White, First Generation	Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)	Professor & Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts	1 section of FYS in the Department of Communication with 20 FTIC students
Mr. Jim Kane[a]	Male, White, First Generation	Master of Science (in progress)	Graduate Assistant Teaching II in the Department of Management	1 section of FYS in the Department of Management with 58 FTIC students
Mr. Joe Morris[a]	Male, Hispanic, First Generation	Doctor of Philosophy (in progress)	Instructor & Contract Director in the Department of Social Work	1 section of FYS in the Department of Social Work with 25 FTIC students
Dr. Kelly Payne	Female, White, Not First Generation	Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)	Professor & Associate Dean in the Department of Kinesiology	1 section of FYS in the Department of Kinesiology with 45 FTIC students.

[a] Assigned FYE peer mentor also provided consent to participate.

FYE Peer Mentors

The pilot study of the FYE Peer Mentor Program included seven peer mentors. Of these individuals, consent to participate in this study was provided by five peer mentors (see Table 4). All peer mentor participants were female, sophomore-level students. Each peer mentor was appointed to work with an instructor who taught one or more FYS sections aligned with their major. As shown in Table 4, four of the peer mentors completed their duties with one

FYS section, and one peer mentor completed their duties with three FYS sections.

Table 4.
FYE Peer Mentors

Student Name	Demographic Characteristics	Degree Major	FYS Course Assignments
Lexie	Female, Black, Not First Generation	Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice	3 FYS sections in the Department of Criminal Justice with 67 students
Maisie[a]	Female, Hispanic, First Generation	Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education	1 FYS section in the Department of Education with 23 FTIC students
Carrie	Female, Black, First Generation	Bachelor of Science in Nursing	1 FYS section in the Department of Nursing with 34 FTIC students
Madeline[a]	Female, White, First Generation	Bachelor of Business Administration in Management	1 FYS section in the Department of Management with 58 FTIC students
Kayla[a]	Female, Black, First Generation	Bachelor of Science in Social Work	1 FYS section in the Department of Social Work with 25 FTIC students

[a] Assigned FYS instructor also provided consent to participate.

FTIC Students

FTIC students at South Central University who were enrolled in one of the FYS sections affiliated with the FYE Peer Mentor Program were also invited to take part in this study. Of 272 FTIC students who were enrolled in 10 FYS course sections, 49 FTIC students provided consent to participate (see Table 5).

Table 5.
FTIC Students

Category with Respective Characteristics	*n*	% of Category
Gender		
Female	37	75.51%
Male	12	24.49%
Ethnicity		
White	35	71.43%
Hispanic or LatinX	11	22.45%
Black or African American	3	6.12%
First Generation Status		
Not First Generation	30	61.22%
First Generation	19	38.78%

Data Collection

As suggested by Yin (2014), multiple sources of data were collected in this study to investigate the FYE Peer Mentor Program broadly and promote the development of converging lines of inquiry. Data were collected over a four-month period from participants in the form of interview data, documentary information, and questionnaire responses. Below is a description of each data collection approach.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each FYS instructor and peer mentor at two distinct points during the fall semester: (1) between the fifth and seventh week of instruction and (2) after the last week of instruction. During each interview, a researcher-created interview guide was used that included open-ended questions to elicit information about the background of each participant and their viewpoints and experiences with the FYE Peer Mentor Program in a two-way, conversational manner (see Figure

1). Each semi-structured interview was audio recorded so the researcher could focus on building rapport with interviewees and making field notes. Once all semi-structured interviews were conducted, the researcher completed manual verbatim transcriptions from the audio recordings.

Figure 1.
Questions from Interview Guides

FYS Instructors	Peer Mentors
Background Questions (Phase 1 only) 1. Tell me a little about your background. 2. Tell me about your experiences with teaching the FYS course. 3. Why did you elect to participate in the FYE Peer Mentor program?	*Background Questions* (Phase 1 only) 1. Tell me a little about your background. 2. Tell me about your first-year experience. 3. What is your major? 4. What are your professional goals? 5. Why did you elect to participate in the FYE Peer Mentor program?
Main Questions (Phases 1 & 2) 1. Describe your experiences with the FYE Peer Mentor program. 2. How are you engaging with the peer mentor? 3. How is the peer mentor engaging with students in the FYS course? 4. What is going well with the FYE Peer Mentor Program? 5. What benefits are you experiencing with the FYE Peer Mentor Program? 6. What challenges are you encountering with the FYE Peer Mentor Program?	*Main Questions* (Phases 1 & 2) 1. Describe your experiences as a peer mentor. 2. How are you engaging with the FYS instructor? 3. How are you engaging with the students in the FYS course? 4. What is going well with the FYE Peer Mentor Program? 5. What benefits are you experiencing with the FYE Peer Mentor Program? 6. What challenges are you encountering with the FYE Peer Mentor Program?

Documentary Information

Documentary information was also collected from peer mentors throughout the four-month data collection period. Documentary information came from a wide range of sources and included:

- copies of administrative records, such as term grade point averages (GPAs), FYS course final grades, fall-to-spring retention rates, and fall-to-fall retention rates;
- email correspondence between the peer mentor and the researcher, their assigned FYS instructor, and/or FTIC students enrolled in FYS courses;
- physical artifacts, which encompassed teaching aids and mentoring tools used by the peer mentor during interactions with FTIC students; and
- reflective notes documenting ideas, questions, and thoughts among peer mentors during their mentoring experiences.

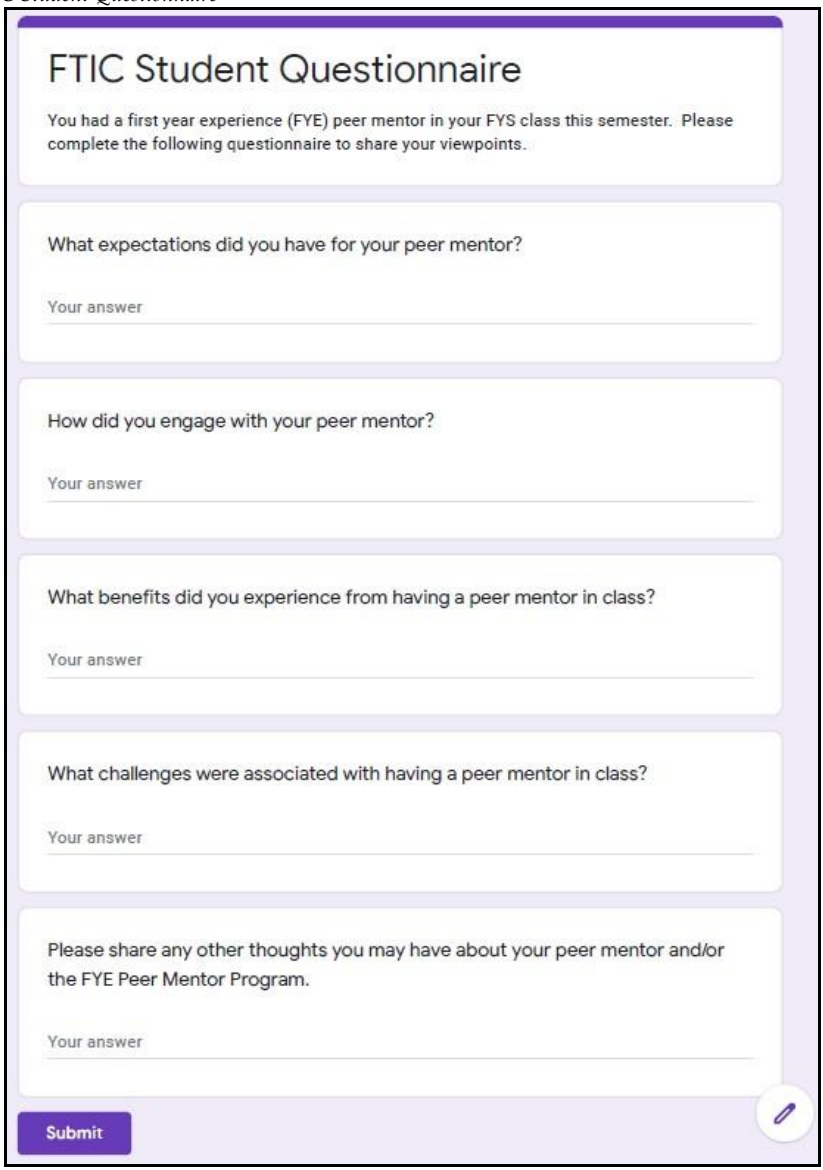
Peer mentors submitted documentary information to the researcher in electronic formats by email (i.e., .doc, .docx, and .pdf files, forwarded email messages, .jpg images) and provided the researcher with shared access to cloud-based files stored in Google Drive.

Questionnaire

Lastly, data were collected from FTIC students using a researcher-created, web-based questionnaire in Google Forms (see Figure 2). The questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions intended to garner insights from FTIC students about engagement with their peer mentor and the FYE Peer Mentor Program. The researcher sent a recruitment email to FTIC students during the last two weeks of classes prior to the end of the semester that described

the research goals for this study, provided informed consent, and included a link to the questionnaire.

Figure 2.
FTIC Student Questionnaire



Data Analysis

Once data were collected, qualitative and quantitative analyses were performed in two separate phases. Qualitative data analysis occurred during the first phase and included data from the following sources: transcriptions from semi-structured interviews held with FYS instructors and peer mentors, documentary information, and responses from the questionnaire received from FTIC students. Qualitative data were organized into separate files by case and all relevant data were placed in a logical order. The researcher then used thematic analysis within each case to identify themes that emerged (Yin, 2014). During within-case analysis, the researcher read and re-read case-related data carefully and assigned important information distinct codes (Boyatzis, 1998). Next, the researcher reviewed codes within a case to generate themes that described and interpreted the phenomenon under study. After completing data analysis for each case, the researcher analyzed themes across cases to detect patterns (Yin, 2014).

Once qualitative data analysis was completed, an external reviewer conducted an audit to assess the reliability of information and confirmability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The external reviewer was a member of the researcher's professional network who was employed at a different regional, public institution of higher education located in the same region of the United States. The researcher selected this external reviewer to perform a

systematic review of both the process and product of this study because they were experienced with qualitative research methods and knowledgeable about peer mentoring.

Quantitative data analysis occurred during the second phase and included data from documentary information, specifically administrative records. Descriptive data analysis was used to report FYS final course grades, term GPAs for the fall and subsequent spring semesters, fall-to-spring retention rates, and fall-to-fall retention rates for peer mentors and FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course with a FYE peer mentor. Additionally, independent samples *t*-tests were performed to assess whether there were significant differences with student success metrics between FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course with a FYE peer mentor and FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course without a FYE peer mentor.

Findings

The findings presented in this section identify key outcomes and impact on student success metrics for the FYE Peer Mentor Program at South Central University. Findings are organized below by phase in which respective analyses were performed to offer a clear understanding of findings in relation to the research goal of this study. Qualitative data analysis produced three major themes that are presented below with illustrative and salient quotations from research participants to represent interpretations. Quantitative data

analysis revealed findings for student success metrics (i.e., FYS final course grades, term GPAs, and retention rates) among FTIC students that were summarized below using descriptive and inferential data from statistical testing.

Qualitative Findings

Theme 1: Academic Support for FTIC Students

Within this theme, participants described ways in which the FYE Peer Mentor Program provided academic support for FTIC students. For example, FYS instructors noted various mechanisms that peer mentors used to reinforce learning among FTIC students during the FYS class. Dr. Healey shared that her normal approach for communicating academic expectations typically involves reviewing assignment guidelines with students well before the due date. Dr. Healey stated that she also emphasizes the importance of getting an early start on bigger, more involved projects. However, Dr. Healey recognized, "Students hear me, but they don't hear my message." To overcome this issue, Dr. Healey coordinated with her assigned peer mentor, Savannah, to develop strategies that make these moments more meaningful to FTIC students. To enhance the communication of academic expectations, Savannah would share their personal experiences and perspectives as a first-year student to facilitate understandings among FTIC students. Dr. Healey explained:

> So, now I can make eye contact with Savannah, and she will pop right up and say, 'Savannah's tips!' And, she'll just dive in as a communicator— she's not afraid of this moment—and say, 'Well, most people are not going to start this. And, here's what happened to me my freshman year. And, here's what I think you should consider.' So, she's this fresh voice that students hear on a different level. They're connected, they're engaged, and it's meaningful to both her and to them.

By elevating the student perspective with peer mentors, FTIC students were able to develop clear understandings of expectations for course requirements, such as assignments, and productive student behaviors that lead to academic success. One FTIC student stated that having a peer mentor was beneficial because "professors may have forgotten what it's like to be a college freshman. My peer mentor gets it because they were there only a short while ago." Similarly, another peer mentor, Carrie, shared how she helped FTIC students in the FYS class contend with anxiety and pressure associated with the first year of college. Carrie divulged that FTIC students may "crunch under pressure." She described a particular situation in her assigned FYS class after an academic advisor made a guest presentation about advising services. While explaining

graduation requirements in the degree program for nursing, Carrie observed that several FTIC students "just folded" and recounted:

> I felt like I folded, too, because when the advisor talked about all of the requirements, I was just like, 'Oh, my goodness – this is a lot!' And, then the advisor started talking about summer classes. Personally, I don't like summer classes because you don't get the full 16 weeks to fully understand content. So, a lot of students felt like they were being rushed to graduate. But, I calmed them down later and told them, 'If you just stay on track, then you should still graduate on time.'

While the academic advisor offered what they deemed as good advice from a staff member perspective, FTIC students appreciated having access to a peer mentor for advice. FTIC students found value in "getting advice from another student going through the same degree program" and "who is kind of on the same level." Findings also showed that peer mentors offered academic support to FTIC students in courses beyond the FYS class. As sophomore-level students, peer mentors had recent experiences with the freshman-level courses required in their degree programs. Thus, peer mentors acknowledged that they consistently offered FTIC students course insights and tips to promote their academic success. To illustrate, Maisie was aware of a particularly rigorous freshman-level chemistry course in which FTIC students in her degree

program often experience academic struggles. Maisie recalled how several FTIC students reached out to her to convey challenges and issues they were encountering with the instructor in this course. Maisie told these FTIC students that she had had this instructor before and explained "it's something that you just have to get through because she's very unique." Maisie also shared helpful resources for "getting through the class" and gave these FTIC students periodic encouragement by reminding them that "once you get through the class, it's like, 'Ok – I'm never going to have to take that course again!'" FTIC students appreciated being able to contact a peer mentor "who shared their experiences as a freshman honestly" and "gave little nuggets of advice about how to succeed in the first semester."

Theme 2: Leadership Development for Peer Mentors

Within this theme, participants described how the FYE Peer Mentor Program promoted leadership development among peer mentors. This was most notably recognized by the FYS instructors. Mr. Kane taught the largest FYS course section in this study, which had an enrollment of 59 students. To assist with such a large course enrollment, Mr. Kane explained that he met with his assigned peer mentor, Madeline, before every class session to develop a plan for instruction. In class, Madeline helped with attendance and assumed the role of a "teaching assistant" to "stand up in front to do quick demonstrations and check in with students." Mr. Kane also added

Madeline to the course in the learning management system (LMS) as a teaching assistant so she could help students with technical questions, such as uploading documents to designated assignment links. Mr. Kane shared that he has seen Madeline "go from kind of timid to where she's like – she jumps in front of people! This has developed her leadership skills immensely."

In this same manner, Dr. Payne identified ways in which her assigned peer mentor, Norberto, assumed leadership roles in and beyond the FYS class with FTIC students. Dr. Payne divulged that the FYS course section Norberto was assigned to was "by far the most challenging group I have ever dealt with, and I've been teaching [college] classes since 1988!" With this FYS class, Dr. Payne coordinated with Norberto to manage challenging student behavior using a "divide and conquer" strategy. Dr. Payne explained:

> So, I walk around a lot, and I go back to the back and to the middle of the class and put my arms around students just to get them to refocus. I may stand there or press down on their shoulders gently to get their full attention. I'm not calling them out, but I am trying to redirect their behavior. So, when I do this, Norberto knows that he needs to go and do the same in other corners of the room where the behavior is happening.

Beyond the FYS class, Dr. Payne relayed that Norberto made himself easily accessible to FTIC students in the FYS class. Dr.

Payne stated, “He’s very approachable. He shows up at the dining hall, library, and rec center. The students know who he is and can meet up with him.”

The peer mentors also understood that the FYE Peer Mentor Program enhanced the development of specific leadership abilities and skills within themselves. Lexie remarked that “being a peer mentor has helped me with speaking out more and being about to talk around larger groups of peers.” In addition, Lexie attributed the expansion of her professional network to the working relationship developed with her assigned FYS instructor. Lexie reflected that her assigned FYS instructor “became a mentor to me” and would “introduce me to different people that I didn’t know. He also told me about internships, ride alongs with police officers, and other things I can do to prepare for my future career.”

Theme 3: Sense of Belonging and Social Support for FTIC Students

Within this theme, participants expressed feelings of acceptance and security that derived from actions associated with the FYE Peer Mentor Program. Dr. Smith shared that her assigned peer mentor, Maisie, “definitely had a great influence on how [FTIC] students adjusted to their first year [of college].” Dr. Smith explained:

> As an instructor, I am mainly focused on the academic piece. I am well aware of which students demonstrate understandings in class, as well as which students master objectives on assignments.

> However, I am much less knowledgeable about how my students feel at [South Central University]. And, I am not quite sure that some of my students would be comfortable confiding anxieties, insecurities, or feelings like they don't belong here. I think some would, but there are some who would not want to look so vulnerable in front of a professor. Having Maisie as a peer mentor has been fantastic because she has gone out of her way to help students feel connected, especially outside of class.

Dr. Healey also noted that having a more experienced peer be a "set of eyes and ears" was extremely beneficial for first year college students. Findings also showed a wide range of ways in which their peer mentors helped foster a sense of belonging on campus. For example, Maisie repeatedly asked FTIC students to share an inspiring quote with each other in their GroupMe text messaging group. Norberto encouraged FTIC students to meet him at the campus recreation center to work out together. Lexie developed Google Form surveys to send to FTIC students periodically as check in tools for feelings of belongingness. FTIC students also noted that their peer mentors "ate lunch with us after class," "invited us to go to football games," "kept us informed about events and student organizations," and were available to "answer any questions we had."

Quantitative Findings

In this study, 2,140 students were enrolled in a FYS course at the beginning of the fall term. Prior to conducting quantitative data analyses, FYS course data were inspected carefully to identify student members of the Fall 2019 FTIC Cohort. During this inspection, 67 students from previous FTIC cohorts were identified and removed from data analysis. These students likely enrolled in the FYS course to replace an unsatisfactory grade or fulfill this general education core requirement that may have been overlooked during their entry semester at South Central University. Therefore, data analysis was limited to include only the 2,073 student members of the Fall 2019 FTIC Cohort (see Table 2).

FYS Final Course Grades for FTIC Students

Among the 272 FTIC students enrolled in FYS courses with a peer mentor, final grades were as follows: 161 students (59.19%) earned an A; 51 students (18.75%) earned a B; 33 students (12.13%) earned a C; and 27 students (9.93%) earned a D, F, or W. Among the 1,801 FTIC students enrolled in FYS courses without a peer mentor, final grades were as follows: 1,047 students (58.13%) earned an A; 332 students (18.43%) earned a B; 185 students (10.27%) earned a C; and 237 students (13.16%) earned a D, F, or W. Independent *t*-tests were performed to assess whether FYS final course grades differed significantly between FTIC students who were enrolled in FYS courses with a peer mentor and FTIC students who were enrolled in

FYS courses without a peer mentor. Results showed that the mean final course grades for the FTIC students in FYS courses with peer mentors was slightly lower than the comparison group (M = 1.73, SD = 1.02; M = 1.78, SD = 1.08, respectively). Additionally, there was not a statistically significant difference in final course grades between study participants and the comparison group, t(-.812) = 1.84, p = .42.

Term GPAs for FTIC Students and Peer Mentors

Among the 272 FTIC students enrolled in FYS courses with a peer mentor, the mean for end of term GPA in Fall 2019 was 2.64. At the end of the subsequent Spring 2020 semester, the mean for end of term GPA was 3.02, which was an increase of 0.38 points. However, the mean for end of term GPA decreased to 2.61 for students who remained enrolled during the Fall 2020 semester. This same pattern for end of term GPA was visible among the 1,801 FTIC students enrolled in FYS courses without a peer mentor (Fall 2019: 2.65, Spring 2020: 3.12, Fall 2020: 2.68). Independent samples t-tests were performed to assess whether GPA differed significantly between FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course with a peer mentor and FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course without a peer mentor. Results showed that there was not a statically significant difference in term GPA for Fall 2019 [t(.115) = 1.50, p = .91], Spring 2020 [t(-1.617) = 0.79, p = .11], or Fall 2020 [t(-

.604) = .382, p = .54] between study participants and the comparison group.

Retention Rates

Among the 272 FTIC students enrolled in FYS course with a peer mentor, 242 FTIC students returned in the subsequent spring semester and 193 returned for a second fall semester, resulting in a fall-to-spring retention rate of 88.97% and a fall-to-fall retention rate of 70.96%. Among the 1,801 FTIC students enrolled in FYS courses without a peer mentor, 1,557 FTIC students returned in the subsequent spring semester and 1,237 returned for a second fall semester, resulting in a fall-to-spring retention rate of 86.45% and a fall-to-fall retention rate of 68.68%. Independent samples t-tests were performed to assess whether fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall retention rates differed significantly between FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course with a peer mentor and FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course without a peer mentor. Results showed that there was not a statistically significant difference in fall-to-spring retention rates [t(.807) = 2.70, p = .42)] or fall-to-fall retention rates [t(.589) = 0.59, p = .79] between study participants and the comparison group.

Discussion

This study used a case study methodology to explore key outcomes and impact on student success metrics associated with participation in a pilot study of the FYE Peer Mentor Program at

South Central University. In the FYE Peer Mentor Program, at-risk, sophomore-level college students were employed as peer mentors in FYS courses to assist the FYS instructor with promoting a smooth transition to college among FTIC students. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, documentary information, and a questionnaire from which qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted. Qualitative findings characterized the FYE Peer Mentor Program as a vital support mechanism for FTIC students academically and socially, as well as a promising way to promote leadership development in at-risk college students who serve as peer mentors. Quantitative findings showed that FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course with a peer mentor earned higher final course grades and had higher fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall retention rates than FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course without a peer mentor. However, no statistically significant differences were found in FYS final course grades or retention rates between the two groups. Because this study lacked a comparison group for peer mentors, no quantitative analyses were conducted with student success metrics related to the peer mentors. However, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that four of the peer mentors who participated in this study have maintained satisfactory GPAs and progress in their selected academic degree programs. Additionally, all five peer mentors have maintained continuous enrollment to date at South Central University.

Qualitative findings presented in this study aligned with a large body of literature (Lane, 2020; Lennox Terrion, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012) and empirical studies (Albright & Hurd, 2018; Collings et al., 2014; Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Lenz, 2014; Sanchez et al., 2006; Yomtov et al., 2017) that tout the importance of peer mentoring to strengthen "students' feelings of belonging, connectedness, perceived academic and social support, and familiarity with campus resources and facilities" (Yomtov et al., 2017, p. 40). Snowden and Hardy (2012) further purported that "peer mentorship adds value to the learning experience" and "enhances engagement within the higher education community" among FTIC students (p. 90). Thus, the qualitative findings reported in this study have suggested that the FYE Peer Mentor Program is an effective strategy to enhance the transition to college for FTIC students.

While the quantitative findings presented in this study highlighted increases in FYS final course grades and retention rates among FTIC students who were enrolled in a FYS course with a peer mentor, there was no statistically significant difference with these student success metrics when compared to their counterparts. Additionally, the quantitative findings showed an inverse relationship with term GPA—FTIC students in the comparison group had higher term GPAs than FTIC students in the intervention group. Although research studies have reported statistically

significant relationships between peer mentoring and student success metrics (Budny et al., 2010; DeMarinis et al., 2017; Leidenfrost et al., 2014), Bonin (2016) asserted that the "peer mentors' effect on the academic performance of undergraduate students remains statistically unclear" (p. 20).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As with any research endeavor, there were limitations with this study that should be acknowledged. First, this study employed a case study methodology for a single case, which may pose methodological concerns for rigor and generalizability (Yin, 2014). To address this limitation, future research should study the key outcomes and impact on student success metrics for initiatives such as the FYS Peer Mentor Program using different research methodologies, as well as case study methodologies, in different contexts. Another limitation of great importance involves the time frame in which this study was conducted. Quantitative data related to student success metrics were collected for two long semesters following the implementation of the pilot study. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 (American Journal of Managed Care, 2020), which may have had a negative effect on data collected. A replication study should be conducted in a post-COVID-19 pandemic world to assess the accuracy of findings reported in this study.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge for peer mentoring as a higher education strategy to help FTIC students transition to the college environment (Plaskett et al., 2018) and promote the development of leadership dispositions and skills among the at-risk college students who serve as peer mentors (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Woelk & Pennington Weeks, 2010). A unique aspect to this study was the intentionality of inviting at-risk, sophomore-level students to serve as peer mentors. Typically, at-risk college students are identified as the mentees in peer mentoring programs because they have a higher probability of experiencing academic and social achievements (Horton, 2015). However, this study empowered students who are first-generation, Pell eligible, and/or members of an underrepresented racial/ethnic group to be the knowledgeable and skilled upperclassmen who assisted with providing a smooth transition to college for incoming FTIC students (Plaskett et al., 2018).

With respect to peer mentoring programs, D'Abate (2009) emphasized the importance of clarifying the role of peer mentors to strengthen the quality of support and fully realize potential benefits. Since this was South Central University's initial attempt with implementing the FYE Peer Mentor Program, there was a relatively loose programmatic structure. To strengthen the FYE Peer Mentor Program at South Central University, continuous improvement

efforts will be made to enhance the selection of peer mentors (Holt & Fifer, 2018), as well as peer mentor training and supervision (Holt & Lopez, 2014). By doing so, peer mentors will have a clearer understanding of their role and responsibilities and may experience enhanced leadership development. As presumed by Holt and Fifer (2018), enhancing core skills used by peer mentors to facilitate the smooth transition of their mentees to college "will have a more pronounced and positive effect" on key outcomes and student success metrics among FTIC students (p. 87).

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