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## The (Missing) Human Part: Listening for Students' Perceptions of the Value of Peer Mentors

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## The (Missing) Human Part: Listening for Students' Perceptions of the Value of Peer Mentors

### Abstract

In this paper, we describe an IRB-approved (exempt) study designed to help us understand the impact that engaging with a peer mentor has on student learning in the online, intermediate composition classroom. Our study aimed to both identify the quantity of student interactions with peer mentors in online intermediate composition courses and to understand specifically how these interactions impacted students' learning. The study focused on this question: "How do students describe the impact of peer mentors on their learning in the writing course?" Using a combination of qualitative methods (student survey, student interview, peer mentor reflection, and local institutional data on students' use of campus resources), we developed four analytical themes focused on modes of engagement, expectations for online interaction, expectations for grades versus reported engagement with peer mentors, and students' use of campus resources. Through this analysis, we argue that structuring contact points with peer mentors is not enough to engage students with this invaluable learning resource; without attention to the social quality of those contacts, we will not see increased engagement between students and peer mentors in our learning community, nor will we see students' valuing of peer mentoring as improved.

### Keywords

peer mentors, engagement, online learning, pandemic

### Cover Page Footnote

The authors wish to thank the following colleagues from our university for providing information about students' use of campus resources during the first three semesters of the COVID-19 pandemic: Veronica Bielat, Librarian; Melissa Crabtree, Senior Director, Campus and Classroom IT; Kate Dyki, Program Management Specialist, Enrollment Management; Christina Neal, Warrior Life Coordinator, Dean of Students' Office; Dr. David Strauss, Dean of Students; Dr. Jule Thomas, Director of the Writing Center.

Learning communities of all stripes have long been discussed as a near-universal benefit to students in higher education (Budge, 2006; Collier, 2015; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016). From increasing metacognition to facilitating meaningful collaboration, the increased connection of students to learning has been a persuasive argument to instructors for the efficacy of learning communities (Fisher et al., 2020). The peer-to-peer interactions involved in learning communities both enhance the undergraduate student experience and create professionalization opportunities for the students who become peer mentors (Benjamin, 2020). In particular, writing classrooms have been identified as key transition points for undergraduate students to benefit from a learning community model with peer mentor support (Camp & Bolstad, 2011). Indeed, in our local context of an urban research institution, we have much anecdotal and assessment-based evidence gathered over six years, which indicate the benefits of a learning community specifically targeting composition courses for undergraduates. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as educators at all levels learned the insidious meaning of terms like “pivot” and “agile teaching,” traditional, in-person methods of enacting peer mentoring within learning communities required massive revision. In the face of traumatic educational conditions, several scholars posited that learning communities could maintain connection for students who were facing online learning from home (Mabry, 2020; Fisher et al., 2020). In the Composition Learning Community (CLC) at our urban R1 university, we sought to investigate the ways in which students perceived peer mentors and their work in online learning community sections, to better understand whether and how our learning community was providing the support students needed.

The CLC was founded in 2014 to support general education composition students in engaging in a community of writers, exploring the experience of working on writing projects, and building working relationships with instructors and peer mentors across the community (Composition Learning Community Handbook). Students join the CLC when they enroll in sections of composition courses taught by CLC instructors (full-time faculty and graduate students in the English Department); these courses range across the composition sequence, and in any given semester include sections in basic writing, first-year writing, intermediate writing, community writing, or technical communication. Each semester, members of the CLC (students, peer mentors, and faculty) engage in a Student Writing Showcase, sharing their learning and writing with each other. The weekly work of the CLC happens within individual classrooms (both traditional and online classrooms), where students work not only with their classmates and instructors on developing writing processes but also talk with peer mentors—former general education composition students themselves—about their experiences working through our classes. Peer mentors receive both CLC-centered and university-facilitated training for their work with students. Each August, the university hosts

a one- or two-day training for peer mentors of all learning communities<sup>1</sup> (Peer mentor training). Within the CLC, we hold an orientation each semester, and meet several times across the term to engage peer mentors and faculty in collaborative problem-solving and planning. Instructors and peer mentors in individual sections meet weekly to design opportunities for peer mentors and students to engage in conversation about and collaboration on the learning, research, and writing needed for students to compose assigned projects.

In this paper, we describe an IRB-approved study designed to help us understand the impact that engaging with a peer mentor has on student learning in the online, intermediate composition classroom. The intermediate composition course at our institution enrolls undergraduate students from first year to senior year, and thus allows us to gauge the impact of peer mentor engagement with a demographically broader set of students than we might expect in a first-year writing course. Preparing for Winter 2021, we designed a peer mentor engagement plan for four sections of the intermediate writing class, scaffolding regular opportunities for interaction between peer mentors and the students in the sections they served. Then, we surveyed students to see whether and how this plan made any difference in students' engagement with peer mentors and gathered accounts from both a student and several peer mentors to find out why. Our study aimed to both identify the quantity of student interactions with peer mentors in online intermediate composition courses and to understand specifically how these interactions impacted students' learning. The study focused on this question: "How do students describe the impact of peer mentors on their learning in the writing course?" Through our analysis, we argue that structuring contact points with peer mentors is not enough to engage students with this invaluable learning resource; without attention to the social quality of those contacts, we will not see increased engagement between students and peer mentors in our learning community, nor will we see students' valuing of peer mentoring as improved.

## **Literature Review**

### **Peer Mentor Characteristics**

A successful learning community program requires thoughtful attention to the design of multiple facets of peer mentoring. The selection of the individuals who will serve as peer mentors is a primary consideration, though, as Terrion and Leonard (2007) pointed out, there has been little research on which peer characteristics are most effective for this selection. Terrion and Leonard's literature review, however, has provided a set of peer mentor characteristics gleaned from the

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<sup>1</sup> In AY 2020-2021, this university training for peer mentors was held online because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

literature, including, but not limited to trustworthiness, enthusiasm, empathy, and motivation for self-enhancement. Further, while Terrion and Leonard asserted that the selection of peer mentors based on gender and race is likely a question or issue of institutional context (p. 153), Budge (2006) argued that peer mentoring relationships need to be designed to include more women and underrepresented minorities in both mentor and mentee roles. Beyond selection, a program must also support peer mentors' ongoing professional development. Reid (2008), writing about support for graduate-level mentors in composition classrooms, highlighted the importance of deeply structured and integrated reflective professional development, assertions which apply to the experiences of undergraduate-level mentors as well.

### **Peer Mentors as Models of Learning Habits**

These peer mentor relationships also need to be deeply integrated into classroom work, where mentors have the opportunity to model successful learning habits. Leidenfrost et al. (2011) found that the quality and frequency of positive interactions between peer mentors and mentees contributed to greater impact. And Morales et al. (2016) found that when peer mentors model successful, goal-oriented behaviors, mentees are positively influenced, in terms of both academics and self-efficacy. Helping peer mentors identify and purposefully develop these qualities is a large part of their professional development. Holt and Fifer (2018) demonstrated an important tie between mentors' self-efficacy and their assessment of how much support they provide to their mentees. These studies have suggested that successful peer mentoring programs not only fully integrate mentors into classrooms, but also support their reflective practice and professional development in multiple capacities.

### **Reasons Students Engage with Peer Mentors**

The array of scholarship on peer mentoring throughout disciplines has evidenced its value for students (see, for example, Asgari & Carter, 2016; VanWeelden, Heath-Reynolds & Leaman, 2017; Kramer, Hillman and Zavala, 2018; Griffiths, Kopanidis & Steel, 2018 and others). Understanding the motivations students have for engaging with peer mentors sheds light on students' perceptions of the value of peer support. Colvin and Ashman (2010) found that among students, women provided "relationship-centered" reasons for engaging with peer mentors, whereas men identified "content-centered" reasons for engagement. However, there is still much to learn about how students in college writing courses, specifically, benefit from the integration of peer mentors. Holt and Fifer (2018), looking at peer mentoring of first-year students more broadly, recommended differentiating between mentor-initiated and mentee-initiated contacts, as one type may be more

predictive of mentee satisfaction than the other. They also concluded that future investigation should include more objective mentee outcomes such as course grades and retention. On the other hand, peer mentor training can be tailored to equip mentors as they engage with students. Benjamin (2020) highlighted the impact of training on peer mentor approaches for “identifying and addressing concerning behaviors through the learning community...” (p. 6). However, peer mentor training is often combined with personal experience to help mentors critically navigate the sometimes complex mentor-mentee relationships within a learning community. Benjamin noted that the dispositions of the peer mentors involved in the study were highly efficacious, a characteristic common in students who take up such roles (p.12).

Bridging the gap between students in need of support within a learning community, and dedicated peer mentors trained and ready to provide such support, is an area that has received much attention in a face-to-face context. In an online learning environment, however, such as many students experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the conditions for forging these connections were novel and at times, incredibly challenging.

### **Challenges to Peer Mentor-Student Engagement**

Online learning environments have alternately been viewed as panacea and antithesis for student engagement. Various studies interrogating online learning have found varying, and at times, conflicting results, but on average coalesce around affordances and constraints attributed to online versus face-to-face learning modes. Paulsen and McCormick (2020) noted that the benefits of online learning for students lie mainly in perceived academic challenge, learning gains, satisfaction, and better study habits, while face-to-face learning carries advantages in higher levels of environment support, collaborative learning and faculty interaction. However, when accounting for demographic variance (i.e., age, work status, dependents, and enrollment status) among student respondents to the National Survey of Student Engagement, Paulsen and McCormick found that while student dispositions generally matter far more than learning mode, online learning is still far behind other modes (i.e., hybrid and face-to-face modes) when it comes to collaboration and interactions with faculty (p. 27). They argued that as online learning becomes more ubiquitous, the importance of facilitating meaningful interactions to foster student collaboration will only increase.

Measuring collaboration is only one of several methods by which scholars traditionally demonstrate student engagement in the face-to-face or online classroom. In studying engagement in distance learning contexts, Sun and Rueda (2012) looked at connections between motivational and learning variables (interest, self-efficacy and self-regulation) and three kinds of student engagement (behavioral, emotional and cognitive). Their findings indicated correlations

between interest and self-regulation for all three types of engagement, while computer self-efficacy did not correlate to any. Students' self-described interest in a course significantly correlated with only emotional engagement (p. 197). And though the study was conducted well before the COVID-19 pandemic, a finding relevant to many students' pandemic educational experiences showed that as a students' anxiety increased, emotional engagement decreased (p. 202). In online educational environments, both before and during the pandemic, correlations between anxiety and engagement occur independent of computer self-efficacy.

However, it cannot be overstated that though there may be similarities in student engagement pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic, online instruction occurring during the pandemic must be defined and characterized very differently than online instruction occurring prior to the pandemic. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) clarified that non-pandemic online instruction, produced through careful design and thoughtful pedagogical planning, should be understood as separate from "emergency remote teaching," which during the COVID-19 pandemic could only be achieved under crisis-conditions (p. 2). The consequent online instruction resulted in declines in confidence and increased anxiety for students, particularly for those early in their undergraduate careers or those without prior online course experience (Prokes & Housel 2021). Additionally, students experienced changes to their work-life balance, experienced mental and physical health shifts, and faced the challenge of all courses being held online, while academic and/or technology support resources, and perhaps most significantly *social* support resources, were lost (p. 9). In response to these losses, scholars like Fisher et al. (2020) have advocated for the use of Student Learning Communities (SLCs) and through them, application of principles of learning that aim to transition to virtual learning environments, as a solution to this loss of social and academic support. In particular, they argue that student learning communities can meet learning outcomes and engage students in meaningful collaboration in online courses. However, these principles for enacting SLCs entirely online have yet to be tested.

A recent assessment of student learning in the Composition Learning Community at our institution (Varty, 2021) showed that students in CLC courses maintained positive perceptions of peer mentors across the semester (70% at both early and late semester surveys). Additionally, the assessment revealed that students in CLC *face-to-face* courses [n=7 sections] (versus all other face to face non-CLC composition courses [n=57 sections]) have a statistically significant greater percentage of their course grade staying the same or increasing, and a statistically significant lower percentage of their course grade decreasing, when comparing Early Academic Assessment (EAA) grades to final grades. However, when comparing EAA grades to final grades, students' enrollment in *online* CLC courses [n=16 sections] (versus all other online non-CLC composition courses [n=33 sections]) makes no statistically significant difference in maintaining or

increasing student grades. What these assessment results demonstrate for our local context is that, so far, learning community and peer mentor support in composition courses has significant positive effect on academic success for face-to-face courses, but little discernible effect on student academic success for online courses. The results of this assessment, gathered prior to their ebook's publication, nevertheless stands in stark contrast to the hypothesis put forth by Fisher et al. (2020). Amidst the unique circumstances brought about by COVID-19, all of our institution's composition courses, CLC and non-CLC, moved online during the academic year (AY) 2020-2021. This provided a new impetus to investigate how and why student performance in online CLC courses does not align with student performance in face-to-face CLC courses. Much of the literature around online instruction highlights the difficulties of facilitating student engagement in digital formats (e.g., Sun & Rueda, 2012; Samuel et al., 2019) and measuring this engagement (e.g., Dixon, 2015). However, any possible link between students' engagement with peer mentors and their retention and/or academic success in the composition courses remains unclear.

### **Methods and Methodology**

Reviewing the scholarship outlined above helped us understand that we would need to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to understand intermediate composition students' experiences with peer mentors. For example, as Holt and Fifer (2018) suggested, we surveyed students to understand whether mentors or mentees initiated more contacts. Then, we worked to understand, through both asking students to rate their satisfaction numerically, and listening to students' experiences with mentor-mentee contacts, whether one kind of initiation was more satisfactory than another, and why. We designed a peer mentor integration plan for the semester to ensure a level of parity across sections of the study and designed a survey and an interview protocol to employ toward the end of the semester. We collected peer mentors' accounts of their experiences. And, as we worked collaboratively as a faculty and undergraduate research team to analyze each of these artifacts, we understood that looking at CLC students' experiences in light of the big picture of undergraduate students' use of resources at our university in Winter 2021 could help us think about what our measurement of students' engagement with peer mentors might actually mean for improving learning community resources, specifically.

### **Peer Mentor Integration Scaffold**

As a framework for this study, we developed a map of key interactions we wanted all peer mentors (n=6) to follow in addition to their regular interactions with students (Appendix A), continuing to build on our long-held attention to peer

mentors' professional development (Reid, 2008). This scaffold laid out activities for peer mentors to engage in for and with students in nearly every week of the semester. Having worked together through almost two semesters of learning during the pandemic, we had a felt sense about students' emotional and mental bandwidth for proactively engaging with an additional support person during what would be the third pandemic semester. In both our orientation in January 2020 and in weekly meetings with peer mentors, instructors guided peer mentors through how to implement these interventions. While the peer mentors were given autonomy regarding the exact mode of interaction with students (e.g., they could choose to create a video or host an open Zoom "study table" or "office hours" meeting), all peer mentors were asked to follow the general plan and create multimodal interventions for students in each of the indicated weeks (n=10) throughout the semester. This recommended integration built on the planning and reflective strategizing for peer mentor engagement conducted during the semester orientations, mid-semester check-ins, and end-of-semester meetings already in place for all faculty and peer mentor members of the CLC (Composition Learning Community, 2017).

### **Surveys**

To gauge the response of students to these scaffolded peer mentor interactions, we used surveys of students in our four online, learning community sections of intermediate composition to acquire several metrics: a quantitative measurement of students' awareness of peer mentors in their courses; counts of their engagements with peer mentors; identification of the course assignments most often associated with peer mentor engagement; and an expectation of course grades. The items about contact and course grades specifically responded to recommendations from Holt and Fifer (2018). Additionally, the surveys helped us assess whether and how students engaged with peer mentors within or outside of the course LMS, whether and how students drew on peer mentors as resources of support for writing, and how students perceived peer mentor value. 21 students participated in the survey of 103 invited students in the four sections of intermediate composition studied. We analyzed survey data descriptively to reveal patterns in student responses, indicating the level of students' perceived value of peer mentors to their intermediate composition experience.

### **Interviews**

We used interviewing to develop a qualitative understanding of the purpose and focus of students' engagement with peer mentors. As described in our discussion of limitations, this all-online, "pandemic semester" yielded only one student interview participant of the 21 students participating in the survey. Using a semi-

structured interview script (Merriam, 2009), interviewers used both scripted and follow-up questions to learn about the student's experiences taking online classes with embedded peer mentors. The interview was recorded on Zoom and interviewers took notes during the interview to back up the recording (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview was then transcribed for analysis.

### **Peer Mentors' Written Accounts**

To deepen our understanding of the quality of engagement between peer mentors and students in intermediate composition, we also gathered written experiences from several peer mentors, including the peer mentor identified in the student interview. These written accounts allowed us to triangulate qualitative results from both mentor and mentee perspectives.

### **Use of Campus Resources**

We reached out to several campus offices and programs seeking information about the degree to which students used specific campus resources in Winter 2021 as compared to any of the three semesters prior: Fall 2019 (pre-pandemic), Winter 2020 (shift to remote learning mid-semester), Fall 2020 (fully online or remote learning). Specifically, we inquired about students' use of undergraduate library resources, the campus writing center, and laptop loaning programs to try to assess students' use of resources related to success in the course<sup>2</sup>. These inquiries allowed us to put our measurement of students' engagement with peer mentors across semesters in conversation with undergraduate students' use of other campus resources, helping us consider when and why students might or might not use specific kinds of resources.

### **Analysis**

We began our initial analysis during a collaborative Zoom call by reviewing the survey results as presented by the Qualtrics system. This review of our short survey allowed us to identify initial patterns that could guide our reading of the interview transcript. After this initial review of the survey results, we worked through open coding of the transcript (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). To conduct this open coding, we read the transcript and used the highlight tool to mark passages that spoke to our research questions, the initial impressions we developed from the review of the survey results, or that surprised us, as the student described her experiences. After

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<sup>2</sup> We also submitted an email inquiry re: students' use of the campus food pantry during Winter 2021, but this data is not yet available. In line with our argument in this paper, examinations of student engagement in courses should consider a wide net of campus resources, not only academic resources.

marking the transcript, we talked through the document from top to bottom, explaining what felt significant about each marked passage, and leaving notes in the margins, using the comments tool.

After we discussed these initial impressions of the transcript, we worked to refine our notes into categories. Because we worked with only one transcript, we used these categories as themes that we could put into conversation with our survey results, instructional plans, and discussions with peer mentors. We continued to gather information and artifacts that could help us develop each theme; for example, as noted above, we understood that it would be beneficial to listen to the experiences of more peer mentors as well as to gather data that could tell us something about the experience of all students at our university during the Winter 2021 semester.

Once we gathered this additional information, we took each theme and worked to “examine the same event, situation, or data in multiple ways” (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2019, p. 101), identifying methods of triangulation relevant to that theme. In some cases, this meant reviewing survey results in light of our instructional plans and survey results from previous semesters; in others, it meant talking to multiple peer mentors to better understand what emerged in the student interview; sometimes, we researched the larger university context, working to deepen what was initially anecdotal evidence with information from university sources. These themes are outlined below and together demonstrate our overall argument that without attention to students as individuals and to forming working relationships with them that support their individual needs, we cannot support the kinds of engagement we hope for in our learning community courses.

## Themes

The four themes below highlight the ways that students' expectations and needs and *our* expectations of student needs as peer mentor and faculty members of the CLC were sometimes in conflict. We see these themes as tools for strategizing future peer mentoring, student support, and research. In particular, what we learned from talking with Maria<sup>3</sup>, an intermediate composition student who had previously taken our first-year writing course with Nicole, tells us a lot about what we need to pay attention to in future iterations of integrating peer mentors in online environments. As Maria expressed in her responses to our interview questions, her experience taking an online class during our third pandemic semester, was only one part of an “extremely hard” period of time. Working full time, going to school full time, and managing a family full time, Maria, like other students at our university, was taking all of her classes online for the first time while our campus was in remote instruction for the duration of the academic year. She described her experience

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym.

managing these various responsibilities as “not easy. You don’t know which direction you’re going in.” Maria’s experience, alongside our planning materials, surveys, peer mentor testimonies, campus inquiries, and secondary research, provides evidence for the development of these themes.

***Theme 1: Student engagement with peer mentors in this year’s classes happens through various online avenues but remains limited.***

As noted in our introduction, a primary driver for our study was a desire to understand how to improve student engagement with peer mentors in online learning community sections. One of our perennial strategies for peer mentoring in both online and face-to-face courses has been to ensure that peer mentors are available both synchronously (in the classroom, library, or Zoom office hours) and asynchronously (via email, third-party communication app, or the course LMS). The survey results reflect that the students who do utilize peer mentor support access peer mentors in the various avenues offered during this online, remote semester.

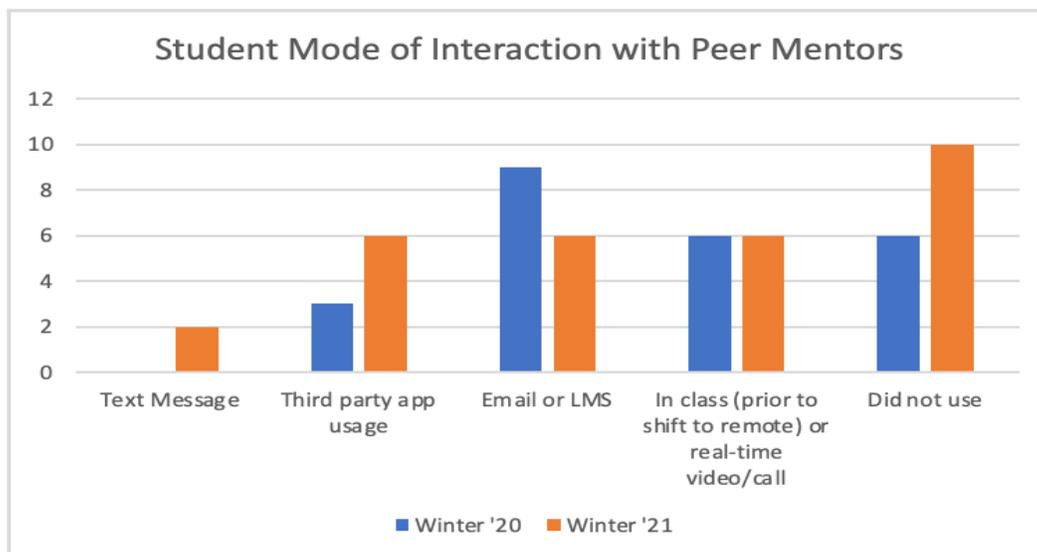


Figure 1. Survey responses from W '20 and W '21 regarding mode of communication with peer mentor.

We compared students’ use of these various modes of communication with peer mentors to survey results from Winter 2020 (n=21), to find that use of third-party apps like WhatsApp or GroupMe increased from Winter 2020 (9.5% of students) to Winter 2021 (28.6%), while email or LMS messaging decreased slightly, from 42.6% of students engaging with peer mentors this way in Winter 2020 to 28.6% of students reporting use of email or LMS messaging in Winter 2021. However,

overall engagement with peer mentors actually decreased slightly (8 of 21 students reporting no engagement with peer mentor in 2020; 10 of 21 reporting no engagement with peer mentor in 2021).

Understanding this limited engagement through the accounts of both the student we interviewed and the peer mentors who have provided testimonies can help us see why certain modes of interaction seem more successful each semester (i.e., email/LMS in Winter 2020 and third-party apps in Winter 2021) and why overall engagement did not improve, even in a third semester of online, remote learning for our university's students.

In the interview, we noticed that Maria repeatedly commented that she did not have the desired amount of interaction or engagement with her peer mentor. Maria described having peer mentors as beneficial but noted limitations with availability during continued online schooling. She explained that reaching out to a peer mentor was more convenient prior to the start of the pandemic, when she had only one class online and was able to see her peer mentor in person. When classes went online, she had limited time to connect with resources. Maria commented,

Actually, having peer mentors is very helpful. I think the issue is when they were available, because, like, if I had classes, I, you know, I couldn't meet with them or, you know, like I said, other things going on in life. It was pretty hard, whereas being on campus you know you could actually just go to them.

In fact, in the interview, Maria explicitly used the words "available" or "availability" five times and describes the concept with other language twice: "being in conflict of times" and noting that if a student in an online class is working at "two in the morning...[they] have no one to ask." For Maria, frustration with this limited availability of the peer mentor support mechanism seemed to be compounded with her sense that taking classes online and working through a pandemic consists of very "impersonal" situations. She said, "For me, Zoom seems impersonal in a way, especially when the camera is off... I felt like I was bothering them and, you know, they weren't giving full attention..." Maria asserted later in the interview that "face-to-face would be optimal," echoing the responses of students in other studies, who prefer face-to-face learning overall (e.g., Rath et al., 2019).

We turned to the peer mentor testimonies to try to understand Maria's comments about the limited availability of peer mentors and whether peer mentors also felt this sense of impersonal interaction in their work with students. As noted above, we offered peer mentors a structured set of intervention points for their work with intermediate composition students across the semester (Appendix A). Because the intermediate writing classes were asynchronous and remote, peer mentors chose

the times and modes of contact that best suited their schedules for meeting with students. Haley and Michelle, peer mentors for Adrienne's class, noted in their collaboratively composed testimony that they did not expect students to consider peer mentoring a priority or to reach out. They were "pleasantly surprised" when students attended their office hours, but the number of students attending these "differed greatly from the plethora of students that participated in previous [online or face-to-face] semesters," and students did not reach out as often near deadlines as they had in previous semesters. In his testimony, Mubashar, one of Nicole's peer mentors, also noted the distinction between students' "easy" participation in face-to-face classes, when everyone is working together, and the difficulty of getting the timing of online peer mentoring to work for both students and peer mentors. He wrote that he tried to be online near submission times so that students could ask questions, but the asynchronous nature of much online communication could pose problems. "If a student decided to work on an assignment the day it was due," Mubashar explained, "they would have less time to respond if they were confused about something."

While attuned to the challenges of structuring peer mentoring contacts in online, asynchronous courses, these peer mentors wrote less in their testimonies about the interpersonal aspects of this work. Haley and Michelle did note that they worked to make students feel "comfortable" with their presence in the course LMS by commenting on students' introductory posts in the class discussion board. They also suggested that students may have reached out to Alison, their instructor, more than to them as peer mentors, because instructors in online courses might seem "less intimidating" than in face-to-face classes. Mubashar described how important it was to have students attend online office hours so that he could "put a face to a name" and "socialize" about aspects of student life beyond the course itself. All three peer mentors commented that it seems that students are more likely to ask questions in person than via online channels. The peer mentor testimonies highlight that peer mentors understand that their regular presence in a class is important for student engagement, though their written discussion about any problems in the course is more weighted toward timing and availability (echoing Maria's concerns) than interpersonal interaction.

The interview and peer mentor testimonies emphasize two major roadblocks to increasing students' engagement with peer mentors: limited availability and a sense of "impersonal" contacts. These roadblocks also evidence a tension beyond scheduling: while students, like Maria, may perceive interpersonal problems as paramount, peer mentors may not perceive them as insurmountable obstacles to providing support.

***Theme 2: Digital/online interaction with peer mentors is a site where expectations for communication, prior experiences with online communications, and anxieties about online communication, manifest.***

As noted above, both our student interview participant, Maria, and our peer mentor testimonies highlight that students and peer mentors are keenly aware of the affordances and limitations of engaging peer mentoring in online and face-to-face settings. When we read the transcript of our interview with Maria, we additionally saw the importance of considering the affective nature of online communications.

In the interview, there are several moments where Maria described a tension in her one-on-one Zoom encounter with the peer mentor, expressing that she was worried she was bothering him. She explained,

[E]ven though I don't like Zoom—I've mentioned it before—but without a face it's even harder and it is just a little bit stressing me out...I was a little bit uncomfortable with that, but I mean they were really helpful. I'm not going to say that that they weren't.

Here Maria stated that while the interaction yielded helpful strategies for her project, the experience was still very stressful and uncomfortable, and we learned in the interview that this was the only time that Maria chose to interact with her peer mentor. Maria offered a suggestion twice in the interview that, in Zoom interactions, peer mentors should be forthcoming with students about what is happening in their environment, so there is no miscommunication between peer mentor and student about the relational aspects of the conversation. If a peer mentor's camera has to be off in the Zoom call, Maria suggested, “just state to your student that this is going on and that's why this is happening, just so they don't feel uncomfortable and feel like they're being bothered.”

Lack of clear communication norms is a common barrier to online learning that creates anxiety for many students (Irwin & Berge, 2006). Students struggle to interpret nonverbal cues such as body language or voice tones over video communication, thus making online conversation more difficult and stressful (Wirth, 2020). Students have expressed that online interactions are missing a “human aspect” and that when communicating online they often feel like they are just filming themselves rather than engaging in a conversation (Ong, 2021). Technological issues also result in conversations being choppy due to glitches and delays; these interruptions increase social anxiety levels and make it harder for students to make a social connection during conversations (Wirth, 2020). These stressors may increase what Rath et al. (2019) have reported as students' “fears of the lack of instructor and peer contact leading to a sense of isolation” in online learning.

Maria came into the peer mentor encounter with a set of expectations that were not met. She expected that the norm for a one-on-one interaction with her peer mentor would include them turning on their camera:

If you're in a Zoom class, you know you got a hundred students, obviously you're going to have your camera off because, you know, you don't know what's going on, but a one-on-one you know you're going to carve out that little time to try not to be distracted and so that you can actually see the person.

Her peer mentor did not seem to share the same ideas regarding online communication norms; he may have found it normal to have his camera off. The opposing expectations and the lack of clear communication norms made Maria anxious and led her to believe that she was bothering her peer mentor during their session. This anxiety may be what made it difficult for Maria and her peer mentor to form a connection because they did not get to experience the human aspect that is present in in-person communication, and it may be an example of what fueled students' anxieties in online learning during the pandemic (e.g., Prokes & Housel, 2021).

***Theme 3: While survey respondents report high expectations for their grades, they do not report a high level of engagement with peer mentors.***

When analyzing our survey data, we found that 17 respondents (80%) report that they expected to receive an A in the course; 4 an A-. However, the survey results showed that 18 of 20 students (90%) who answered item 1 ("Were you aware that your class had a peer mentor?") said "yes", but 11 of 21 students (52%) answering item 2 ("How many times did you work with your peer mentor this semester?") indicated that they never worked with their peer mentor. Further, 12 of 20 students (60%) answering item 8 ("Apart from your ENG 3010 peer mentor, do you have other academic support systems available to you (e.g., do you receive support as a student athlete?)" indicated that they have no other support systems available to them at the university (Figure 2).

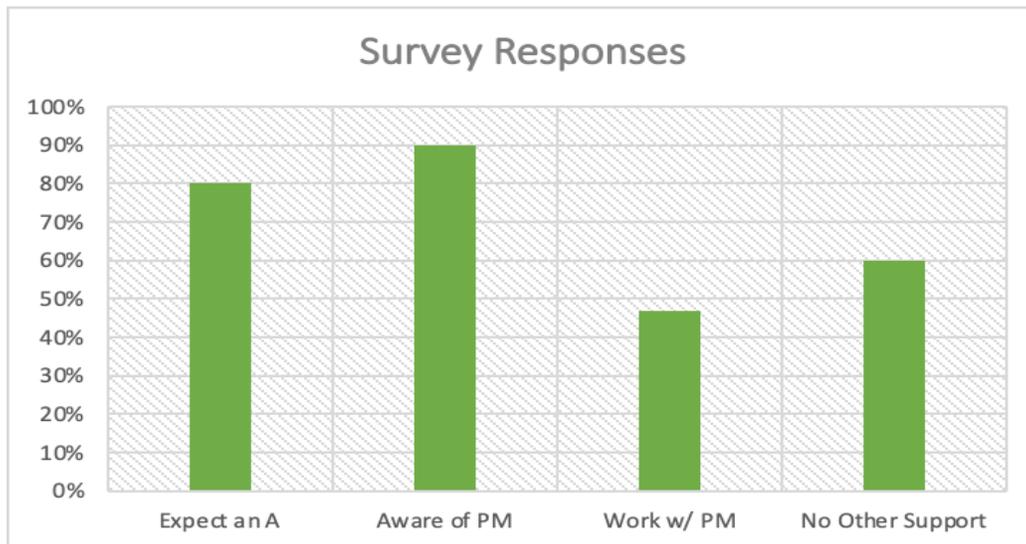


Figure 2. Comparison of survey responses indicating grade expectations, awareness of peer mentors, work with peer mentors, and non-learning community support

These results were surprising to our team for several reasons. First, anecdotal evidence and literature around peer mentoring (Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003; Budge, 2006) indicates that undergraduate students facing challenges with academic knowledge transfer, academic behaviors and other non-academic factors for adapting to college are those who benefit most from peer mentor support within a learning community. Though undergraduate students tend to overestimate their grades in college courses, when given the chance to predict them (Prohaska, 1994), some student estimates of grades may be more accurate than others, depending on factors like maturity and self-awareness (Lange & Byrd, 2002). Our survey respondents may have been overestimating their grades, in which use of peer mentors as a resource may or may not be another college behavior to which they have not yet adapted. Or the students responding to the survey may have been more settled in their college identities, and thus making more accurate predictions of potential course grades. This may also account for lower reported engagement with peer mentors, as self-efficacious students may not perceive a need for such support.

Along these lines, students' self-reported perceived engagement in online courses based in self-efficacy may not reveal the full picture. For example, a student may be getting an A due to high self-regulation that produces high behavioral and cognitive engagement (Sun & Rueda, 2012) and yet simultaneously experience an increase in anxiety, which decreases emotional engagement. In other words, if students feel successful, or perceive they will earn a high grade in an online course, it may be accurate due to high cognitive and behavioral engagement, but that same student may not experience emotional engagement. In future survey questions, the three types of student engagement studied by Sun and Rueda may prove fruitful to

parsing out why students may or may not choose to utilize peer mentors as resources and whether they perceive value in such interactions.

Second, we hypothesized that, during the emergency shift to online-only courses, students would need extra support (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020) and thus would perhaps engage more with peer mentors, who not only serve as an academic support, but also provide moral support (Composition Learning Community, 2017). Here, Sun and Rueda's recommendation for comparing face-to-face and online courses found resonance in our interview with Maria, where she directly compared both face-to-face and online CLC courses, and online pre-pandemic courses with emergency-online-only semester. In the interview, Maria and Nicole recalled when Maria was in Nicole's online first-year writing course (also a CLC course with peer mentor support) and often visited Nicole's office to ask her questions. In contrast, Maria described using campus resources *differently* in her pandemic online classes as opposed to non-pandemic online classes and face-to-face classes.

***Theme 4: Even when students have resources available to them, during this pandemic time, they may not avail themselves of these resources.***

Despite our integration plan, students who responded to the survey did not have a high or consistent rate of engagement with peer mentors. Our survey results show that 52.38% of respondents did not work with a peer mentor at all during the Winter 2021 semester (compared to 38.09% in our Winter 2020 survey). None of the respondents noted that they worked with a peer mentor more than three times during the semester. Our survey also expressed that most students (12 of 21) did not have any other support systems available to them (consistent with the Winter 2020 survey), which made us wonder whether and how students engaged with any of the resources offered by the campus during the semester.

Maria, our interview participant, reported only one contact with a peer mentor during the semester, while in previous semesters, she was able to get to campus early to "just go to" resources. Maria's responses in the interview provided us with some insight into possible challenges for the peer mentor engagement we hoped to see. In the interview, Maria described the challenge of focusing on a single class during an all-online semester, saying,

It's not exactly like how when I had the first online class that I had, because then I only had one and my other classes were all on campus, so I wasn't as distracted cuz I could do stuff when I was on campus, whereas now it's extremely hard.

Her description of the challenge of divided attention to her classes in a house "already crowded with a bunch of people" and of the problems of peer mentor

availability described above reveal possible roadblocks to the kind of engagement that is sustained during focused attention on activities or coursework.

Maria's description of the difference between taking an online class during the pandemic versus not during the pandemic directed the way we looked at students' engagement with other campus resources during Winter 2021. We wondered if the rate of student engagement with peer mentors in these online sections of intermediate composition reflected other similar patterns of student engagement with campus resources during AY 2020-2021.

Two campus resources most closely related to the work our intermediate composition students were doing—the writing center and the undergraduate library—provided us with information to help us consider what we see in our survey and interview. The campus writing center conducted 985 appointments (graduate and undergraduate) during the Fall 2019 semester, 671 in Winter 2020 (when campus shut down for the switch to remote learning during spring break), and 711 in Fall 2020<sup>4</sup>, showing a slight drop between our last “regular” semester (Fall 2019) and when students worked almost entirely remotely in Fall 2020.

Information from the undergraduate library provided us with insight into how undergraduates used the kinds of support intermediate composition students might have especially needed to complete research projects. Specifically, *reported* research support transactions (i.e., Zoom or Microsoft Teams appointments or direct email inquiries) between undergraduate students and subject specialist librarians increased by almost 100% from 43 in the Winter 2020 semester to 75 in Winter 2021<sup>5</sup>. When we looked at how many times intermediate composition students clicked into the course library guide linked in the standard course LMS shell, we saw student contact with the guide go up significantly (209%) from Winter 2020 (i.e., more students clicked into the library guide); however, our library contact reported that YouTube analytics showed no significant change in the amount of engagement with the videos in the guide. This point of analysis, specifically, suggests that while evident points of contact suggest *potential* for more student engagement with resources, student engagement with these resources may not have increased.

To further consider the kinds of campus resources required by students to complete online courses, we reached out to our colleagues working with students on technology support. Information provided to us about a campus laptop loaning program and a laptop program specifically for Pell-eligible first-year students shows a decline in student use of resources in Winter 2021. The numbers related to student technology use could be, as one of our campus colleagues suggested, a

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<sup>4</sup> Winter 2021 numbers not yet available.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note two qualifications related to these numbers: 1) these research support transactions are not required to be reported; 2) projects in some sections of intermediate composition courses *require* this contact with subject specialist librarians.

result of students having more technology either provided to them by their high schools or re-using needed technology resources obtained during previous semesters. It may also be that rather than utilizing campus resources during this online, remote academic year, students were already equipped with technology for accessing courses, even if they still faced technological issues, like multiple family members sharing Wi-Fi (Prokes & Housel, 2021). In the future, survey questions about which campus resources students use and where students do schoolwork when they are enrolled in online courses can help tell us something about whether and how peer mentoring can support students' needs. For example, if, as we know from experience, some students in our classes are completing their class work in their cars, on their phones, in their workplace parking lots, during dinner breaks, the likelihood of peer mentor engagement, or engagement in specific kinds of other campus resources, like library resources (Prokes & Housel, 2021), seems low. The need for support, however, seems significant.

So, while scholars like Fisher et al. (2020) have suggested that peer mentoring is a kind of campus resource that can help students maintain connections during remote or online learning, it may also be that if those connections are not experienced in interpersonally fulfilling ways on first contact, the peer mentoring relationship may be harder to develop. The challenges of students' technology access and competence cited by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) may have further compounded students' limited engagement with this course-based social opportunity. However, discovering whether students simply used *other* resources will be an important data point in how we develop student support strategies in the learning community in the future.

### **Discussion and Limitations**

Both our research and peer mentor engagement are limited due to protocols and regulations enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey engagement and the responses of students in the survey items regarding peer mentor contact and value provide us with a little insight into the context of students' overall engagement with peer mentoring. As Dixson (2015) and Sun and Rueda (2012) have demonstrated, and our study reinforces, measuring student engagement in online courses is both complex and crucial. However, looking at engagement in one facet of student life (e.g., the learning community) in light of other facets of campus support (e.g., the writing center, library, and technology support) gives us some clues about what is happening overall.

We set out to conduct this study as a follow up to Varty's 2021 assessment project, which found that students in face-to-face CLC composition courses saw significantly higher increase in grades (mid-term to final) than students in face-to-face non-CLC courses. However, the assessment found no significant difference between online CLC and online non-CLC courses. In response to this, we designed

specific online interventions for peer mentors, in the form of a common contact schedule and recommended modalities for peer mentor interactions, which we describe earlier in the article. Our intention to focus on online-only peer mentoring and to examine the unique affordances and constraints of conducting a composition learning community in online learning environments is clouded by the coinciding pandemic circumstances. It is impossible to isolate the effects of online learning affordances and constraints from those of the COVID-19 pandemic, which are effectively ubiquitous in all online learning taking place during this time. Our attention to students' interpersonal needs will foreground our work as we continue to implement and assess the effectiveness of peer mentor interventions in online classes in future non-pandemic semesters.

A drop of student engagement overall during the pandemic is evidenced even simply by reviewing completed surveys from early Winter 2020 (on campus), the end of Winter 2020 (having shifted to remote learning), and the end of Winter 2021 (the end of a second fully remote semester for our students). In early Winter 2020, 55 students completed a beginning-of-semester CLC assessment survey; by the end of that same semester, only 21 students completed the survey. The 20.39% (21 of 103) completion rate in Winter 2021, then, while still statistically interesting, demonstrates that our learning community students are less engaged with CLC opportunities during "pandemic semesters" than in previous semesters; the participation of only one student in the interviews process further supports this.

Further, research conducted on students' and instructors' responses to the shift to remote, online learning during COVID-19 highlights the various challenges of teaching and learning under these conditions (e.g., Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Prokes & Housel, 2021). However, the interview with Maria helps us begin to see which factors are within our control (internal to the class) and which are not (external to the class). Specifically, while we understand that there is much we cannot control about items like students' access to technology or the demands of their part- or full-time work outside of academics, we can strategize how to better provide asynchronous and synchronous peer mentor availability for all students.

Most significantly, the interview with Maria highlights the importance of interpersonal connections for driving engagement and helps us think about how to develop peer mentor training to support attunement to the interpersonal moment (not just curriculum, planning, or project problem-solving). This also provides us with questions to ask of our peer mentors (i.e., about self-perceptions of interpersonal strengths, about classes taken outside of composition) as we work with them to prepare to enter the classroom, online or otherwise. As Johnson and Rifenburg (2020) have expressed, "Listening to stories of the work is good. But ensuring that undergraduates talk back is our next imperative" (p. 120). So, we take the words and experiences of our peer mentors and intermediate writing students as

integral in guiding not only our next steps in strengthening student engagement with peer mentors, but also in studying and writing about this engagement.

### **Conclusion**

While the scholarship cited above considers peer mentor integration in terms of demographic factors, learning needs, and learning styles, our pilot study has reminded us that we certainly also cannot forget the human part of learning and peer mentoring. As Stommel (2020) has argued, teachers' (and we will add peer mentors') attention only to "scaffolding" student support across a semester cannot adequately meet the needs of the real, individual students in a class. Providing suggestions for change that "starts with small, human acts," Stommel concluded by stating, "we need to start by trusting students. Ask them when and how they learn. Ask what barriers they face. Listen. Believe the answers."

Heeding Stommel's reminder, and the work of researchers studying contexts similar to ours, who emphasize the importance of gathering student perspectives on supporting learning (e.g., Prokes & Housel, 2021) and understanding students' need for "human contact" (Rath et al., 2019), we continue our work attending to student voices in developing our learning community. We hear Maria tell us that while she believed the peer mentors in her class could be helpful, they were not available when and how she needed them, and when she did connect, she felt like a bother. These frustrations limited the potential of this powerful learning resource for Maria. We hear students who participated in our survey express that they feel confident in their performance in intermediate writing and that they feel less confident about the value peer mentors will add to that performance. Even though scholarship tells us peer mentors add value to students' learning (e.g., Budge, 2006; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Leidenfrost, 2011; Holt & Fifer, 2018), our online intermediate writing students are, largely, still not perceiving that value. We hear our peer mentors (also students) say that while they did not experience engagement from the students they were assigned to mentor, they also had low expectations for engagement because of the nature of remote learning during COVID-19 and online learning in general. And when we look at students' use of campus resources in place solely for their use, we see less engagement than we expect, considering what we think students need to succeed in online, general education courses. When we listen to each of these accounts of what our learning community students need, we can hear that we have not provided them with what they need now: a sense of human connection that might motivate them to engage more deeply not only in course content, but also with the support structure a learning community aims to provide.

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### Appendix A. Peer Mentor Integration Scaffold

Weekly Topic for Students in ENG 3010	Peer Mentor Check-In (Task, Video, Conference, etc.)
Understanding and applying the concept of “discourse community”	Personal introductions
Using the library research guides and assessing (my) knowledge gaps	Video or other multimodal demo: demonstration of using the research guides for your major/discipline
Analyzing the communicative practices of my discourse community	Video or other multimodal demo: identifying and analyzing communicative practices in your professional discourse community
Developing a web-based research guide and making a research plan (including drafting interview questions)	Zoom study table
Refining a research question and developing a working bibliography	Video or other multimodal demo: demonstrating refining the research question for our peer mentoring study and developing a working bibliography (maybe two short videos)
Annotating sources and writing Cornell notes	[regular work with individual students via Zoom or email]
Creating a synthesis map	Sit in on Zoom study table for synthesis mapping
Multimodal presentations	Commenting on student presentations
Revising my research question and identifying a gap or problem to write toward	[regular work with individual students via Zoom or email]
Organizing my literature review and proposal	Sit in on Zoom study table for P3

Drafting my literature review	Video: drafting a literature review passage or other synthesis writing
Sharing my draft for feedback	[regular work with individual students via Zoom or email]
Preparing final draft of literature review	[regular work with individual students via Zoom or email]
Revising my research guide: integrating interview findings and other knowledge I have developed across the semester	[regular work with individual students via Zoom or email]
Composing the reflective letter	Sit in on Zoom study table for the final project.