Empowering Academic Tutors Through Professional Development to Create Effective Online Learning Environments

Leidy K. Pichardo, E.d.D
College Discovery (CD) Program, Bronx Community College
Bronx, New York, United States

Jessica C. Rivera, E.d.D
Search for Education
Elevation, & Knowledge (SEEK) Program, Medgar Evers College
Brooklyn New York, United States

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic served both as a challenge and a moment for higher education opportunity programs (HEOPs) to innovate professional development programming for learning facilitators who expressed a desire to expand their knowledge-base while serving as a compass for their students whose learning was disrupted without warning. Consequently, two HEOP programs within a community college and senior college collaborated to create a virtual professional learning community that allowed learning facilitators to maintain high-quality professional development throughout the pandemic. This qualitative study used the Kirkpatrick Model as the theoretical framework to explore the strategies used by HEOPs before and during the pandemic to determine effective and efficient strategies within academic support centers using a virtual learning environment. As a result, this study found the most effective and efficient strategies used by HEOP academic support centers are those that maintain regular and consistent professional development opportunities for part-time Learning Facilitators.

Key words: virtual professional development, tutoring, opportunity programs, COVID-19 pandemic, educational technology and online learning, learning centers, student support services, peer education and peer-to-peer learning.

The College Discovery (CD) of Bronx Community College and the Percy E. Sutton (SEEK) programs of Medgar Evers College are housed within colleges that are part of the City University of New York (CUNY). Moreover, CD and SEEK are sister higher education opportunity programs created in the 1960s that affords underprivileged students an opportunity in accessing a quality college degree while obtaining upward social mobility with extra resources. The College Discovery (CD) program, founded in 1964, is at the CUNY community colleges (two year), while The Percy Ellis Sutton Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK), founded in 1965, is the higher education opportunity program at the senior and comprehensive (four year) CUNY colleges (CUNY, n.d.). In its mission, CD and SEEK were established to provide comprehensive academic, financial, and social support to assist capable students who otherwise might not be able to attend college due to their educational and financial circumstances. Students are admitted without regard to age, sex, sexual orientation, race, disability or creed (CUNY, n.d.).

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The CD/SEEK Programs offer students numerous academic support services aimed at enhancing their basic skills, reinforcing their academic progress in all upper level college courses and optimizing their retention and persistence through to graduation (CUNY, n.d.). Supplemental instruction and tutoring support services are available, such as: individual, group, and classroom tutoring; supplemental instruction hours attached to high-risk academic courses; peer study groups; course review groups; and computer assisted academic instruction (CUNY, n.d.).

Academic tutoring is essential to student academic success (Crouse-Machcinski, 2019). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many areas were severely affected, especially the area of academic support. Research shows that students who attend tutoring regularly perform better and earn higher grades in their courses (Ambrose et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011). During fall 2020, tutoring centers like the *College Discovery* (CD) and *Search for Elevation, Education, & Knowledge* (SEEK) Programs have experienced devastating budget cuts, reduced staff, and limited resources. Out of necessity, both programs teamed up to innovate, carry out, and provide quality professional development in a safe virtual space for educators. Therefore, Academic Support Managers at a CUNY community college and a CUNY senior college (Bronx Community College and Medgar Evers College) collaborated in a virtual tutor training series to empower part-time learning facilitators in creating and sustaining effective online learning environments. *"How Learning Works: Seven Research Strategies for Effective Teaching"* by Ambrose et al. (2010) was used as the main resource for the seven-part workshop series during the first semester. Forty participants completed the first workshop series, including CD/SEEK Counselors, learning facilitators, and managers across the City University of New York (CUNY). Intently, we provided quality professional development to CD/SEEK Tutors and Academic Support Staff to support, enhance, and promote effective online learning. Subsequently, due to high demand, learning facilitators and managers asked for the workshop series to continue throughout the remainder of the pandemic, through the fall of 2021.

For the purpose of this study, tutors will be referred to as learning facilitators, who work part-time in the CD/SEEK Academic Support Centers. Managers supervise the daily operations and are responsible for the professional development of all part-time teaching staff. Counselors service students in academic advisement, career training, leadership development, and mental health counseling.

Theoretical Framework

Success criteria and measurable outcomes of creating effective professional development centers around the four variables of the Kirkpatrick model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Kirkpatrick's Learning Evaluation Model refers to a pyramid with four levels building upon each other to create a chain of evidence that illustrates a relevant connection between each level of reaction, learning, behavior, and impact to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of training (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Specifically, Kirkpatrick's model asks each level to identify what the organization is trying to measure and how that outcome lends itself to improving training effectiveness and increasing its impact. Therefore, the four variables include (1) Reaction, (2) Learning, (3) Behavior, and (4) Results. Each variable is addressed in chronological order and represents the level of evaluation. For example, (1) Reaction measures how participants have reacted to the training series; (2) Learning measures to which degree the participants have acquired the knowledge or skills of the training series; (3) Behavior measures the transfer of learning to the workplace, and (4) Results measure if the training series outcomes have taken place because of its existence (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Hence, for an organization to facilitate efficient and practical training, it must have a positive rate of interest (ROI) where trainees can demonstrate more gains than what the training costs the organization to create and deliver it. Moreover, as administrators, we used this model to improve the experience of our stakeholders as learners, which ties to our goals of creating quality professional development for our learning facilitators, which will benefit students within higher education opportunity programs.

Problem

Prior to March 2020, budgets of higher education opportunity programs (College Discovery/Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) were cut dramatically due to low enrollment and retention. Additionally, once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, budgets were further reduced thus affecting the professional development opportunities offered to academic part-time staff. Therefore, as administrators of CD/SEEK, we created cross-campus virtual professional development to help learning facilitators strengthen their teaching practice while learning to be adaptive to the online evolving needs of their students and themselves.

Research Questions

Quality professional development was waning during the pre-COVID-19 pandemic for higher education opportunity programs within CUNY due to professional development funding being cut. Consequently, this deficiency became more pronounced when the COVID-19 pandemic hit March of 2020. Hence, this initiative aimed to provide a tool kit for staff on how to navigate a pandemic as learning facilitators in an online environment.

To evaluate whether this initiative was effective and efficient in the training is offered, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1. As a part-time learning facilitator, what strategies or professional development were generally offered by higher education opportunity programs <u>prior</u> to the COVID-19 pandemic?
RQ2. As a part-time learning facilitator, what strategies or professional development were generally offered by higher education opportunity programs <u>during</u> the COVID-19 pandemic?
RQ3. What are your future recommendations pertaining to ongoing professional development offered by CD or SEEK?

Literature Review

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many tutoring centers in post-secondary schools found themselves transferring their services to an online environment. Meaningful student engagement with online learning has been a major challenge for higher education institutions during COVID-19 (Gregg & Shin, 2021). Many challenges emerged during the first year of transition, including the need for professional development for faculty and staff (Okoro et al., 2021). Okoro et al. (2021) conducted a study at a South Africa college campus that discovered a need for more innovative strategies in the area of tutor professional development on online teaching and learning. In accordance with researchers in the area of academic support (Gregg & Shin, 2021; Simmons et al., 2020; Okoro et al., 2021), we also argue that institutional commitment is lacking in the funding of professional development opportunities for part-time tutoring staff in higher education.

While there is a broad body of research that supports peer tutoring and supplemental instruction as high impact practices that help with student retention (Gregg & Shin, 2021; Okoro et al., 2021), there are limited studies that focus on the professional preparation of tutors and learning facilitators. Gregg and Shin (2021) propose a further consideration of online training for tutoring staff due to the growing demand of online academic support. Online training does not only provide a flexibility for attendance, but it also prepares tutors on how to better engage on the platforms used by students, giving them a unique insight as to the students' experience (Gregg & Shin, 2021; Okoro et al., 2021).

Concerning tutoring programs, research states that tutoring training is the glue that holds fortifying peer tutoring and supplemental programs together (Adnan, 2018; Arco-Tirado et al., 2020). However, it is worth noting various training models exist, including non-elaborated versus elaborated training. Specifically, non-elaborated training lacks explicit instructions, principles, and processes (Adnan, 2018; Arco-Tirado et al., 2020). In contrast, elaborated training involves training that lays out explicit principles and reasons why they exist and the processes needed to execute said principles (Adnan, 2018; Arco-Tirado et al., 2020). Thus, ideal tutors do well when the interaction between tutors and their tutees during a tutoring session is more precise and explicit, and when the tutors themselves are better prepared to help the tutee perform a task independently (Barron & Foot, 2006).

Supplemental tutoring can have learning facilitators who range from professors, peers, or alums. Regardless of a tutor's role outside of a tutoring session, they can benefit from training that infuses elements from peer tutoring (Bowman-Perrot et al., 2019). This model allows tutors to use a student-centered pedagogy where a tutor functions as an equal to the tutee. Moreover, peer tutoring is an instructional strategy that will enable tutors to work with the tutee through the repetition of key concepts (Bowman-Perrot et al., 2019). Some research states that tutoring models such as peer learning benefit tutors more than tutees (Thurston, 2021).

By tutors engaging through active helping and supporting the tutee regardless of status, both parties benefit from this strategy because it becomes an acquisition of knowledge and skill rather than hierarchical regurgitation of learning random facts (Arco-Tirado et al., 2019). Consequently, by a tutoring program using a student-centered model and offering a highly structured individual weekly tutoring session for tutees, research showed there were significant differences statistically in favor of tutees who engaged in this model.

This was evidenced by their total academic course in the fall and spring semesters while tutors become more able to do their roles through the use of psycho-pedagogical interventions which allow them to draw upon counseling approaches rooted in students' self-regulated learning rather than focusing on specific content or learning how to beat a test (Arco-Tirado et al., 2019).

Practical tutoring training depends on many variables, including institutional, structural, and the fall trap of needing to look to model organizations versus distinguishing issues affecting tutors within a specific sector. Hence, effective tutors should receive thorough training that is intentional and structured enough to allow tutors to be well-versed in course content, institutional procedures, technical skills, and interpersonal skills (Sturrock, 2011). All of these skills are pertinent in effective tutors being able to enhance in-person tutoring but also tutoring for distance learning (Sturrock, 2011). Some research also purports that these pyramids of skills suggested for distance learning also mirror some flipped classroom methodologies (Von Lindeiner-Strask et al., 2022). Specifically, some flipped classroom methodologies, according to some researchers, allow enhanced online teaching as it emphasizes live synchronous interactions between educators and students versus asynchronous interactions that limit a party's ability to engage and ask questions (Tang et al., 2020). To emphasize, flipped classroom methodologies do not include blended learning as blended learning supports traditional in-person learning versus learning that can happen either in hybrid or fully online capacities (Leszczyński et al., 2018). Even though some research advocates for a combined model of live synchronous teaching and flipped learning, ultimately, a student's successful learning and an educator's ability to effectively teach depends on the limitations of the LMS medium or e-tools being used which is provided through the institution (Leszczyński et al., 2018).

Hence, some research warns that a bad best practice is to search for best practices versus asking all stakeholders involved in a process what tool they need and what behaviors or processes need to be in place to address the x, y, and z, issues (Morris, 2017). Specifically, applying the best practices of others to one's tutoring staff and tutees can be catastrophic because research speaks against using a cookie-cutter design in training tutors and teaching tutees (Morris, 2017).

Effective tutor training directly impacts the effective delivery of tutoring services as it can define both the self-efficacy beliefs of the tutor and tutee equally. Hence, research advocates for tutoring training that is both specific in offering a course-specific curriculum along with the field experience. Thus, this model empowers tutors through concepts and applications (Waltz, 2019).

Another model of tutoring is known as cross-age tutoring (Hanze et al., 2018). This model, just like peer tutoring, can have parts of its model applied to supplemental tutoring as it allows tutors and tutees to have a meeting of the minds regardless of age. The benefits of this model involve a tutee being able to play an active role in their session versus being made to regurgitate a lecture given by an older seasoned tutor. Instead, it allows tutees to ask questions and help gear the session to meet their particular needs. Thus, effective learning becomes a shared responsibility between them and their tutor. Likewise, research states that tutors learn to encourage tutees' independence, competence, and active knowledge construction, which changes the quality and dynamics of an effective tutoring session (Hanze et al., 2018). Therefore, effectively trained tutors, not defined by their age but rather by technique, exhibit more knowledge-building than knowledge-telling behavior, causing tutees to show more active versus restrained behavior (Hanze et al., 2018).

Regarding tutor training, training tutors for online delivery has yet to be greatly researched. As it exists, current research refers to online tutor training as superficial and not going beyond the technical skills needed to help them and their tutees navigate learning management systems (LMS) successfully. Thus, seminal theorists Hampel & Stickler (2007) advocate for tutors operating in an online environment to have a pyramid of skills necessary for successful online teaching. These skills include going beyond technological skills and understanding its advantages, teaching the social skills of community building, language teaching skills, and skills to teach creatively while feeling empowered to develop an individualized teaching style for an online modality. Moreover, these skills can be best nourished through pre-training and ongoing staff development (Hampel & Stickler, 2005). However, research further expounds that for tutors to effectively work within an online modality while supporting student interaction within the confines of a language learning context, they must have: up-to-date training, ongoing technical support, hands-on pedagogical training where they play the role of tutees; ongoing guidance with task design; supervisors who model what is expected of the tutors; activity banks with interactive tasks for tutor use; pedagogical support; self-reflection and feedback; and space for sharing experience or critique (Hampel & Stickler, 2007; Hampel, 2009).

Research shows an increased positive relationship between student-centered pedagogy and student achievement. Hence, research shows the defining factor being curriculum, instruction, and assessment customized to each tutee's needs (Shen et al., 2020; Wenn & Campbell, 2017). Moreover, this finding led to teacher empowerment and distributed leadership (Shen et al., 2020; Wenn & Campbell, 2017). Specifically, research finds that teacher empowerment and distributed leadership is significant as education as a discipline is facing two challenges: accountability has strengthened expectations for improved student achievement and improved student performance, and, in response to these increased demands, educators are discovering the benefit of shared leadership responsibility (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; MetLife, 2013).

Moreover, research shows that as tutor training moves away from teacher-centered pedagogy and into student-centered pedagogy, it can become more effective by utilizing learning management systems, which can include an experience that is hybrid or fully remote (Crouse-Machcinski, 2019). To that effect, up-to-date training is quintessential for having an effective, successful tutoring program or learning center. In that effect, a tutoring program must be able to serve not only its students' academic needs but also their tutors' professional needs as defined but not limited to proper training, support, and guidance (Crouse-Machcinski, 2019). Therefore, technology, including LMS, allows tutoring programs to raise the quality of tutors, expand accessibility, and contribute to student success on an institutional level through their tutors. Research also shows that if a tutoring program uses an LMS from their institution, they may be allowed to not only cut or reduce costs associated with training but overall tutoring functionalities as technology can help to advance how tutoring can happen and where (Crouse-Machcinski, 2019).

In addition to an LMS, many evolving e-learning tools are now available for tutors to use to enhance its delivery. They are friendly on the platform itself, including Dropbox and blogging.

The benefit of an LMS is the ability of e-learning tools and systems to be hosted in one place for tutors; however, research shows institutions need to stay on top of updating their LMS as a means of keeping e-learning relevant to the current generation and their needs (Alier et al., 2012).

Other benefits of LMS include tutors being able to offer tutees the option of accessing a session or materials at a later date, the ability to meet the tutee where they are, increase the chances of participation from an introvert tutee to express opinions outside the classroom, and the opportunity to carefully time and plan sessions. Additionally, tutors can use LMS to host office hours and additional tutoring sessions, record their lectures, and create a safe space to provide the tutee with feedback (Dehinbo & Odunaike, 2010; Hampel, 2014).

Research shows online tutor training correlates with increased knowledge of curriculum topics and specific content and a slight change in training satisfaction (Sibonga, 2019). Thus, research further showed significant improvement in the clarity of short answers and affective post-survey results, such as higher ratings for application and job performance confidence (Sibonga, 2019). Therefore, research advocates for online training to be used in tutor training to meet the needs of a field that requires real-time interactions and up-to-date training for tutors to sharpen their crafts (Sibonga, 2019).

Another important note for institutions is to remember when purchasing or expanding an LMS, they need to have buy-in and participation from the variety of stakeholders involved, including faculty, staff, and students. In that vein, research recognizes that creating a uniform product such as an e-tutoring program is challenging to do due to the varying needs of an entire community and the fluidity of institutional technology; however, it is not impossible as long as the institution helps learning centers build their online sites, it could make a smoother transition and help all involved (Feldstein, 2016).

Moreover, training that helps tutors online can nurture academic literacy, writing knowledge and rules if institutions provide a comprehensive learning support environment, especially during unforeseen circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Stickler, 2022). Research further concluded that there was no statistically significant difference between in-person and online tutoring as long as institutional buy-in and support existed (Iwasaki et al., 2019).

Research shows a popular method of tutor training is certifying them tutors, through a program called the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) (CRLA, 2018). Specifically, the CRLA offers tutor training and support for tutor selection, experience, and evaluation (Walker, 2016).

However, not all tutoring programs can do this without institutional support. Therefore, lack of institutional support counters tutors' ongoing need for high levels of support and training from their supervisors, thus affecting effective tutoring and student academic performance throughout the institution.

Effective tutor training can help tutors feel more connected to their tutees while it helps tutees feel significantly more connected to their classes and institution as a whole (Yomtov, 2017). This heightened sense of belonging is due to tutors using a student-centered pedagogy that fortifies transferable skills such as being independent and playing an active role in their learning and experiences navigating the institution as they feel more emotionally and socially supported from the beginning and throughout their college experience. Moreover, effective tutors not only assist tutees with their academics, but in hindsight, they provide especially first-year students with guidance, advice, and mentorship (Yomtov, 2017).

Thus, research calls for effective tutor training to include professional development, focusing on the new roles and competencies they will need to tutor and engage in an online environment. Research finds that participants want to enhance their traditional tutoring role to incorporate the necessary competencies for online teaching and active practice in real-life applications (Adnan, 2018). Moreover, professional development is crucial to help tutors become familiarized and comfortable with emerging pedagogies and required technological systems and develop a positive attitude to online learning and their ability to teach their tutees competently (Adnan, 2018).

Therefore, many tutoring centers have a diverse group of mastery among their staff. Ranging from newly employed (1-2) years, to senior master tutors (over 10 years). Tutors experience different levels of stress in helping students like low attendance, lack of engagement, unpreparedness, and attitudes (Simmons et al., 2020). Although master tutors know their work can be emotionally draining and stressful, current research does not fully investigate these experiences (Okoro et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2020). For instance, Simmons et al. (2020) found that factors within tutoring sessions cause more stress for tutors than external factors. Since tutoring is a helping profession, many tutors find themselves involved in multiple roles such as that of an advisor, counselor, friend, financial aid specialist, or advocate (Gregg & Shin, 2021; Okoro et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2020). Tutors consistently express the value of their relationship building with tutees. As students attend frequent tutoring sessions, they develop relationships with their tutors, not necessarily developed with other college staff (Simmons et al., 2020). As managers, it is essential to continue to develop our tutoring staff with socio-emotional aspects of tutoring in addition to their content knowledge development.

Within the existing body of literature, many agree that there needs to be a relationship between training, knowledge content, and background in effective tutors (Leary et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2011). The most effective tutors have a mastery of the content knowledge and are able to establish a strong student-centered learning environment that promotes self-directed learning as guides through the process (Leary et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2011). Such skills are obtained through ongoing training of effective teaching and learning practices (Leary et al., 2013). As Zhang et al. (2011) indicate, the essence of tutor training is preparing the learning facilitator through using Socratic Methods, guiding discussions, provoking critical thinking, and modeling critical analysis. Scholars like Zhang et al. (2011) and Leary et al. (2013) highly encourage continuous training as opposed to just a one-time workshop opportunity to yield higher student learning results.

Method Design

The method design employed in this research included a qualitative study design. Specifically, this research used descriptive phenomenology. The methods used involved: participant/group observations, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions conversations and focus sessions. During these focus sessions and post-programming sessions, this research examined participant experiences also through surveys and recordings via Zoom video. This method design was a critical tool in helping the researchers understand subjectively the experiences of individual participants and experiences shared by individuals as a group. Moreover, this lends itself to the researchers gaining insight regarding shared phenomenon, experiences, and assumptions experienced by an individual and the group.

Procedures

At the onset of the pandemic, we first thought about providing a series of professional development workshops to the part-time learning facilitator staff at our respective campuses asynchronously via Blackboard (LMS) modules. A course shell was created for tutors to review modules at their pace regarding best teaching practices in online learning.

Some of the topics addressed in the LMS modules included: The Role of a Tutor & Common Mistakes Tutors Should Avoid; Ten Golden Strategies for Tutors; Tutoring as a Process; and, Deliberate Practice Concept. Throughout the asynchronous modules, tutors were required to engage in quizzes, discussion prompts, and blogging as a means of demonstrating their understanding of each topic. As a follow-up, all tutors engaged with their Academic Support Program Manager for synchronous development, either individually or during monthly staff meetings.

While participation was fair (10 out of 19 = 52.6%), there was a larger need to engage with the learning facilitators in a more direct, synchronous modality to accommodate all learning needs, as everyone did not have the same level of technological savvy. Consequently, our tutoring services would be conducted online in a new virtual environment for the first time. As challenges emerged, we saw an even greater demand to develop virtual synchronous training for academic support facilitators among the CD/SEEK programs.

After discussing our idea with a body of CUNY Academic Support Program Managers, an interest emerged in having their learning facilitators participate in the virtual workshops. Therefore, we transformed this initial idea into a year and a half professional development series with the consent of all participants. All workshops were provided via Zoom. As a follow-up to the professional development series, we facilitated focus groups and post-programming sessions to examine participant experiences gathered through surveys and interview recordings. As a result, the collected data provided emerging themes that influenced our anchor texts and programming for subsequent semesters.

During the first semester, the overarching topic for the professional development series was "Tutors as Academic Leaders," held in fall 2020, focused on "How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching" by Ambrose et al. (2010), which was selected as the mentor text. The seven research-based strategies include:

- Prior knowledge
- Student's organization of knowledge
- Motivation factors
- Developing mastery
- Practice and Feedback
- Student development and course climate
- Becoming a self-directed learner

The workshops were divided into seven one-hour sessions to discuss and apply the different theories. The first half of the hour centered on an overview and explanation of a learning principle. The second half of the hour was dedicated for tutors to put into practice the theoretical researched principle. Specifically, tutors were engaged in didactic and dynamic group work on role-play scenarios, among other interactive activities. These were conducted in breakout rooms. As a culminating activity at the end of the semester, attendees received a certificate of participation and were given a feedback survey. The responses were used to improve the next series of workshops for the following semester and gauge continued interest.

As a result, the survey illuminated that the main feedback called for the workshops to be longer with fewer days of commitment due to the complexity of time schedules. While some colleges could financially compensate their tutors, others had to embed the training time into the tutor's regular work schedule. Considering this, during the second semester of spring 2021, the professional development series was modified to four one-and-a-half-hour sessions (one workshop per month). Here, forty-five minutes was dedicated to theoretical discussion, and the remaining forty-five minutes were used for theory in practice. The anchor text selected was: "Change Leadership in Higher Education: A Practical Guide to Academic Transformation," by Jeffrey Butler (2015). An additional change to the series was the inclusion of two master tutors, one from Bronx Community College and the other from Medgar Evers College, as lead facilitators of the application activities. Not only did we desire tutors to grow in theoretical knowledge, but it was also essential for them to be allowed to develop their presentation skills. We led the theoretical discussions of the selected chapters during the first half of each session and the master tutors were responsible for conducting the application activities during the second half. Similar to fall 2020, we administered a feedback survey to all participants.

Therefore, during the fall 2021 semester, the last conducted series included only two one-and-a-half-hour workshops, due to time availability constraints of facilitators and managers. But, the same format of theory and interactive practice was followed. Moreover, the feedback survey gathered from spring 2021 showed that the participants had a particular interest in social-emotional learning and managing concepts of critical race applications in tutoring. As a result, instead of selecting an anchor text to drive these discussions, we decided to have two experts present on the topics. The first topic was "Critical Race Theory in Tutoring," moderated by Dr. Jessica C. Rivera, Academic Support Manager at Medgar Evers SEEK Program. The second was "Social Emotional Intelligence in Tutoring," conducted by Dr. Barbara Flores-Caballero, Assistant Professor in Education at Bronx Community College.

After the third semester of virtual professional development workshops, we conducted summative surveys and video interviews of learning facilitators, counselors, and managers who participated in at least one of the session modules. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Participant Breakdown from Fall 2020 – Fall 2021

Semester	Learning Facilitators	Managers	Counselors	Total
Fall 2020	39	5	0	44
Spring 2021	27	3	0	30
Fall 2021	31	5	3	39

Note 1: Participation across 7 out of 13 CUNY campuses
Note 2: Participants from the Blackboard course shell who attended the Professional Development Series more than 1 workshop (retention): 7/19 = 36.84%; 7 Tutors
Note 3: Participants from the Professional Development Series who attended more than 1 workshop (retention): 21/39 = 54%; 3 Managers and 18 Tutors

Findings

Through the virtual professional development series, we were able to retain 37% of the learning facilitators from the original pilot which launched via Blackboard (Spring 2020) and increased retention to 54%, generally of those who attended the professional development series defined as attending more than one workshop. During the first year (Fall 2020 - Spring 2021) of piloting this initiative, participants defined the following themes as overall positive experiences (see Table 2):

● Networking & Socialization - participants liked the ability to network with peer tutors and staff across CD/SEEK CUNY programs.
● Engaging & Interactive - each session was highly engaging with a combination of learning theory and practice. Every session introduced participants to different interactive platforms like Google Jamboard, Mentimeter, polls, graphic organizers, and role-play.
● Applicable & Relevant Workshops - the seven strategies discussed were highly applicable to tutoring and all topics were relevant to teaching and learning across all academic support centers.

Whereas the participants defined the following themes as improvement areas:

● Needing more time for activities - participants reported that one hour was insufficient to review the theory and practice of each concept.
● Preferring to have a detailed visual model before doing breakout activities - participants expressed the need for a handout or other type of visual aid to provide instructions before breakout activities.
● Scheduling - there were participants from senior and community colleges. Scheduling varied across campuses and across programs. It was often challenging for learning facilitators primarily to attend all seven sessions due to work and other scheduling conflicts.
● Funding – there was limited funding for compensation, primarily due to program budget cuts.

Moreover, as recommendations for future programming, participants suggested the following themes should be included:

- Tutees;
- Expanded invitations to other stakeholders besides tutors/learning facilitators; and,
- Topics of Social Emotional Learning and Social Justice

Table 2: Theme Findings of Year One (Fall 2020 – Spring 2021)

Criteria	Themes
Plusses	Networking & Socialization Opportunities; Interactive & Engaging Sessions; Applicable & Relevant Topics
Deltas	Limited Time for Activities; Need Clearer Modeling Instructions for Breakout Activities; Scheduling Conflicts of Learning Facilitators; Limited Funding to Compensate Learning Facilitators
Recommendations	Expand Series to Include Tutees and non-CD/SEEK Stakeholders (Learning Centers; Departments; College Leadership, etc.); Inclusion of Topics such as Social Emotional Learning & Social Justice

Based on this feedback, Fall 2021 programming was planned per these considerations. Consequently, at the end of the semester, we secured a sample size e (n= 8) derived from all participants who engaged in the virtual professional development from Fall 2020 - Fall 2021. Specifically, we disseminated a Google form to every person who registered for any of the virtual professional development series. Based on the survey feedback, eight individuals decided to participate in our overall survey by submitting a brief description of their overarching experience. This overall survey was used to gather the participants' thoughts on whether attending the virtual professional development series from Fall 2020 - Fall 2021 affected the quality of professional development they received before the pandemic happened, along with their recommendations for future professional development. Thus, the survey disseminated at the end of Fall 2021 was used to serve two functions. The first function was to see if participants felt a difference in the quality of professional development they were offered before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, the second function was to ask for their insight on future recommendations for ongoing professional development at their respective institutions.

Consequently, participants reported the following findings per question:

Table 3: Theme Findings Per Research Question

Research Questions	Themes
Question 1: PD prior to pandemic	Non-existent or limited; Outsourced; Non-inclusive programming; lack of national tutoring certification
Question 2: PD during the pandemic	Only PD received was our virtual professional development series; our PD was identified as applicable & relevant; Enhanced pedagogical skills as a professional
Question 3: Recommendations for future programming	Continued inclusion of Master Learning Facilitators to Deliver Content; Sustainability re: institutional support, funding, relevant training and literature in real-time

Question #1: As a part-time learning facilitator, what type of professional development were generally offered by higher education opportunity programs (CD or SEEK) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Participants described their professional development before the COVID-19 pandemic as non-existent or limited and provided externally instead of home-grown. Examples include professional development being defined as not being offered or being limited to internal staff meetings or non-inclusive workshops that lack transferable skills, such as: only having writing workshops or not having many tutor training certifications available for learning facilitators in addition to the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA).

Question #2: As a part-time learning facilitator, what type of professional development workshops were generally offered by higher education opportunity programs (CD or SEEK) during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Participants described their professional development during the COVID-19 pandemic as deriving from the very virtual professional development series we administrators ran. Participants identified how we delivered what they wanted and the emerging trends we addressed within that programming. Specifically, participants stated we offered virtual professional development across CUNY, which focused on improving student-centered pedagogy and being an effective facilitator by offering tutoring methodologies and practices. On the other hand, emerging trends that we addressed within our programming during Fall 2021 were self-care, wellness, mental health, and critical race within academia. As per the participants, these trends confirmed that the virtual professional development that we offered allowed them to gain critical training on how to be effective facilitators. Additionally, the participants were provided with real-time applicable and relevant literature to help them sharpen their craft as learning facilitators and individuals who have a stakeholder role within the same college they serve.

Question #3: What are your future recommendations about ongoing professional development offered by CD or SEEK?

- Participants described their future recommendations about ongoing professional development offered by CD or SEEK as involving tutors in topics covered in the programming. Additionally, participants validated that the virtual professional development series format should be maintained. Still, they advocated for the series to be sustained with institutional support, funding, relevant training and literature in real-time.

Discussion

The data confirms there was limited or minimal professional development prior to the COVID-19 pandemic across CUNY's CD and SEEK academic support programs. This one and a half-year pilot also reinforces the need for ongoing professional development of academic support part-time staff among the CD and SEEK opportunity programs, as suggested by Zhang et al. (2011) and Leary et al. (2013). Professional development for tutors is an increasing priority in light of the evolving changes in teaching and learning modalities experienced in higher education (Bowman et al., 2013). As more students are enrolling and expressing interest in online learning, academic support centers must also equip tutors and learning facilitators with the tools and skills required to yield more student success in a virtual environment (Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Hampel, 2014).

As the literature supports, professional development should not and cannot be done irregularly (Gregg, 2021; Okoro et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2011). Part-time tutors and learning facilitators need to have consistent opportunities to develop and grow in their specialized content area and in their pedagogical skills. Mastery of the content and knowing how to present the material comprehensively goes hand-in-hand (Zhang et al., 2011). Academic support managers and program administrators who invest time and resources enhance the intellectual pedigree of their employees, especially those who work in the front line with students (Gregg, 2021; Zhang et al., 2011).

This phenomenology study reveals that strategies being used by higher education opportunity programs that are effective and efficient within academic support centers are having regular and consistent professional development opportunities for part-time tutors and learning facilitators. As we have learned, one of the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that we now have the ability and flexibility to offer training and workshops in multiple modalities, like hybrid, in-person, synchronous, or asynchronous.

Creating effective professional development for tutors and learning facilitators in this study are measured by the four Kirkpatrick model variables of: (1) Reaction, (2) Learning, (3) Behavior, and (4) Results (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Data outcomes show the following:

- Reaction - On average, 90% of participants reacted satisfactorily to each training series offered thus rating the series as excellent with 90% stating they would extremely recommend this training series to someone else.
- Learning - Allowing participants to practice each theory and put theory into practice was an immediate assessment of what was learned.
- Behavior - Tutors who returned shared their experiences in applying the concepts and skills learned in the previous session providing examples of application. Concepts and theoretical practices were implemented in subsequent tutoring sessions, as disclosed by learning facilitators.
- Results - Based on the feedback and experiences of all who participated in the video interviews and the overall survey, we conclude that the training series outcomes have taken place because of its existence. Participants described the many new concepts, topics, lessons, and strategies gained by having participated in at least once professional development series.

Limitations

This study is still young. Therefore, the existing research may not apply to all educational research questions. Since this research happened during a pandemic, participants may not be able to express themselves articulately or clearly due to internet connection and internet lag. Other factors that may contribute to participants not representing themselves articulately or clearly can be language challenges, cognition challenges, or other undetermined factors. Tutor availability was also a factor due to them working on a part-time bi-semesteral contractual basis or some not being currently employed at their institution, thus, limiting the number of survey responses collected. Additionally, there were a few tutors who did complete any survey submitted from Fall 2020 - to the present, there was confusion in them interpreting a question, especially when these questions were conducted virtually. Lastly, the data and analysis require interpretation without researcher bias; however, bias cannot be removed entirely, just minimized.

Future Recommendations

Based on the feedback of our participants, the following three recommendations for future programming are as follows:

- continue to focus offerings centered on mental health, academic, and socioemotional needs of staff AND students;
- provide books or reading materials ahead of workshops and;
- offer the current series in an in-person day seminar format

In summary, participants gave two recommendations: we, as administrators and other administrators seeking to use our data as a model, can control programming easier versus offering the series an in-person all-day seminar. To provide the current professional development in an in-person day seminar or event would require five variables to happen efficiently.

The five variables needed would be:

- Collaboration between support program stakeholders
- Collaboration between support program stakeholders and central office administration
- A budget
- Resources (human capital and physical resources)
- Prioritization
- Scheduling

Converting or offering an in-person option for the virtual professional development offered from Fall 2020 until the present is not impossible, but it does need to start with support. Support required to sustain and grow this series requires buy-in and championing from the support programs responsible for providing academic and non-academic support services alongside key management leadership stemming from the central office. Without this support and push, metamorphosing the virtual professional development into a bigger capacity takes commitment and alignment of goals, especially regarding budgets and resources.

Without budgets or dedicated resources, the leadership of support programs within the individual campuses of the City University is placed in a bind as some support programs cannot afford to pay their employees additional monies to attend professional development. On the employee side, they are left with an option of volunteering to participate outside of work, losing work time to listen, or not being able to attend due to scheduling. Without support from the top of the top-bottom power structure within CUNY, it may be challenging to sustain ventures such as our initiative due to the existing systemic effectiveness and efficiency within CD and SEEK support programs currently. But, should more collaboration happen across more CUNY schools, more tutors will be able to partake in what participants defined as an ongoing need. In contrast, with even some collaboration support from central office administration, professional development will be expanded to more stakeholders across CUNY outside of the support programs of CD and SEEK.

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