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# What Tutor Researchers and Their Mentors Tell Us About Undergraduate Research in the Writing Center: An Exploratory Study

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## Abstract

This article reports the results of a study of undergraduate research practices and mentoring practices of 107 writing center professionals and 102 undergraduate peer writing tutor researchers. Survey responses from these 209 tutor researchers and professionals provide insight into what they consider to be the benefits of peer writing tutor research and the challenges faced by tutor researchers and their mentors. The article concludes that while both tutor researchers and professionals agree on one significant challenge (time needed to complete projects) and one significant benefit (the positive effects of tutor research on peer tutoring), other benefits and challenges were not consistently identified and discussed by both groups. Implications for tutor research and research mentoring are discussed, and a general call is made for the writing

center community to follow other disciplines, especially STEM and social sciences, and investigate the value of tutor research to the tutors themselves, to their writing centers and students who are tutored, and to the discipline.

In a 2011 article in *Profession*, Joyce Kinkead & Laurie Grobman set down a definition of undergraduate research (UR):

By *undergraduate research* we mean the educational and comprehensive curricular movement that involves students as apprentices, collaborators, or independent scholars in critical investigations using fieldwork and discipline-specific methodologies under the sponsorship of faculty mentors. Ideally, undergraduate research is based on the same principles that drive faculty scholarship: it is meant to fill a gap in our knowledge base and be shared with the scholarly community. (p. 219)

During the past three decades, the writing center community has embraced the idea that peer writing tutors can contribute in meaningful ways to “critical investigations using fieldwork and discipline-specific methodologies” (Kinkead & Grobman, 2011, p. 219) that result in both scholarly presentation and publication. Since 1984 peer writing tutors have been presenting their research at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW). Just a few months before the first NCPTW was held at Brown University, *The Writing Lab Newsletter (WLN)* published the first “Tutor’s Corner” (later renamed “Tutor’s Column”) that encouraged tutors “to add their voices to the discussion” (Harris, 1984, p. 1) and share writing and reflections about tutoring practice. Additionally, writing tutors regularly attend the annual conferences for the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) and its regional affiliates.

A pivotal year in English studies and composition/rhetoric was 2003 when efforts to encourage undergraduate research increased significantly. Spring 2003 saw the publication of the undergraduate research issue of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, edited and introduced by Kinkead, an early Secretary/Treasurer of the National Writing Centers Association and co-editor of *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* from 1985–1990. Later that year the inaugural issue of *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*, edited by Grobman & Candace Spigelman, was released, and *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, edited by undergraduate and graduate writing consultants, launched. After the trial run of a joint NCPTW/Midwest Writing Centers Association conference in fall 2002, the NCPTW and IWCA hosted their first joint conference in Hershey, Pennsylvania, in fall

2003, offering additional opportunities for peer tutors to present their research alongside professionals at the country's premier conference on writing centers. Since then, IWCA has joined with NCPTW for its annual conference four more times, in 2005, 2008, 2010, and 2014 (Past conferences, 2013).

It is surprising, then, that between 2003 and 2012, the year Lauren Fitzgerald & Melissa Ianetta edited a special undergraduate research issue of *WCJ* and Fitzgerald delivered an IWCA conference keynote address focused on UR (reproduced in 2014 in *WCJ*), only three essays that help us better understand tutor research were published: Dominic DelliCarpini & Cynthia Crimmins' (2010) chapter in *Undergraduate Research in English Studies*, Jeanne Marie Rose & Grobman's (2010) *WLN* article "Scholarship Reconsidered: Tutor-Scholars as Undergraduate Researchers," and undergraduate peer tutor Skyler Konicki's (2011) *Young Scholars in Writing* article "De-Centering Peer Tutors: Research Applications for Undergraduates in the Writing Program." More recently, writing center scholars have turned their attention to publishing texts that teach undergraduates and novice writing center researchers how to conduct research in writing studies, such as Fitzgerald & Ianetta's (2016) *Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Kinkead's (2016) *Researching Writing: An Introduction to Research Methods*, and Jackie Grutsch McKinney's (2016) *Strategies for Writing Center Research*.

While we have been celebrating and encouraging tutor research, our colleagues from across the disciplines, in particular in the sciences and social sciences but also in the humanities, have been busy asking questions about the role UR plays in the social, intellectual, and professional development of their students. For example, *CUR Quarterly*, a peer-reviewed publication of the Council on Undergraduate Research, publishes over 20 research articles on UR annually. Recent thematic issues have focused on UR in general education, UR in support of sustainability, and assessing UR. Outside of *CUR Quarterly* are numerous examples of investigations and scholarly publication on UR experiences. For instance, Chris Craney, Tara McKay, April Mazzeo, Janet Morris, Cheryl Prigodich, & Robert de Groot (2011) showed how participants in a summer UR program at Occidental College were retained through graduation, pursued graduate education, developed research skills, and won competitive grants and awards at higher rates than Occidental students who did not participate in the summer UR program. And on the mentoring side, Linda Behar-Horenstein, Kellie Roberts, & Alice Dix (2010) found that while undergraduate researchers in the sciences improved their communication and technical skills, the perceptions of the undergraduates and their mentors were inconsistent with regard to

mentors' guidance through the research process. Articles investigating UR and profiles of UR programs are not uncommon in disciplinary journals (*Journal of Chemical Education*, *Teaching of Psychology*, *Journal of Engineering*, *Journal of Nursing*, and *Communication Education* to name a few) and in cross-disciplinary journals (*Journal of Higher Education*, *College Student Journal*, and *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*). But even faculty in the sciences and social sciences, with their long history of supporting UR through lab and fieldwork, continue to question their assumptions about the benefits of UR for students, faculty, and colleges and universities. In a recent issue of *Science*, for example, Marcia C. Linn, Erin Palmer, Anne Baranger, Elizabeth Gerard, & Elisa Stone (2015) review five years of literature on UR in the sciences and conclude:

The costs and benefits of research experiences for building human capital, benefitting undergraduates, improving workforce diversity, and strengthening educational outcomes need better understanding. Making the best use of extramural funds and the (often voluntary) contributions of faculty to improve undergraduate research experiences requires a strong research base. (p. 627)

English studies has begun to establish such a research base, but we still have much to do. Kathleen Blake Yancey (2010), in her Afterword to *Undergraduate Research in English Studies*, invites our discipline to reflect on and investigate the outcomes of UR:

[G]iven the nascent quality of undergraduate research in English studies, we have limited results. [A]s these projects move from pilots to regular extracurricular parts of the curriculum, what are the results? Do students graduate at a higher rate? Do they go on to graduate school at a higher rate? What might they tell us five years after graduating from college about the contribution these projects made to their lives, their professions, their sense of self? (p. 252)

I would add to Yancey's questions the following: To what degree do UR experiences in college composition contribute to student engagement in these critical first-year courses? How do faculty benefit from partnering with undergraduate researchers in the humanities, in particular in literary studies, rhetoric and composition, and other writing-intensive disciplines? To what degree are undergraduate researchers in English studies able to transfer research knowledge, skills, and methodologies to other research contexts?

It makes sense that the same kinds of questions we ask about student learning should be asked of undergraduate research experiences. After all, undergraduate research often has been touted as primarily a teaching and learning experience for faculty and students (see Kinkead, 2003, for a full overview). But writing center folk are not doing the

best job asking those questions. We move forward, encouraging tutors to plan projects, spend time and money carrying out research, and expend substantial mental energy writing presentations and, to a lesser degree, manuscripts, to submit to conferences and journals. The writing center community, then, owes it to the tutor researchers and directors mentoring those researchers to collectively investigate the best practices for and implications of conducting tutor research in writing centers. It is this “gap in our knowledge base” (Kinkead & Grobman, 2011, p. 219) that I have begun to address in my research, beginning with an article published in *CCCC Forum* (Ervin, 2014) about the successful undergraduate research mentoring techniques of non-tenure eligible writing center directors. That article and the current study respond to this absence in the published literature about undergraduate research and writing center work. In the current study, I seek to answer three specific research questions:

1. What are professionals’ and tutor researchers’ perceptions of the benefits of UR for tutor researchers?
2. What are professionals’ and tutor researchers’ perceptions of the barriers and challenges that discourage tutor research?
3. To what degree do tutors and their mentors believe research skills and knowledge transfer from a writing center context to other research contexts?

A broader question that this study hopes to answer is: Where do mentors’ and tutors’ perceptions about undergraduate research in writing centers fall in line with each other, where do they diverge, and how can an awareness of such different perspectives contribute to more successful director-tutor research partnerships?

## **Method**

Because little has been published about writing center tutor researchers, I sought to establish a baseline for future research by collecting data from as many tutor researchers and writing center directors as possible. Thus, a survey methodology was selected.

**The surveys.** Two surveys were distributed: one to directors/assistant directors (referred to as “professionals,” “research mentors,” or just “mentors”) and one to tutor researchers. The survey asked respondents about tutor research mentoring; writing center and institutional support of tutor research; venues for publication and presentation for

tutor research; and the challenges and benefits of tutor research, including the degree to which research skills transfer to other contexts.

Both surveys offered a definition of research based on Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, & Steve Price's (2011) *WCJ* article and further explained what the surveys meant by "undergraduate peer tutor research." The definitions on the surveys read as follows:

**Definition of "research":** To provide some context and common ground for survey respondents, I begin with a definition of research, borrowed from Liggett, Jordan, and Price's 2011 *Writing Center Journal* article: They define research as "any intellectual activity directed at answering a question by using discernable methods to create knowledge" (p. 51).

**Definition of "undergraduate peer tutor research":** In addition to the definition of research above, "undergraduate peer tutor research" means the work of an individual tutor, a collaboration between tutors, or a collaboration between undergraduate tutors and others (faculty, graduate students, etc).

Because writing center directors and tutors engage in activities they might consider "research" that those in other disciplines might not agree fit the definition of research, my goal was to include responses from as broad a range of research mentors and tutor researchers as possible. Thus, the definition for research I provided aimed for inclusiveness rather than precision.

**Sampling.** A criterion-based sampling method was used, with two different sampling methods employed for the surveys.<sup>1</sup> For the "professional" survey, "maximum variation" sampling was used, a sampling method that seeks to collect data from "those who represent the widest possible range of the characteristics of interest for the study" (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). Specifically, writing center directors on a recently (2011) compiled mailing list of U.S. writing centers as well as those subscribed to the WPA-L and WCenter listservs were invited to respond to the survey. The intention was to include tutor research mentors with varying degrees of experience as well as writing center directors with no experience mentoring tutor researchers. Such variety in the dataset would help determine not only what mentors considered the barriers and benefits of tutor research, but also the attitudes of those who do not engage in tutor research mentoring. A response rate is impossible to calculate because of the use of two listservs to recruit participants.

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1 Sharan Merriam (2009) explains, "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77).

Sampling for the tutor researcher survey was more complicated. The absence of any comprehensive contact list for tutor researchers left only two options: convenience sampling and “network sampling” (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). I selected modified criterion-based network sampling, or calling on an existing group of participants to reach out to additional participants for further data collection. In this case, writing center professionals were asked to share the tutor survey link and invitation with tutors they knew had participated in UR. The same mailing list and listservs used to contact professionals were used to network with tutors. Undergraduates who were participating in writing center research at the time of the study or had participated during the two years prior, as well as graduate students who had completed undergraduate tutor research projects in the two years prior to the study, were invited to complete the survey.

**Participants.** Two hundred forty-nine respondents submitted surveys: 123 writing center professionals and 126 undergraduate and former undergraduate tutor researchers. Of the 123 responses from professionals, 107 were usable. Usable surveys were those submitted by respondents whose writing centers employed undergraduate peer tutors; those considered unusable were eliminated for various reasons, but primarily because the respondent’s center employed no undergraduate peer tutors, the respondent had no past experience with UR in writing centers, and the respondent offered no opinion about tutor research mentoring. In other words, surveys with mostly unanswered questions were considered unusable. Of the 126 tutor researcher survey responses, 102 surveys were usable. Unusable surveys were submitted by tutors who had no tutor research experience and by tutors who misunderstood what “tutor research” meant for the purposes of the study. (They reported on tutoring students on their research papers, not on their own tutor research.)

The demographics of the professional respondents are consistent with what others (Healy, 1995; Ervin, 2002; Geller & Denny, 2013) have reported as the general makeup of the writing center profession: primarily tenured or tenurable writing center directors as well as directors with administrative staff positions, mostly from departments of English, writing, composition/rhetoric, and other humanities. One distinction is worth noting, however: Only a handful (13%) of respondents were employed at two-year colleges, suggesting that tutor research mentoring happens primarily at four-year rather than two-year schools. Detailed demographic information for directors and tutors is listed in the Tables 1–4.

The demographics of the tutor respondents<sup>2</sup> were more varied. Many tutor researchers identified majors from English, writing, and other humanities, while a smaller though not insignificant number had STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), social sciences, health sciences, and fine/performing arts majors. Research universities were disproportionately represented in the survey (44%) compared to masters and baccalaureate institutions. As with the professional survey, associates-granting institutions were lightly represented. In many cases several tutors from a single institution responded to the survey, thus leading to a smaller total number of institutions being represented compared to the professional survey. (See Table 6.) Finally, most tutor respondents were undergraduates at the time of the survey distribution (88%); around 12% identified as former undergraduate tutor researchers or graduate students who had been undergraduate tutor researchers no more than two years prior to the survey distribution. (See Tables 5–7.)

**Table 1. Position in Writing Center: “Professionals” Survey**

Position	#	%
Director/coordinator	94	87.9%
Associate/assistant director/coordinator	6	5.6%
Other <sup>a</sup>	7	6.5%

<sup>a</sup>“Other” category includes responses such as “Executive Director,” “Interim Director,” and “English faculty who recruited and trained undergrad tutors.”

**Table 2. Type of Institution: “Professionals” Survey (n=107 Unique Institutions)**

Institution Type	#	%
Research universities <sup>b</sup>	22	20.6%
Masters colleges & universities	39	36.4%
Baccalaureate colleges	28	26.0%
Associates-granting colleges	14	13.1%

<sup>2</sup> Because many respondents identified as double majors, straight percentages of the total would be inaccurate, with the total number of majors selected totaling more than the number of surveys submitted.



Institution Type	#	%
Other <sup>c</sup>	4	2.7%
Public	62	57.9%
Private	45	42.1%

<sup>b</sup> University of Iowa has three writing centers, and two—the University of Iowa Writing Center and the Frank Business Communications Center—are represented in the survey.

<sup>c</sup> One branch campus of a research university and three that are categorized “Spec” in the Carnegie “Basic” category: one “Spec/Health,” one “Spec/Arts,” and one “Spec/Faith.”

**Table 3. Professional Status: “Professionals” Survey**

Status	#	%
Tenurable/tenured faculty	40	37.4%
Professional/administrative staff	41	38.3%
Non-tenure track full-time faculty	20	18.7%
Professional staff & faculty (combined position)	4	3.7%
Adjunct/part-time faculty	1	0.9%
Student co-administrator	1	0.9%

**Table 4. Primary Institutional Affiliation:  
“Professionals” Survey**

Institutional Affiliation	#	%
English Department	51	47.7%
Provost/Academic Affairs	21	20.0%
Learning Center, Student Support, or Independent Writing Center	8	7.5%
Writing Program/Composition & Rhetoric Program/Department	8	7.5%
Humanities Division/Department	10	9.3%
Other	9	8.4%

**Table 5. Majors of Tutor Researchers (n=102<sup>d</sup>)**

Major	#
English (Literature)	40
Other Humanities	34
Creative Writing	17
Social Sciences/Education	14
STEM	10
Fine/Performing Arts	9
Other	9
Writing Studies/Rhet Comp	8
Professional/Technical Writing	5
Health Sciences	3

<sup>d</sup> Some respondents listed more than one major, so percentages of the total would be inaccurate.

**Table 6. Type of Institution: Tutor Survey (n=43 unique institutions)**

Type of Institution	#	%
Research universities	19	44.2%
Masters colleges & universities	10	23.3%
Baccalaureate colleges	8	18.6%
Associates-granting colleges	5	11.6%
Public	27	62.8%
Private	16	37.2%

**Table 7. Educational Level of Tutor Researchers**

Educational Level	#	%
Current undergraduate	90	88.2%
Recently graduated, but was undergrad tutor within past 2 years	7	6.9%
Graduate student, but was undergrad tutor within past 2 years	5	4.9%

**Coding the survey responses.** The coding system was developed with direction from Johnny Saldaña’s (2010) *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, a comprehensive methodology text explaining how to code various types of qualitative data. Saldaña describes two stages of coding: first cycle coding and second cycle coding. For this study, only first cycle coding, specifically “attribute coding” and “initial coding,” was needed.

Attribute coding, or the classification of research participants according to demographic categories,<sup>3</sup> was applied first (Tables 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7). The more substantive coding stage involved “initial coding,” or “breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely

<sup>3</sup> Type of institution was not requested in the survey; instead, Carnegie classifications were added to each institution using the database at <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/>.

examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences” (Saldaña, 2010, p. 81); this approach allowed easy identification of themes that emerged from across the survey. For example, one question on the tutor survey asked, “Can you describe instances in which you have applied research skills learned through writing center research to other contexts?” The tutors’ responses to this question often alluded to the benefits of conducting tutor research rather than what I would call “transfer” of research skills. Discussion of the benefits of tutor research showed up in responses to other questions, as well, prompting one set of initial codes to focus on “benefits” in the tutor survey responses even though the survey never asked explicitly about “benefits.” Additionally, the final question on both the professional and the tutor survey was intended to prompt broad reflection on mentoring or conducting tutor research. These responses were coded multiple times (for benefits, for barriers, etc.), as well. In other words, the “codebook”<sup>4</sup> was applied to responses to multiple questions in order to extract as much relevant data as possible. (See Tables 8–11.)

## Results

### **Professionals’ perceptions of the benefits of tutor research.**

When asked their opinion about the value of tutor research, professionals agreed on a handful of benefits. (See Table 8.) Four primary benefits emerged in the data analysis.

***Benefit 1: Tutor researchers develop a broader perspective on writing center work.*** Research mentors reported that when tutors participate in research, they develop new perspectives on their own writing center work and on the broader discipline. One director reported:

These projects require the staff members to step back and try to make sense of what they are doing and why they are doing it.... I want the staff to view themselves as part of a larger academic community that goes well beyond our campus, and they have a chance to enter into and contribute to that community. The result is a kind of professional commitment to their work that would not be so intense if we eliminated these research projects.

Beginning with the library research students in tutor training courses often do and continuing through the presentation of their research to real audiences, tutors are exposed to pedagogical and intellec-

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4 Saldaña (2010) defines a “codebook” or “code list” as the “compilation of the codes, their content descriptions, and a brief data example for reference” (p. 25).

tual conversations about peer writing tutoring. One director reflected on this benefit:

[T]he process of text-grounded research in our theory/practicum course serves as a model for how to develop this sort of paper as inquiry.... When our tutors have presented at national or regional conferences, the experience seems to have opened their eyes to what academic work looks like beyond the classroom or our institutional perimeters.

Another director described this as “the wonderful benefit of realizing that there are real audiences interested in the results” of tutor research. In other words, writing center research invites tutors into the Burkean Parlor.

**Benefit 2: Tutor researchers become better researchers.** Directors (29%) believe tutors’ ability to move through the research process, from developing researchable questions through presentation of the results, improves. Additionally, mentors who identified this benefit frequently commented on numerous intangible benefits. A non-tenure track director noted that tutors’ acquisition of research skills leads to their development of an ethos of scholarly inquiry and objectivity:

[R]esearch changes the way they make judgments and reach conclusions. They often jump to interpretation without evidence: “I really like X.” For instance, at the start of the project, their observational data is often full of judgment. By the end, they are much more curious, more likely to hang back and consider things for a while, and more likely to question how they know what they think they know. They mostly fall in love with data! Evidence-based decision-making as a habit of mind will serve them in any future context.

Another director noted that tutors’ acquisition of research skills leads to further advancement, even beyond the writing center: “When they engage in qualitative research, they learn how to collect data via a variety of methods and make meaning from these experiences. This prepares them for higher level thinking and enables them to produce stronger work in the writing center and in other areas of the academy and workforce.”

**Benefit 3: Tutor researchers become better tutors.** Several directors (27%) noted that that tutor research makes peer writing tutors better at their primary job: the tutoring of writing. (See Table 8.) A director from a small liberal arts college shared the following: “[A]ll the projects we do connect with their work as advisors. That’s the underlying goal: any research an advisor does should serve her to become a better advisor. Any research results should transfer to their time at a table (or online)

with a writer.” In a writing center context, the great advantage tutor researchers have compared to other undergraduate researchers is that tutors are working disciplinary professionals. When research contributes directly to their daily practice, it becomes especially meaningful and can benefit them immediately.

**Benefit 4: Tutor research results in the transfer of research skills.** Finally, many (48%) mentors reported that a benefit of the UR experience is the transfer of research skills to other classes, graduate school, and professional contexts. One mentor explained, “Some of the tutors have done similar research on their own, either before or after the WC projects; the synergy between their projects seemed to strengthen both ends of the relationship.” On the other hand, based on the results of the tutor survey, tutors were not as confident that research conducted in the writing center had much bearing on their work in other contexts. I address this inconsistency in the next section in which I discuss tutors’ responses.

**Table 8. Professionals’ Perceptions: Benefits of Tutor Research (n=62 usable responses)**

Type of Benefit	#	%
Transfer: Other classes, graduate school, career, or other research contexts	30	48.4%
Develop broader perspective (on research, on their WC, on WC discipline)	23	37.1%
Helps improve research skills (methodology, conceiving of a research question, presentational skills, etc.)	18	29.0%
Become better tutors	17	27.4%
Increased self-confidence	6	9.7%
Helps improve writing	6	9.7%
Increased engagement in WC work	3	4.8%
Expanded sense of audience for research writing	3	4.8%
Helps improve presentational skills	1	1.6%
Helps them learn to write for publication	1	1.6%

**Tutors' perceptions of the benefits of tutor research.** Questions on the tutor survey that helped answer my first research question were “Can you describe instances in which you have applied research skills learned through writing center research to other contexts?” and the final question, “What else would you like to add about undergraduate tutor/consultant research in your writing center or in writing centers generally?” While neither question asked explicitly about the “benefits” of tutor research, both questions yielded valuable insights into how tutor researchers saw themselves and their peers benefitting from their participation in UR in their writing centers and elsewhere. Three primary benefits emerged from their responses to those two questions.

**Benefit 1: Tutor researchers become better researchers.** Nearly 43% of tutor researchers reported that practicing UR in the writing center improved their research skills, including planning a research project, writing a literature review, designing and revising surveys, collecting and handling data, transcribing interviews, and presenting their work to colleagues. One tutor reported that he can “make a mean survey question now, partially due to my work in the writing center research project.” Another reported developing the ability “to not make unqualified claims without direct support,” a skill we writing faculty are eager for all students to master. Tutors also named intangible benefits related to research skills. One noted she “learned to be open to lots of ideas.” Another claimed an increase in confidence with interviewing as well as a greater degree of professionalism. Finally, one respondent observed that she learned to expect the unexpected over the course of her research project.

**Benefit 2: Tutor researchers transfer research skills.** Some tutors (31%) reported using their research skills in other contexts, such as in other classes, in Honors thesis research, and in graduate school applications; some graduate student respondents referred to using their research skills during graduate school. One respondent “conducted research related to working with deaf students in the writing center, [which] greatly overflowed into [her] interpreting major.” Another reported that she “used the grant proposal writing skills in a summer internship.” However, while this study suggests tutors recognize how research skills might transfer across contexts in a general sense, respondents seldom specifically described the nature of such transfer. For example, a response like this was not uncommon:

The research skills that I learned in my writing center classes have greatly improved my writing and research abilities in my other English classes. They have shaped me as a writer, reader, and researcher. Also, I will enter into a teacher education program in

the summer, and I feel that the analytical skills acquired and experience earned will prove vital in my abilities to perform as an English teacher.

Another respondent was more specific: “I took what I learned from the Writing Center and used it in my research paper for my Social Problems class as well as using it for the major papers that I have written for my Drug and Alcohol Abuse classes.” The small number of tutors who reported with some specificity how skills acquired through writing center research projects might be useful in other contexts suggests that transfer is a feature of UR in writing centers worth paying attention to in the mentor/tutor researcher relationship.

Additionally, a handful of tutors (five, to be exact) reported that transfer of research skills meant, for them, applying skills they developed outside the writing center to their research in the writing center. One tutor noted that she “applied certain skills I learned in doing history research projects to my own writing center research.” The implications of this finding are greater than might be expected in terms of developing cross-disciplinary UR programs involving writing centers. In other words, the foundation for writing center-based UR does not have to be composition/rhetoric; tutors from disciplines outside English studies can bring their expertise to the writing center, as well.

**Table 9. Tutors’ Perceptions: Benefits of Conducting Tutor Research (n=61 usable responses)**

Type of Benefit	#	%
Helps improve research skills (methodology, conceiving of a research question, etc.)	26	42.6%
Transfer: Other classes/graduate school, other research contexts	19	31.1%
Become better tutors	11	18.0%
Helps improve presentational skills	6	9.8%
Develop broader perspective (on research, on their WC, on WC discipline, etc)	4	6.6%
Increased engagement in WC work	4	6.6%
Increased self-confidence	3	4.9%
Helps improve writing	3	4.9%
Expanded sense of audience for research writing	2	3.3%
Helps them learn to write for publication	1	1.6%
Transfer: Career/workplace	0	0.0%



**Benefit 3: Tutor researchers become better tutors.** Like their mentors, some tutor researchers recognized how their own tutoring improved when they were engaged in undergraduate research, but those respondents were few in comparison to the number of tutors who recognized the potential for writing center research to add to their existing research skill set. Only eleven tutors (18%) noted that their one-to-one teaching had changed for the better as a direct result of their undergraduate research in the writing center. One observed that UR in the writing center “helps inform my tutoring technique as well as better understand the writers I seek to help.” Others were more precise in their responses, such as the tutor who shared that she “advised other students during consultations on research methods, style of APA papers, and developing posters to present their research.” And another reflected, “After conducting these projects, since they are so tied to our tutoring practices, I’ve become more aware of my tutoring style and methods and how it might affect my students. For example, after the ‘ownership’ presentation, I was more careful to cede authority to my tutees.” It is difficult to speculate about the reason more tutors and mentors do not recognize the impact tutor research has on tutoring practice, but I attempt to do so in the Discussion.

### **Professionals’ perceptions of the barriers/challenges to mentoring tutor research.**

**Barrier 1: Time.** Unsurprisingly, directors reported *time* as the largest hurdle they and their tutors face in pursuing tutor research and mentoring. Over 66% of respondents reported that tutor research competes either with their time, the tutors’ time, or the writing center’s time. While some respondents stated flatly that “time” was a barrier, many offered nuanced explanations of the type of time barrier they and the tutor researchers faced.

Some explained that tutor research reduces the time tutors have to work with student writers.<sup>5</sup> One director characterized tutors using writing center time for research as a “sacrifice” because “we’re understaffed, [and] as important as I feel research is, I don’t feel like I can sacrifice the consultations.” Many (25%) worried that tutor research places a burden on their tutors’ time, and those concerns fell into two distinct categories: 1. tutor research time would compete with the time tutors spent on other academic and extracurricular activities; and 2.

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5 This was a significant fear for those who reported it since those comments often admitted that their centers are at 100% capacity, and replacing tutoring time with research time would be a deal breaker.

tutor research projects would compete with other activities in writing center pedagogy courses. As a writing center director at the University of South Dakota from 2004–2009, I experienced both challenges and sought ways to develop a writing center course that accommodated both pedagogical instruction and research mentoring. When I left that position, I was teaching a 3-credit fall semester course that required students to plan a project during the course and, in the spring, choose whether to pursue the project or to leave it behind. Some tutors opted to pursue their projects, but not as many as I had hoped.

The largest percentage of directors reporting time as a significant challenge noted that mentoring tutor research competed with their own time as faculty or administrators. A particularly vulnerable subset of directors—those on the tenure track but not yet tenured, 37% of the respondents in this study—must protect their research time if they hope to secure tenure, and tenured faculty who hold associate professor rank are seeking promotion. Both groups must spend substantial time doing their own research, so any research mentoring might inhibit rather than contribute to their progress. Of course, other directors not on the tenure track have professional responsibilities that compete with the time they might spend mentoring tutor researchers, such as this respondent, whose frustration is clear in her answer to the question:

My position as director of the writing center is 0.50 FTE, and in addition to writing center work, includes administering tutoring for second-language writers, professional tutoring for second-language and underprepared writers, and writers with cognitive or emotional disabilities, as well as general academic support center initiatives. I am the only professional staff doing this work. I train and supervise 25 undergraduate tutors. I do not have time to mentor student researchers.

A final time barrier is what I am describing as “longevity.” Respondents were concerned both with the tutors’ availability for their projects and their ability to see larger projects through to completion, ideally culminating in presentation and/or publication. One director noted:

By the time undergraduates are usually prepared to be research partners, they are in their junior and senior years and are usually committed to a variety of areas, from work to school to other extra-curricular organizations and activities. In addition, they are close to graduation, so their time as an undergraduate is limited. If a project needs to take 18 months and the student is a senior, it can be difficult to complete the project together.

Another described a similar situation:

Toward the end of the semester, many of the students thought of brilliant ideas for qualitative and quantitative projects that could address their research questions. Sadly, there wasn't really enough time to [let] them carry that research out. I tried to interest some of them in getting grants to do the research after the class was over, but I didn't get much interest in that.

Or even worse, one director reported, "We are at the place of writing for publication, and that's another problem—how to work with alums when they are busy in their new careers or, most often, off enjoying the rigors of graduate school."

Even more difficult is tutor research mentoring at two-year colleges where tutors often work in the writing center during their first two years of college prior to graduating and moving on to four-year colleges or careers. One respondent described this challenge as a "lack of long-term time on the part of students: Besides their own heavy study and work loads, undergraduate tutors often transfer within a semester or two, so long-term research projects are not possible"; and another put it this way: "As a faculty coordinator at a two-year college, the challenges I face are my students' busy lives and the fact that I typically have them in my center for one year (before they transfer to a 4-year university)."

Research takes time, and time is scarce for mentors and tutor researchers. But writing center directors have found creative ways to incorporate research into their centers.<sup>6</sup> It is my hope that this study and the growing conversation around tutor research will encourage those directors to share their approaches and successes in addressing these challenges.

**Barrier 2: Investment of the tutor in writing center research.** A second barrier, reported by around 29% of professionals, was the perception that tutors see little utility or value in writing center-focused research. Some reported that they and/or their tutors believe research on writing centers does little for tutors with majors outside composition/rhetoric or English. For example, one respondent noted that her center's tutors are drawn from a wide variety of disciplines and if they do research, they typically do it in their own disciplines. We don't have a composition program or linguistics and as far as I know, the education students don't do a lot of research. I suppose a psychology student could be interested in doing research in the Writing Center, but so far none of them has been.

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6 See Ervin (2014) for more about how non-tenure-eligible directors have successfully mentored tutor researchers.

Another survey respondent reported that few of her tutors are “going to go on to a degree in Composition or Writing Center studies, so the work they’d do for the research doesn’t tie in the same way a geology project would, or a history project.” Finally, one director who had no experience mentoring tutor researchers at the time she completed the survey found herself looking forward to the challenges of initiating tutor research projects in her center:

One challenge we anticipate is that many undergrads at [institution] are already conducting high-level research in their majors; thus, they may have little time to devote to one of our projects. Another issue is that there is no writing or composition major, so our consultants may not see such research as valuable to them beyond the Center. (Our English department is very focused on literature.)

Even mentors with ties to English departments, as the previous respondent suggested, find it difficult to interest tutors in writing- and tutoring-focused research projects when those tutors’ majors are literature or creative writing. One respondent noted, “We do not have a writing curriculum or department, and despite the rigor of the initial classes addressing writing center theory/practice, students don’t readily see how, for instance, this might be the work of English studies.” This disconnect between writing studies and literature or creative writing does not stop with the tutors. For example, a director who has an administrative appointment and reports to the College Dean but has direct ties to the English department suggested a tension between the writing center and the department, one that likely extends beyond UR mentoring activity: “Although I have never asked the academic dean or other department whether I could work with a senior inquiry student (a required research project of each senior), my assistant director has worked with one senior and her inquiry project with the ‘blessings’ of the English department.”

**Barrier 3: Financial limitations.** Less prominent but still a concern are financial barriers that make conducting research and, more significantly, traveling to present research difficult. Several mentors mentioned general funding or financial support as a problem (“we are also operating under a small budget”), but some wrote in detail about financial difficulties that fell primarily into three categories: funding for conference travel, funding to extend writing center hours for the purposes of conducting research, and funding for a peer tutoring course, presumably one that would offer research training and mentorship.

“Money to bring [tutors] to conferences to share results” was identified as a significant barrier. One mentor’s situation suggested that

funding for UR conference travel across the institution might have fallen victim to a budget cut in Academic Affairs:

Unfortunately, my Provost placed a ban on departments paying travel expenses for undergraduates to travel to conferences. While they still participate in local conferences, the travel ban has decreased the number of undergraduates involved in research compared to the number of graduate students (graduate students have other avenues for securing conference funding).

Even more disappointing is the fact that some directors' institutional status prevents them from requesting or applying for research funds. Unlike tenure-track faculty who have the best access to at least some funds for research and travel, writing center directors who have staff or administrative positions and are not tenured in a department are more likely to find themselves in a situation similar to the director who responded this way: "Because my position is a staff position, not a faculty one, I do not have access to the Undergraduate Research travel funds which allow faculty to participate in off-campus conferences, along with their mentees."

However, we also learn from this respondent that while the hierarchy created by tenure and promotion might seem insurmountable for some, research mentoring and the dissemination of tutor research are feasible even without funding for travel to conferences. The director who reported that her staff position limited ability to obtain funding for conference travel also noted that she encourages her tutors "to participate in original research for the Undergraduate Research Conference at the university," which was a new event at her institution. In short, writing center directors who are committed to encouraging tutor research find ways to do it, even despite funding limitations.

Two additional categories of responses identified funding for extended writing center hours or for writing center or tutor training courses as significant barriers to mentoring tutor research. One director, who is tenure-track in the Language and Literature department, speculated that additional tutoring hours would expand and encourage research opportunities:

[M]y budget is such that I can only offer about 40 hours of tutoring a week, which averages out to about 10 hours of paid tutoring with 4 different tutors. If there was money built into the budget so that tutors could work more hours (and physically be in the center more often), I think research interest and opportunities would develop more easily.

Similarly, a respondent from a two-year college described a situation that will be familiar to most directors, even those who have

successful tutor research in their centers: “we have no funding for a writing center theory class. So all research would have to be done during center down time (which there is very little of) or their personal time. Given the nature of school for most of them, asking more of their personal time is not a possibility.”

**Table 10. Professionals’ Perceptions: Barriers/Challenges to Mentoring Tutor Research (n=95 usable responses)**

Barrier/Challenge	#	%
Time (All)	63	66.3%
Tutor’s time	24	25.3%
Director’s time	28	29.5%
WC-time	9	9.5%
Relevance/value/investment-tutor	28	29.5%
Support-institutional-financial	18	19.0%
Qualifications-tutor	7	7.4%
Support-institutional-other	7	7.4%
No opportunity to mentor/Tutors have not expressed an interest	6	6.3%
Qualifications-director	5	5.3%
No barriers/Have not started research yet in new position/new WC	5	5.3%
No research culture	3	3.2%
Logistical Research Problems: IRB	2	2.1%
Lack of venues for presenting/publishing scholarship	2	2.1%
Other	1	1.1%
Relevance/value/investment-director	0	0.0%
Unusable response	5	
No response	7	

## **Tutors' perceptions of the barriers/challenges to conducting tutor research.**

**Barrier 1: Time.** Tutor researchers (50%) reported that time constraints limit how much they can commit to undergraduate research projects in the writing center. Over 43% of the respondents stated that their own time was a major barrier as compared to 12% who reported that their commitment to writing center tutoring took precedence over time to conduct research in the writing center. Many reported some version of the following:

The biggest thing that I have trouble with as an undergraduate is time-management. This semester, I am taking 18 hours or 6 classes with 5 of them being English courses. I have research papers, a job, and other school assignments that I have to do, so finding time to research or to spend as much time working in our Writing Center as I want to [is difficult].

One tutor stated explicitly what others only suggested: Her undergraduate research commitment for her major left her with a decision to make about where to spend her research time: "I have to choose WC research or my own research in History. Trying to work and research two diverse areas is challenging." Interestingly, no tutor respondent recognized the time limitations of their research mentors, a finding that will be addressed in the Discussion.

Tutor researchers also reported that their tutoring duties limited the time they could spend on writing center research, though respondents were much less concerned with this time constraint compared to other time limitations. One respondent summed it up nicely: "[T]here are many students who need help as well as many center projects to work on. Finding a balance in which students have their tutoring needs satisfied and center projects get completed on time can be challenging yet rewarding."

Finally, a few tutors observed that the time constraints of their research subjects, research partners, and research sites place limitations on their ability to conduct research. One tutor explained:

I think that simply having the time to complete the work can be one of the most significant challenges that [an] undergraduate researcher faces. This problem is compounded in the writing center as research that requires the presence of writers or other consultants is then limited by the hours that the writing center is open and whether there are writers who have come in to work with consultants.

Team research and the challenges that come along with such projects emerged as a theme, as well as longevity (discussed earlier):

“The research is challenging because it is difficult to find times for all of our group members to meet. We all have very different schedules during the week and are quite busy. It is also difficult to conduct the research in the timing that is allowed for the project.” Tutor respondents recognized that research with human subjects can be messy, a barrier I take up in the next section.

**Barrier 2: Logistical research problems.** Only three research mentors suggested that tutors were discouraged from beginning or completing research projects because of logistical problems like tutors’ inexperience with research methods or the difficulty presented by the IRB process. A full third of tutor respondents, however, identified such logistical challenges as prohibitive to UR. Table 11 lists the four categories of logistical problems tutors regularly face: Recruiting research subjects, finding new areas to investigate, navigating the IRB process, and devising and implementing an appropriate methodology for the project. One tutor from a writing center at a research university identified several of these challenges:

Because our research projects are slightly more informal, we are limited in the methods we use to conduct our research. We are asked to not hold interviews with writers, though we can interview fellow consultants. Many teams use surveys and round table discussions to collect data. It is also a struggle to reach out and receive feedback from writers who visit the center, because they do not always see and [sic] benefit for themselves. We have had to offer food and ask a couple professors to provide bonus points for attending a round table discussion with consultants.

Similar to the way tutors fail to recognize the time constraints of their mentors, research mentors failed to recognize that tutors face many of the same barriers any researcher who works with human subjects face: availability of research subjects, IRB, and so on.



**Table 11. Tutors' Perceptions: Barriers/Challenges to Conducting Tutor Research (n=83 usable responses)**

Barrier/Challenge	#	%
Time (All)	42	50.6%
Time-tutor	36	43.4%
Time-WC	10	12.1%
Time-director	0	0.0%
Logistical Research Problems	27	32.5%
Difficult to recruit research subjects (writers and/or tutors)	17	20.5%
Difficulty identifying new subjects to investigate	6	7.2%
IRB problems	3	3.6%
Methodological or data collection problems	1	1.2%
Support-institutional-financial	7	8.4%
Unqualified-tutor	6	7.2%
Support-institutional-other	3	3.6%
No barriers	3	3.6%
Relevance/value/investment-tutor	3	3.6%
No research culture	1	1.2%
Lack of venue for presenting/publishing scholarship	1	1.2%
Relevance/value/investment-director	0	0.0%
Unqualified-director	0	0.0%
No opportunity/have not approached director about doing research	0	0.0%
Other	4	4.8%

## Discussion

Most of the findings of this study are not surprising. Based on my experience as well as conversations over the years with tutors and di-

rectors, I expected to hear that tutors and mentors struggle to fit UR into their busy lives and that practicing research under the mentorship of an experienced researcher results in improved research skills. The surprising results, which I discuss here, invite discussion of 1. how tutors transfer research skills across contexts; 2. how tutor research benefits peer tutoring; and 3. how tutors' and professionals' responses diverged in a couple of significant ways.

**Transfer.** While a third of tutors and nearly half of mentors reported that UR experiences in writing centers can inform tutors' research experiences in other contexts, I would expect that number to be higher. From the perspective of an academic whose research training in graduate school included literary and rhetorical analysis, qualitative research, teacher research methods, and archival and oral history training, I understand that research in STEM, the humanities, and the social sciences and health sciences share a common goal (to create new knowledge) and basic method (ask a question, collect data, analyze and share results). I was surprised, then, when the survey responses suggested only a third of tutors reported they were aware of how writing center research methods were applicable elsewhere, and vice versa.

Similar to how student writers in first-year composition struggle to transfer writing skills to other classes without explicit mentoring (Wardle, 2007; Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick, 2012), the transfer of research skills across disciplinary boundaries will not happen without intentional guidance by a mentor. This is a significant missed opportunity for writing center studies as a discipline. Writing centers can benefit from research approaches common in disciplines such as marketing, management, journalism, communication, history, psychology, anthropology, education, economics, mathematics, business, gender studies, international studies, and modern languages and TESOL, among others. Writing centers can be sites for qualitative and quantitative research, service learning, teacher research, and community-based research. Writing tutors with majors from across the disciplines can be encouraged to bring their research skills to bear on questions pertinent to their writing centers, and undergraduate researchers from across the disciplines who are not affiliated with their institution's writing center could design research projects for their majors using the writing center as the research site and as beneficiary of the research project.

An example from the 2002 collection *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*, will illustrate. Jon Olson, as reported in "Student-Centered Assessment Research in the Writing Center" (Olson,

Moyer, & Falda, 2002) was approached by students<sup>7</sup> in an anthropology course. The authors describe the students' proposal:

[T]hey had to do a project for their anthropology class using research methods that are important to developing skills of anthropological inquiry. Their project involved writing a paper applying ethnographic Rapid Assessment strategies.... They wrote a proposal, which the Center for Writing and Learning (CWL) Director and Writing Center Coordinator approved. They designed their methodology (they did not negotiate their survey questions with the Writing Center Coordinator or the CWL Director), went ahead and completed their work, and, at the end of the term, gave the Coordinator a 10-page paper titled "The Writing Center: A Study of Perceptions." ... [T]he outside view contained in the paper was so interesting to the Coordinator and to the Writing Assistants on the staff... that the Coordinator decided to solicit such writing-centered research periodically. (p. 116)

While the student researchers were unaffiliated with Olson's writing center, they applied anthropological methods to the center, benefiting both the researchers and the Center for Writing and Learning.

**Connecting research to tutoring practice.** Both professionals and tutor researchers reported that undergraduate peer writing tutor research helps tutors become better at what they do; however, as with transfer, I would expect that the numbers would be much higher. (Eighteen percent of tutors and a little over 27% of mentors reported this benefit.) I described earlier how one director went to great lengths to make it clear in his response that "any research an advisor does should serve her to become a better advisor. Any research results should transfer to their time at a table (or online) with a writer." It is clear that this director understands the likelihood that tutor research can become disconnected from the work of peer writing tutoring, but the survey results suggest that "becoming better tutors" was, for many respondents, not as clearly recognized as a goal of tutor research as it was for this director. And he is not alone. At the 2008 joined IWCA/NCPTW conference in Las Vegas, Harvey Kail, a long-time proponent of tutor research, made his concerns known about the potential for tutor research to distract from peer tutoring. In his closing plenary address, Kail, who has been a leader in the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing for

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7 Note that the students who conducted the assessment in Olson, Moyer, & Falda (2002) were graduate students, not undergraduates. However, the point I am making—application of methods from other disciplines to writing centers can benefit all involved—is illustrated well through the example.

decades, both praised the undergraduate presenters for their superior presentations and cautioned the directors at the conference to consider whether they were asking too much of peer tutors when they encourage or require research projects in addition to the tutoring of writing.

Kail's concern is well placed, and the fact that this study shows that while improvement in tutoring was identified as one of the top three or four major benefits of tutor research, it was not identified by 80% of tutor respondents and not mentioned by over 70% of mentors. If nearly three-quarters of the respondents to this survey, most of whom regularly mentor tutor researchers, fail to think immediately of "improving peer tutoring" as a benefit of tutor research, then something is amiss. Writing center directors and others who are involved in mentoring tutor researchers must make the benefits to peer tutoring explicit throughout the planning and execution of a project.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that projects that do not directly investigate peer tutor-writer interactions should be abandoned. Historical projects, surveys of faculty perceptions about writing centers, studies of how physical space is used in a center, and other projects that fall outside the parameters of what might be considered pedagogical research can still have direct impacts on the tutoring of writing. However, it is easy for a novice researcher to become so involved in a project that they lose sight of the eventual applications to peer tutoring. The mentor's job, then, is to bookend projects with discussions about those applications, beginning and ending each project with conversations around a central question, "How might the project result in positive changes for peer tutoring in this center (or perhaps beyond this center)?"

How the results of tutor research are disseminated is relevant to this question of connecting tutor research to tutoring practice. When asked how the tutor research in their writing centers is shared, tutor researchers reported overwhelmingly that they share their research at regional conferences and in local venues (see Table 12). Such research presentations are excellent opportunities for mentors to encourage tutors to make clear to their audiences how their research has changed or has the potential to change peer tutoring in positive ways in their own centers. Less common but still significant are research presentations at national conferences (IWCA and NCPTW), which could allow tutors to revisit the audience for their presentations and extend the application of their research to peer tutoring beyond their local writing centers. Throughout the research process, mentors must help keep applications to peer tutoring front and center for themselves and for tutor researchers, and they can hold themselves accountable for doing so by establishing that the culmination of the project will be a presentation of some kind that

shows connections to peer tutoring in writing. Finally, as a follow-up to such presentations, mentors might question tutors on whether and how their own or their colleagues' research has shaped their peer tutoring. Such questioning could happen during directors' formal evaluations of peer tutors, staff meetings, or informal conversations.

**Table 12. How Tutors Disseminate their Research (n=92)**

Means of Dissemination	#	%
Presented at Regional Conference	67	72.8%
Presented Locally	60	65.2%
Local UR Symposium or Conference	54	58.7%
Presented at IWCA	37	40.2%
Presented at NCPTW	30	32.6%
Published in <i>Writing Lab Newsletter</i>	14	15.2%
Published in <i>Writing Center Journal</i>	12	13.0%
Published Locally	9	9.8%
Published in <i>Praxis: A Writing Center Journal</i>	5	5.4%
Published in Another Journal	3	3.3%
Published in <i>Dangling Modifier</i>	2	2.2%

**Divergent views.** As with most studies, potentially significant results emerged from a number of inconsistencies between tutor researchers' and mentors' responses. First, tutor researchers did not seem to recognize the time constraints under which directors work even though they recognized how tutor research competed with their own activities outside the writing center. In fact, no tutor researcher observed that their directors might have found mentoring commitments difficult due to the directors' time constraints. I can only speculate, based on the survey responses and my own experiences, why this is the case. I suspect that directors do not complain to tutors about the competing commitments in their professional lives in the same way tutor researchers might admit to their mentors that they are unable to sign on to a project because of time constraints. Additionally, I suspect that academic culture plays a role here, as well. While faculty in higher education are expected to conduct research and publish, students generally are not held to that expectation. Tutors who are aware of academic culture as-

sume that mentoring undergraduate researchers is “part of the job,” but conducting research as an undergraduate is an additional commitment that must fit into their already-busy student lives. I also suspect that in writing centers that make research an expectation of the position, and at institutions with strong cultures of undergraduate research, tutors would be less likely to see UR as a commitment added on top of their tutoring work.

Second, mentors failed to recognize that tutors face the same research difficulties that plague any writing center researcher: recruitment of research subjects, IRB, scheduling of research activities, miscommunication with research subjects, and more. Nearly 33% of the tutor researchers reported such challenges, but with the exception of two mentors who noted the difficulty of the IRB process, the professional respondents did not report these as significant challenges to mentoring tutor research. One explanation for this omission is the wording of the survey questions. The question on the mentor survey was “As a director, what barriers or challenges do you face when you consider whether to partner with or mentor undergraduate tutors/consultants on a research project?” The tutor researcher survey, on the other hand, asked, “As a writing tutor/consultant, what barriers or challenges do you face when you consider partnering with your writing center director on a research project?” To be honest, the mentor survey discouraged respondents from thinking in terms of the barriers tutors might face that could lead to difficulties in research mentoring, and the tutor survey encouraged respondents to think about what gets in the way of research, not about what gets in the way of being mentored. However, in response to the same question, some directors identified challenges they believed tutors faced, such as time and tutor investment in writing center research. The stark difference, though, in the number of tutor researchers who described logistical research challenges (27, or 33%) compared to the number of mentors (2, or 2%) bears scrutiny.

Among the mentors’ responses there emerged a pattern in their descriptions of mentoring activity. They explained their mentoring in terms of their support and guidance on the various steps of the research process, such as in this response: “Mentoring/support included basic training in qualitative interviewing, focus group and coding methodology, and ongoing consultations with tutor-researchers, from data analysis to reporting to conference presentations.” Another respondent described the research her tutors do, followed by her mentoring role:

Each student in the course conducts a two-month long independent writing center inquiry project, in which they craft their own research questions, learn about human subject research (we have

a class-based IRB, and I function as their IRB board reviewing their methods), conduct their own study (which may involve observations, surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc.), review relevant secondary literature, present their research in process at an in-class mini-conference (open to the public), and produce a final written report.... That course project mentoring takes the form of one-to-one conferences (and lots of office hours conversations) on their inquiry proposals and their process, multiple responses to the methods as part of the class IRB review, responding to drafts in process, etc.

What's missing from these descriptions and others like them is any mention of faculty mentors assisting tutor researchers in recruiting research subjects, scheduling interviews with tutors or students, scheduling and conducting observations of tutoring sessions, distributing surveys and ensuring broad participation in the study, and so on. It doesn't make sense that a research mentor would participate in these activities since such tasks are not easily coordinated among more than one researcher; however, the tutor researchers' responses to this survey suggest that such difficulties are foremost on their minds. For novice researchers, such challenges become insurmountable, leading to disappointing research experiences and decreased investment and engagement.

A final inconsistency between tutors' and mentors' responses was the development of "broader perspectives" about tutors' own writing centers and about writing center studies. Professionals (23, or 37%) noted such a benefit, but tutors did not. DelliCarpini & Crimmins (2010) describe something similar in their chapter in *Undergraduate Research in English Studies*: "[S]tudents situate their work within the literature of the field only as they begin to situate *themselves* within the field through their experiences. This disciplinary engagement—and the primary research that follows from it—starts to gain real value only after field-based experience" (p. 197). Similarly, in "Taking on Turnitin," Renee Brown, Brian Fallon, Jessica Lott, Elizabeth Matthews, & Elizabeth Mintie (2007) describe how the questions they raised about Turnitin led them to engage with the body of scholarship about plagiarism and, eventually, to their investigation of Turnitin on their campus. The authors conclude:

With our initial questions about the program and how it was used answered, we decided to become intellectually engaged with what we had learned. We presented our findings to faculty and students at our institution, and in doing so, we posed ethical, legal, and financial problems with the program that prompted faculty to think carefully about how to use Turnitin in their classes. (p. 26)

One possible explanation for the “broader perspectives” divergence is that no question in the tutor survey explicitly asked tutors to discuss “benefits” of tutor research, while the professional survey did. Another explanation is that another survey, such as the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2010), is a better instrument to gauge the long-term benefits of tutor research since most of the respondents to my survey, by design, were tutors who had only recently participated in tutor research or were still participating in those projects.

## Conclusion

The narrative shaping up here is clear: The writing center community cannot fully agree that undergraduate peer writing tutors should be spending their time conducting research about writing centers. I suspect that most writing center directors agree that tutors who read about peer tutoring practices in publications like *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, *The Writing Center Journal*, and *Praxis* benefit from the reflection and discussion with other peer tutors that those readings prompt, but the time commitment for planning, conducting, writing up, and presenting or publishing their own original research is too much for some directors and tutors.

But a great number of writing center professionals and tutors are eager to take on tutor research projects, and the writing center community supports such professional growth of our undergraduate colleagues. What’s missing, though, are systematic studies of how tutor research affects peer tutoring practices, how research skills developed in a writing center context might transfer to other contexts, and how undergraduate research experiences in writing centers give peer tutors yet another rich high impact experience during their undergraduate years (working in the writing center being a significant high impact experience). I believe, as I am sure all writing center professionals who mentor peer tutor researchers do, that undergraduate research experiences benefit peer tutors while they are in school and beyond. However, we need to make an effort to show how those experiences are influential so we can go about planning research programs in our centers that make the best use of our time, our tutors’ time, and our centers’ resources.

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