Supplemental Instruction Focus Groups Fall 11

Introduction
In an effort to learn more about how students experienced the Fall 11 Supplemental Instruction intervention, a series of focus groups were conducted with students from three classes. In each class, three focus group discussions were conducted with approximately five students in each group. Students were prompted to discuss:
- Did having tutors in your class seem to make a difference, why, how?
- What might be suggestions to improve how they work with you?

Results
Students participating shared a wide range of comments. For a list of the actual comments, see Appendix A. Below is a collective summary for each prompt. It must be noted that these summaries are based on students comments and opinions:

How did the SI support help?
- Nearly all students reported that the tutors were very helpful.
- Several students reported that the tutors were instrumental in helping them pass the class.
- Several students reported that the tutors helped to improve their study skills.
- Most students reported that the most important factor in the tutors’ effectiveness was their kindness and accessibility.
- Many students reported that the tutors brought a student perspective to the material that was distinct from instructors.
- Two students reported that the students seemed to blend well with teachers.
- Many students reported that tutors helped to motivate some students.
- Most students commented that tutors provided additional help when teacher was busy and noted that this was particularly helpful when there was an upcoming project deadline.
- Some students felt like the tutors were more approachable than the instructor.
- Some students reported that the tutor was helpful in them getting started with a project.

Suggestions:
- Most students had no suggestion for improvement because they felt like the support was very helpful and the program was operating well.
- Several students suggested that the support be targeted at special times, when things are particularly busy.
- A group of students from one class reported that the tutors were not that helpful and not worth the money.
- According to some participants from one class, some tutors did not seem prepared.
- One student suggested that the college expand the writing center, noting that it is too crowded and loud.
- Several students suggested that the tutors reach out to those students who are missing classes.
Summary
Prior to summarizing the results, several limitations of the current study must be acknowledged. Firstly, the focus groups were conducted with a small sample of students, thus making results hard to generalize. Qualitative data is hard to collect, summarize, and characterize and can be unreliable. For example, the data provided is based on students’ opinions on the effect of the program. Students may have reported that tutors helped to improve their performance in the class when it might have due to other factors. Nevertheless, data of this kind is particularly informative as a program model develops.

Most all of the groups concluded that the support provided by tutors was very helpful. Some students suggested that in addition to helping student perform better in the class, it helped them with study skills, motivation, and getting started on a project. It was noted that this help was particularly appreciated in times when the class was very busy.

According to students, the factors that were most important to tutor effectiveness were their kindness and approachability. Several students suggested that having student tutors was important as they could help from a student perspective. One group of students, however, commented that one of the tutors did not seem adequately prepared. In two out of three courses, there were only positive comments and few suggestions on how to improve the program. In fact, most students suggested keeping or even expanding the support. Several students commented that the tutors should more actively seek out students who are missing classes and at risk for failure.

Overall, the programs seem to be benefiting students in many different areas. Students suggested that tutors selected for the program should be accessible and trained to communicate in an open and accessible way. They also suggested that students should be well-prepared in the content area. The lack of consistency in quality of the program suggests the need to discuss how tutors are selected trained, and incorporated into the course and curriculum.
Appendix A

Comments for: Did having tutors in your class seem to make a difference, why, how?

- Yes, I would have not passed the class without the writing assistant.
- They have helped with all papers. They helped with step by step/. Without them I would have not have done so well.
- They provided hands on help, from a student perspective.
- They took the time to help.
- They kept you on track.
- There were kind, which led to you feel comfortable asking them questions.
- They also helped you in your organization of your work and how to be a better student.
- They helped build my confidence in being a better student and actually made you try and do better.
- I think their kindness was really important.
- They showed up everyday, they seemed really motivated to help not just a job.
- They also pointed us to tools so we could do it in our own.
- The instructional cards presented by one of the writing assistants were really helpful.
- The writing even helped when I was out for a while, giving me the materials I needed to catch up.
- IT is different having the writing aids in class, since it is hard to concentrate at the writing center. And you have to make an appointment.
- They blend well with the teacher.
- They also have provided you sort of moral support. They act like a normal student. They seem to really like helping.
- They are very positive and motivated.
- They checked your draft, made suggestions. Explain the meaning in a one to one way.
- Good people, good hearted.
- The program is worth the $.

- Helped especially when
- If teacher is busy, they can help me.
- Sometimes the student was able to explain it in a way that made more sense.
- Some students may not feel that comfortable asking a teacher to explain things. They may feel more comfortable with asking a student.
- They have also been helpful facilitating group work.
- They are good at helping me start a project. Sometimes I get overwhelmed starting a new thing and several times he helped get me going.
- They go around asking students, they don’t just wait for us to ask questions.
- They provide hint to things.
- They focus on you, which is very helpful.
- The writing assistant really knows the answer.
- It is very helpful when they read your drafts and provide suggestions.
• My first essay was not good and after working with him my grade really improved.
• I get additional feedback outside of class.
• They help me brainstorm
• They provide good suggestions.
• They have the time to help me through my essay.

Comments for: What might be suggestions to improve how they work with you?
• I don’t really ask the teacher. I feel more comfortable talking with the instructor.
• Nothing, just more WA especially around the time when we have a big essay due because a lot of time we can’t get help.
• More WA would be helpful.

• I don’t think that it is that helpful. Maybe at helping the teacher respond.
• Some of the tutors did not seem that prepared.
• I don’t think it is worth the $.
• They just sit through the lecture like everybody and don’t spend that much time helping.
• Maybe it would be better to have them help 1/1 outside of class time.
• It is good as is.
• Expand the writing center, it is too loud and hard to concentrate.
• The cards developed by one of the WA should be made available to all students.
• Make sure when training/selecting the WA, you get ones that are caring like these.
• Also, having the WA reaching out to students that miss classes. Have them pass on the work or whatever.
• It was great as was.