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Residential learning community peer mentors: a qualitative study of role construction/enactment and learning outcomes

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Residential learning community peer mentors: A qualitative study of role
construction/enactment and learning outcomes

by

Maryanne Benjamin

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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For the Major Program
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Purpose

Residential learning community peer mentors are a relatively new group of paraprofessional undergraduate student employees who work in specified environments (the residence hall, and sometimes the classroom) with a particular group of students (those in the learning community). While peer mentors may be provided with a written job description from a learning community supervisor, due to the newness of these roles, peer mentors also participate in constructing their roles often with little information and with supervision from an individual who may have limited experience supervising paraprofessionals (D. Gruenewald, personal communication, December 3, 2002). Because learning community programs may differ from institution to institution and within institutions, there is little, if any, standardization in the mentor job descriptions. Also, due to the newness of the residential learning community peer mentor position, there has been little research examining this type of student role.

Involvement theory (Astin 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) are fitting frameworks for an exploration of the construction/enactment and learning that occurs within the peer mentor role. Astin’s involvement theory suggests that growth occurs for students as a result of active participation in the campus community; paraprofessional on-campus employment, such as the residential learning community peer mentor role, may be viewed as one method of involvement and subsequent integration. As well, social learning theory (Bandura) posits that individuals learn as a result of their involvement with others and the modeling that takes place, which may occur for peer mentors partially through their interactions with other peer mentors. Residential learning community peer mentor roles
potentially link these theories because peer mentors' involvement in the learning community paraprofessional role positions them for interaction with other students which both offers them an opportunity to model successful collegiate behaviors and an opportunity to observe other successful students (potentially other peer mentors) model success as well.

The purpose of this study was to examine how residential learning community peer mentors constructed and enacted their roles and how they changed and what they learned as a result of being in the peer mentor role. This study highlights the experiences of residential learning community peer mentors from three categories (solo mentors, paired mentors, grouped mentors) and reports their perceptions about their role construction/enactment and their own individual changes. While some peer mentors worked “solo,” other peer mentors had the potential advantage of working collaboratively with one or more other peer mentors, which created an opportunity for modeling that is the crux of social learning theory (Bandura). “Solo mentors” are those peer mentors who served as the only peer mentor living in a residential learning community. “Paired mentors” are peer mentors who were one of two mentors in the same program living in the residential learning community (typically on different floors/houses). Those peer mentors in programs where there were three or more mentors living in the residential learning community were considered “Grouped mentors.” The number of mentors for a program typically depends on the number of participants in the learning community; thus, some learning communities at the selected site had one live-in peer mentor residing on the floor/house while others had as many as five live-in peer mentors living throughout their designated learning community floors.
Warrants for Study

While some literature exists in the areas of student employment and specific employment opportunities (such as peer academic roles and peer residential roles, which will be reviewed to the extent that they are relevant), little literature exists that examines the experience of the residential learning community peer mentor or that brings the two theoretical perspectives to bear on these paraprofessional roles. While some research has been done at the selected site, Iowa State University, to examine the peer mentor role from the perspective of the peer mentor (Benjamin, 2002) and from the viewpoint of the learning community coordinator (Earnest & Benjamin, 2002), no specific studies have focused on residential learning community peer mentors.

A related warrant for this study is financial. Funds for peer mentor salaries make up approximately 35% of the campus learning community budget at Iowa State University. Given the considerable amount of money spent on the peer mentor program as well as the lack of existing information on role construction and enactment and potential learning outcomes, this study aims to fill a gap in the learning community literature.

Research Questions

Research questions for this study include the following:

1. How do residential learning community peer mentors construct and enact their roles?
2. Who do they look to, if anyone, for guidance or models in that role construction and enactment?
3. What do residential learning community peer mentors perceive as the learning outcomes of being a peer mentor?
Information to answer these questions was gathered through conducting document analysis of residential peer mentor job descriptions and the Peer Mentor Handbook, as well as by conducting focus groups of peer mentors from each of the three categories previously identified.

Limitations of this study included a small population being studied, a delay in data analysis, and the typical limitations of using focus groups as a data collection method. The population for this study included 31 peer mentors; 19 chose to participate in the study. Due to time constraints in Spring 2003, focus group data were not analyzed until two to three months after collection. This presented some challenges to member checking, specifically since the analysis took place after the academic year ended and peer mentors had left. Finally, using focus groups provided a great deal of information but did not offer much depth in terms of specific individuals’ experiences.

Researcher Stance

My interest in this study stems from my work with residential learning community peer mentors. Having served as a reviewer of annual learning community funding requests at the research site (for both new and continuing learning communities), requests which must include a peer mentor job description, I became aware of three things: (1) the amount of money that is annually spent on the peer mentor program is considerable; (2) the variety of job expectations is great; and (3) often the amount of clear job responsibilities provided to peer mentors through the job description is minimal. This led me to believe that a greater focus on the peer mentor role was necessary. A great deal of funding is provided for this aspect of learning community programs, and accountability for the use of this funding is necessary. As well, if the peer mentors had little formal information from the learning
community program about expectations of peer mentors (i.e., through the job description),
then the peer mentors may to a great extent construct and enact the peer mentor role on their
own. Some of this construction/enactment may be the result of how they see other peer
mentors performing in this role, but sources of information have as yet not been determined.
Peer mentors are paid for their service in this role, but questions remain as to how they
determine what to do as peer mentors.

Also, these live-in peer mentor roles are relatively new. Some expectations for
creating a microcommunity within a larger community (the residence hall floor or floor
section) may be common among the peer mentors, while the resident assistants attempt to
create a community of the entire floor or floor section. Role confusion and overlap can occur
as issues of territory arise. However, the resident assistant position has existed for a long
time, with greater standardization of the role and scope of responsibilities. The resident
assistants' job descriptions may explicitly describe their responsibilities such that they are
constructing their role to a lesser degree than are the peer mentors, whose roles are less
explicit and also less standardized. Therefore, it is important to understand how residential
learning community peer mentors construct and enact their roles and what learning outcomes
result from the experience of being a peer mentor.

Dissertation Overview

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a review of relevant literature, the theoretical framework,
and the methodology for this study. The review of literature in Chapter 2 begins with a look
at residence halls and educational experiences that are available to students who live in the
halls. Living-learning centers, and learning communities as a specific type of living-learning
center, are discussed. Student employment and peer or paraprofessional positions, which are
often situated in these living environments, are then explored. Specific types of peer roles (i.e. - academic roles such as peer tutors and residential roles such as resident assistants) provide a foundation for the discussion about peer mentors since peer mentor jobs seem to represent a combination of responsibilities analogous to peer academic and peer residential roles. The peer mentor role and the subsequent learning outcomes are then situated within the theoretical frameworks of involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977).

Chapter 3 explains the methodology, design, and methods for this study. The site and participant selection are explained, and the researcher’s qualifications for conducting this study are highlighted. The rationale for the use of focus groups for data collection is presented. Phenomenology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Schwandt, 1997) is used to frame the approach to addressing the research questions. This methodological approach provided the type of information necessary to answer the questions of how peer mentors constructed and enacted their roles and what the resulting learning outcomes were for the peer mentors due to this unique employment position.

Findings are presented in Chapter 4. Appropriate quotations from participants serve to illustrate the findings. Findings regarding role construction and enactment are identified. Document analysis of peer mentor job descriptions and the Peer Mentor Handbook provides information about role construction and enactment. Overall factors impacting role construction and enactment for peer mentors are highlighted. Factors specific to solo mentors, paired mentors, and grouped mentors regarding role construction and enactment are presented. Overall learning outcomes are presented, followed by outcomes specifically
identified by solo mentors, paired mentors, and grouped mentors. Conclusions are provided regarding role construction and enactment and learning outcomes.

Finally, Chapter 5 highlights limitations and ethical considerations, conclusions, and recommendations resulting from this study. Also included are recommendations for future research based on this study of residential learning community peer mentors.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The residential learning community peer mentor role is a relatively new paraprofessional position. In the residence halls, and sometimes in the classroom, peer mentors carry out a variety of responsibilities. In this chapter, major themes are addressed which enhance understandings of residential learning community peer mentor role construction/enactment and learning outcomes of the role. An introduction to residence hall setting and the educational experiences that occur within residential environments is shared to provide a broader context for residential learning communities and the peer mentors who work within them. Specific environmental constructions, such as living-learning centers, are defined. Learning communities, a specific type of living-learning center and setting for residential learning community peer mentors, are described.

The work that residential learning community peer mentors do may be considered “paraprofessional;” thus, student employment and peer paraprofessional work are explored. Specific roles that typically fall into the paraprofessional category exist in academic and residential settings. These peer academic roles and peer residential roles are defined, and an explanation of the residential learning community peer mentor role as a combination of both types of responsibilities is presented. Finally, the theoretical frameworks of involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) are proposed as theories significant to the residential learning community peer mentor role and are used to inform the exploration of the peer mentor role construction/enactment and learning outcomes.

Residence Halls and Education

Student housing has evolved throughout the history of American higher education, starting in 1636 with the Oxford and Cambridge models of residential colleges at Harvard
College, involving live-in faculty members providing supervision of the students (Frederiksen, 1993). A subsequent evolution, from the Civil War to the early 1900s, reflected the contemporary interest in the German model of education, which offered no focus on student housing; housing was not connected to the educational purposes of college and thus was the responsibility of the student. Students often found residence in boarding houses, and it was during this time that greek letter fraternities, complete with chapter houses where students could live, experienced a growth in popularity. Faculty members left what on-campus housing remained, and staff members, including coaches and housemothers, emerged to serve a surrogate parental role within the halls.

Finally, there was a return to providing student residences in the early 1900s as a result of the land grant movement and the opening of women’s colleges, which were residential largely from an impetus to student protection. The reasons for the emphasis back to on-campus housing were numerous:

The new residential-based colleges, the overcrowding and inadequacy of rooming houses, the dissatisfaction of students and their parents with the quality of off-campus housing, and the increased interest on the part of students in extracurricular activities all resulted in a shift toward a policy of providing housing facilities and programs similar to the traditional residential university. (Frederiksen, p. 170)

This renewed interest in on-campus housing resulted in the building of dormitories, which, according to Frederiksen, “were built to house and feed students and to maximize the number of beds constructed for the dollars available, with little or no regard for the quality of students’ educational experiences and personal development. Dormitories were designed for low-cost maintenance, not livability” (p. 172). These dormitories or “dorms,” where students
simply slept and ate (Schuh, 1988), did not provide the living-learning experiences for which they had the potential (Frederiksen). Ultimately, “dorms” became “residence halls,” complete with programmatic foci and intentional efforts by trained professional and paraprofessional staff to impact students’ collegiate experience. A definition of residence halls is provided by Frederiksen: “Residence halls . . . are designed to provide students with low-cost, safe, sanitary, and comfortable living accommodations and to promote students’ intellectual, social, moral and physical development” (p. 175).

In many institutions, the residential living experience is intentionally designed to impact students’ cognitive and affective growth. Riker and DeCoster (1971) provided an early model explaining the combination of educational and management functions of a housing program, stating that “. . . the housing program works to enrich the environment, both physical and interpersonal, and thus enhances the learning process. The residential community becomes an integral part of the university’s educational objectives” (p. 4). The residential environment may be conducive to meeting educational objectives through meaningful interactions, although these interactions are not always planned or intentionally structured. Comparing the perceptions of residence halls by students, faculty, student staff and professional staff, Franken, Hovet and Hartman (1983) stated that all groups strongly agreed that informal discussions and interactions in the halls resulted in significant learning. However, all but student staff members were uncertain about whether the hall environment positively influenced academic success. Similar uncertainties about educational impacts are found in the literature. For example, according to a study by Coldfelter, Furr, and Wachowiak (1984), there appeared to be no academic advantage for students living in residence halls compared to those living off campus, using self-reported grade point average.
as the indicator of academic success. This finding was replicated in a follow-up study by Simono, Wachowiak, and Furr (1984).

On the other hand, in his review of literature, Schuh (1999) concluded that residence hall living had a positive impact on students’ academic growth in four areas:

1. Students who live in specially structured experiences, such as living learning centers, seem to earn better grades than those who do not. . . .
2. Living in residence halls seems to improve student persistence to graduation. . . .
3. Living in residence halls also is associated with increased intellectual development. . . .
4. Finally, living in residence halls seems to be associated with increased cognitive development. (p. 7)

All of the impacts noted by Schuh are indicators of, or are believed to be indicators of, learning: grades, persistence, intellectual development and cognitive development. Most studies, however, have focused primarily on grades.

A number of studies on academic achievement resulting from the residential experience have provided mixed results. After a review of such studies, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) concluded, “. . . [L]iving in a conventional residence hall is not likely to have an appreciable influence one way or the other on a student’s academic achievement” (p. 30), with “academic achievement” defined by grades. However, they stated that they found evidence suggesting that residence hall living may impact general cognitive growth, such as critical thinking, which is not necessarily directly connected to the student’s grades. “Learning” as it applies to the residence hall experience apparently manifests more in
skills acquisition and personal development, which in turn may foster successes that may or may not include subject-specific content knowledge or grade point averages.

Schroeder and Mable (1994) concluded that residence hall innovation would be necessary in order for the residence hall experience to make significant contributions to student learning: “Residence halls have lacked educational planning, strong internal direction, and a set of educational objectives connected to the goals of undergraduate education” (p. 13). Winston and Anchors (1993) recommended that residence halls be structured in ways “that clearly communicate to residents and potential residents that living in residence halls is intended to be an extension or enhancement of the classroom learning” (p. 52). Living-learning centers that are located in some residence halls are one design used to intentionally incorporate educational or learning goals into residential settings.

Living-learning centers within residence halls specifically focus on coupling residential life with student learning. Schuh (1999) defined these residential opportunities as, “specific interventions designed to tie living in a residence unit (floor, hall, wing) to a specific program sponsored by the institution” (p. 12). Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) indicated that while the concept is broadly defined, “the central theme appears to be one of bringing about a closer integration of the student’s living environment with his or her academic or learning environment” (p. 32).

Studies of participation in living-learning centers have suggested that possible positive effects include students’ enhanced abilities to use educational opportunities and better academic performance than students in other living environments. One study stated that anecdotal information suggested that students’ abilities to utilize institutional educational opportunities may be positively affected by living in such a community (Henry & Schein,
Intentional structuring appears to be critical to the success of these centers. Arminio (1994) claimed that the intentionality of these environments influenced academic learning:

"The quality of impact on academic learning by residential learning can be enhanced if the residential learning is coordinated and planned. Living-learning centers are coordinated and planned opportunities for residential and academic learning" (p. 12). Living-learning centers are deemed as being more educationally beneficial to students than "regular" or typical residential living situations, and evidence suggests that, among other results, students in living-learning centers perform better academically (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994). Although one study indicated that students' success was indirectly improved by participation in a living-learning center for first-year students (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997), another study (Pike, 1999) found that students in a residential learning community experienced, among other things, greater intellectual development and learning than students who did not participate in this living-learning center. Therefore, a direct academic advantage may exist for students living in living-learning centers as compared to general residence hall living.

Through the evolution of college/university housing systems, from the Oxford and Cambridge models utilizing live-in faculty, through the "no housing" phase during the German educational model, to the rise of dormitories and finally residence halls, college/university housing has currently become focused on how the living environment can foster student academic success. Residence halls now are structured as environments that ideally contribute to students' academic achievement, although outcomes from living in these residential areas vary as discussed above. More intentional structuring of the environments to enhance student learning, such as living-learning centers, have produced educational
benefits to students as these centers connect academic and residential life. Within the context of residence hall living-learning centers, specific types of academic programs have been established. As one of those specific types of academic programs, learning communities are the next evolution in tying residence hall environments more closely to academics and student learning and are the settings in which both program participants and program staff engage in purposeful activities, which contribute to their learning. "Residential learning communities," one type of living-learning center, vary in format and function as illustrated below. Residential learning communities, however, typically have the common factor of capitalizing on the students' out-of-class living experience to directly complement the students' academic work.

Learning Communities

Learning communities have been defined both broadly and more narrowly in the literature. Cross (1998) broadly defined them as "groups of people engaged in intellectual interactions for the purpose of learning" (p. 4). Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) defined learning communities more narrowly as purposeful restructuring of "the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students" (p. 5). Angelo (1997) added that learning communities use cooperative or collaborative methods significantly and emphasize cross-course and cross-disciplinary learning, further reflecting the unique approach of learning communities to educating students. While not necessarily a new approach to education, today's learning communities are based on the work of John Dewey and on academic experiences structured in 1927 by Alexander Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin, Meiklejohn's former student Joseph
Tussman at the University of California-Berkeley in 1965 (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith 2001), and Tussman's friend, Merv Cadwaller, at San Jose State College (Smith). These efforts were short-lived, but recent concerns surfacing in various reports on education resulted in a renewed approach to teaching and learning, including the resurrection of the premises behind the Meiklejohn, Tussman, and Cadwaller "learning communities." The use of learning communities is a way for institutions to "focus on structural barriers to educational excellence, pointing to the structural characteristics of many colleges and universities as major impediments to effective teaching and learning" (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, p. 9). Learning communities address barriers, such as large classes, and provide structures, like cooperative learning strategies, so that students can overcome those barriers.

Learning community programs take on many designs. Figure 1 illustrates the different designs described here. Linked, paired, or clustered courses, in which students are co-enrolled in at least two classes with a cohort, serve as one format. Often one of the courses is a skills course, such as a composition or communication course (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Freshman interest groups (FIGS) involve a cohort enrolled in three classes, some of which are large lecture courses. Students attend a weekly seminar that often is led by an undergraduate peer adviser (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith; Shapiro & Levine). In the federated learning community, a cohort of students, along with a teacher who serves as a Master Learner, enrolls in three courses and participates in a seminar for content synthesizing (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith; Shapiro & Levine). The Master Learner is a faculty member who is from a discipline not represented in the courses; thus he/she serves as a model for learning as
he/she is expected to play the role of student in the courses, including completing academic responsibilities. Coordinated studies programs involve a cohort of students with a team of interdisciplinary faculty who teach a block of courses on a central theme. All faculty are fully involved, attending all aspects of the program (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith). Finally, residence-based learning communities provide a link between the students’ living and academic environments, integrating curricular with co-curricular experiences (Shapiro & Levine). Students in residence-based programs typically live within proximity to each other, possibly on the same floor of a residence hall or in the same building.

Learning communities provide a context for learning that includes a social component that can assist students in their integration into the college/university setting. The American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators’ document, “Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning” (1998), highlights principles of and suggestions for strengthening learning. Two of these principles are particularly applicable to learning communities. First, “Learning is fundamentally about making and maintaining connections: biologically through neural networks; mentally among concepts, ideas, and meanings; and experientially through interaction between the mind and the environment, self and other, generality and context, deliberation and action” (p. 5). Connections are a foundational aspect of learning communities as students connect more closely with fellow students, faculty, and academic material, reflecting a seamless learning experience. Second, “Learning is done by individuals who are intrinsically tied to others as social beings, interaction as competitors or collaborators, constraining or supporting the learning process, and able to enhance learning through cooperation and sharing” (p. 11). That social tie with other students and faculty is
critical to the success of both the students and the learning community programs. Thus, learning communities present a holistic approach to the educational experience that is not narrowly defined by academic achievement but ideally provides an environment conducive to students’ social interactions and collaborations, which may lead to greater academic and learning success.

The history of learning communities dates back to the 1920s. The curricular innovations implemented by Meiklejohn, Tussman, and Cadwallar, though short-lived, provided a foundation for future learning community structures. Various models exist for learning communities. Most have a strong curricular foundation, such as the linked, paired or clustered courses; the freshman interest groups (FIGS); the federated learning community; and coordinated studies model described earlier. The residential learning community may provide an opportunity to blend classroom experiences with students’ residential experiences. Social interaction is an important component of the residential experience, and the “Powerful Partnerships” document also links social interaction with the academic experience. For some learning communities, one way to enhance the connected and social nature of the program is by employing undergraduate students to provide assistance and support for the learning community participants. These student employees are often titled “peer mentors.” Because of the connection of the peer mentor role to an academic program, peer mentors may be in a position to realize some of the academic learning benefits that are unique to some on-campus employment experiences, which have been suggested by various studies. Additionally, examination of key components of the peer mentor role may foreshadow learning outcomes that have been identified as salient to this study.
Educational Benefits of Student Employment

Many students are also employees during their college/university experience, and the impact of work on students’ academic success has received considerable attention in the literature. Most studies of work impact use grades or grade point average as measures of academic success, although this practice may be problematic, as explained by Stern and Nakata (1991):

With regard to grades, the available research does not give any consistent indication that working students perform either better or worse than nonworking students. An inherent problem in using grades as a measure of performance is that grading standards vary among institutions. Analyzing samples of students from many institutions, therefore, can give only a fuzzy reading of the relationship between employment and grades. (p. 32)

However, Astin (1993) found that undergraduate grade point average was a reasonably accurate indicator of cognitive learning.

Some studies indicated that, while off-campus employment may be deleterious to student success, on-campus employment might be beneficial to students in terms of persistence and educational attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) as well as self-reported cognitive and affective gains and attainment of a bachelor’s degree (Astin, 1993). However, other research indicated that employment in general did not negatively affect academic performance and that student workers seemed able to manage their time to avoid conflicts between academic responsibilities and employment (Canabal, 1998; Hammes & Haller, 1983). It is important to note that the subjects of these studies were enrolled students, eliminating the possibility of understanding how work and balancing multiple roles may have
affected students who made the decision to leave school. Studies also indicated that time to degree may be extended as a result of working (Canabal; Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987), and persistence may be impacted by the amount of hours students work (Ehrenberg & Sherman).

Based on their review of trends in student employment, Stern and Nakata (1991) presented tentative conclusions, two of which have relevance to this study. First, they suggested that working students do not earn lower grades than non-working students; similar findings were reported in other studies (Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987; Hammes & Haller, 1983; Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Desler, & Zusman, 1994). Second, Stern and Nakata posited that a positive relationship exists between work and college success when the job is related to school; this relationship was also suggested by Hammes and Haller.

Because of the context in which it exists, on-campus employment may be related to students' academic experiences. Reviewing various studies, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) reported that an important difference between on- and off-campus work existed in how that experience could assist the student in involvement and integration into the college/university. On-campus work may facilitate this to a greater degree, as Astin (1993) explained:

In all likelihood, the key to understanding this difference lies in the concept of involvement: compared to students who spend an equivalent amount of time working off campus, students who are employed on campus are almost by definition, in more frequent contact with other students and possibly with faculty (depending on the type of work). Apparently, this greater degree of immersion in the collegiate environment and culture more than compensates, in terms of student outcomes, for the time that students must devote to a part-time job on campus. Similar trade-offs are simply not available to the student whose part-time job is located off campus. (pp. 388-389)
In some on-campus work settings, students also may be able to connect their academic studies with their work. Students who work in a departmental office or as a research assistant on a project may learn more about their content area as well as experience cognitive growth in areas such as decision-making and critical thinking. This may seem to be a reasonable assumption, yet in a study identifying the impacts of employment on first year students, no significant differences existed among students who worked on-campus, off-campus or those students who did not work at all in the cognitive outcomes of reading comprehension, mathematics, and critical thinking (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Desler, & Zusman, 1994). Another study suggested that off-campus work adversely affected both persistence in school and time-to-degree for male student employees (Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987). Astin, however, found a positive correlation between self-reported job-related skills improvement and holding a part-time job on campus. These studies suggest that advantages exist to working in on-campus jobs such as the peer mentor role, and that students in these roles may experience some benefits, such as the job-related skills improvement Astin identified. While working may not negatively impact students' academic success, it has been suggested that working may result in students needing more than an average or "the usual" amount of time to complete their degrees.

On-campus employment options for students vary in terms of skills needed or taught, and opportunities for growth. Some of these jobs put students in a peer role where they work directly with other students. Peer roles that exist for the purpose of providing assistance beyond service (such as a position in the dining hall) or clerical duties are often identified as "paraprofessional" positions.
"Peer" Employment and Its Effects

The use of peers, sometimes referred to as "paraprofessionals," in teaching and learning is not itself a recent phenomenon in higher education. Various roles, such as undergraduate teaching assistants, peer tutors, resident assistants, and orientation leaders proliferate on college and university campuses (Ender, 1984; Ender & Newton, 2000). "Paraprofessional" has been defined within the context of student housing as follows, and the components of this definition may well be applicable to most types of paraprofessional roles:

... a student who is selected, trained, and supervised in assuming responsibilities and performing tasks that are intended to (1) directly promote the individual personal development of his or her peers, (2) foster the creation and maintenance of environments that stimulate and support residents' personal and educational development, and/or (3) perform tasks that ensure the maintenance of secure, clean, healthy, psychologically safe, and esthetically pleasing living accommodations. It is important to note that by this definition, not all [student] employees in a housing [or any] department are paraprofessionals. (Winston & Fitch, 1993, p. 317)

According to a study of chief student affairs officers responding to questions about paraprofessional positions, Ender and Winston (cited in Ender, 1984) reported that the highest ranked reason for using paraprofessionals in student affairs departments regarded the impact of the experience on the paraprofessional. Heath (1980) maintained that expecting individuals to be responsible for the growth of others, which is what paraprofessionals tend to do, enhanced personal development. Regarding resident assistants specifically, Winston, Ullom and Werring (1984) noted that, while assisting with and providing support for other students who are experiencing typical challenges of development, student paraprofessionals
are also working through their own maturation and developmental issues which could interfere with their job performance. However, they conclude that paraprofessionals’ greater experience within the context of the college/university uniquely qualifies them to assist their fellow students, despite the similar developmental challenges they may be experiencing.

The rationales behind supporting students in these roles include cost effectiveness (Boud, 2001a; Miller, Groccia, & Miller, 2001; Topping, 1996) as well as research indicating that students may learn best through interaction with other students (Astin, 1993; Boud; Ender, 1984; Topping). According to Miller, Groccia, and Miller, peers play influential learning roles for each other:

[P]eer groups play an important role in influencing adolescent motivation, beliefs, engagement, and achievement. Peers exert influence through socialization processes involving information exchange, modeling, and reinforcement of peer norms and values both inside and outside the classroom. (p. xvi)

As a result, peers may have a significant impact on other students’ learning experiences, making the use of peers in educational settings a logical choice.

Boud, (2001a) defined peer learning as, “‘students learning from and with each other in both formal and informal ways.’ The emphasis is on the learning process, including the emotional support that learners offer each other, as much as the learning task itself” (p. 4). With respect to peer learning in classroom settings, he stated that there should be mutual benefit in the peer learning experience as knowledge, ideas and experiences are shared among peers and not simply from one more knowledgeable peer to another. However, Boud commented that reciprocal peer learning has not yet been explored as a potentially advantageous strategy for student learning. Sampson and Cohen (2001) stated, “Peer
learning is effective when there is a willingness to focus on learning as a social as well as an individual activity, a desire for the development of skills in cooperating and working with each other and a valuing of the importance of students challenging each other" (p. 26). They also identified key features of peer learning strategies that included working together in order to share knowledge and experiences, listening to each other’s opinions, beliefs and values, and providing and receiving feedback. These features may be key factors of paraprofessional experiences such as training and working collaboratively on a staff.

Boud (2001a) identified outcomes that peer learning aims to promote. These outcomes include: working with others; critical enquiry [sic] and reflection; communication and articulation of knowledge, understanding and skills; managing learning and how to learn; and self and peer assessment (p. 8-9). Cohen and Sampson (2001) suggested that clear information makes for the best experience, stating that effectiveness and satisfaction will be heightened if the peer learning process is clear and planned. These peer learning experiences provide students with additional benefits beyond acquisition of content knowledge as students learn to work with each other. “Learning about how groups operate, how learning can be facilitated and how to give each other feedback are not just interesting options but may need to be incorporated as normal parts of the curriculum” (Boud, 2001b, p. 172). Employment opportunities that match peer students with other students offer mutual benefits in terms of experience for the employee and role modeling for the student being assisted.

In summary, peer learning can be impacted by paraprofessional staff through the qualities of their interaction with other students. Selection, training, and supervision to promote the development of the students and the paraprofessional are hallmarks of housing, and likely most other paraprofessional positions. The impact of the experience on the
Paraprofessional has been cited as the primary reason for student affairs offices providing such experiences, while the cost-effectiveness of utilizing paraprofessionals and the learning benefits to the student are deemed valuable. Literature on peer learning indicates that peers influence each other, and that influence can be especially effective in learning when learning has a social component such as peer interaction. Paraprofessional positions focused on peer learning can provide an opportunity for that type of learning.

Paraprofessional roles, such as peer tutor, peer counselor, peer assistant, peer educator, and peer mentor, often have different contextual connotations. There is little literature that addresses these individual roles to any great depth. Much can be gained, however, from examining the different types of peer roles and examining the components, benefits, and challenges of each. The role of residential learning community peer mentors often reflects a combination of responsibilities that typically have been associated with peer roles in learning centers, in academic advising, and in residence halls.

Peer Roles in Context

The next two sub-sections provide an extended discussion of peer roles in context. I describe two general categories of peer roles: peer academic roles and peer residential roles. The residential learning community peer mentor role includes components of both types of roles, making it necessary to understand the different foci of these positions. These descriptions are followed by the final section, in which aspects of the residential learning community peer mentor position are explored.

Peer academic roles

Student academic employment may include tutoring, working in a learning center, or providing academic advisement. Learning center peer roles, which may include tutoring,
involve some specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Materniak, 1984) on the part of the prospective peer tutor or advisor. Knowledge of subject matter, ability to explain and apply concepts, and mastery of the learning skills they are teaching are critical for the learning center peer employee. These students also must model positive learning behaviors, strategies, and attitudes for those they assist. Also important is their ability to assist students in making the connections between the skills taught and the courses, alternatives and resources available to them. Finally, peers in this type of role can help the student client better understand themselves, their skills and their needs (Materniak). According to Materniak, "[t]he basic duties of the learning center paraprofessional include assessing the student’s needs, formulating a plan, providing instruction in content or skills and opportunities to practice the skills, evaluating the student’s progress, and determining the student’s future needs or goals" (p. 27).

Another paraprofessional role is peer academic advisor. A benefit of peer academic advisors is that they are often available at times when professional staff are not available, especially after office hours (Habley, 1984). They also often are privy to information on students’ concerns about advising, as a result of their peer group affiliation, that professional staff may not be. Their awareness of such issues can aid in improving students’ advising experiences. Like their counterparts in a learning center peer role, the peer academic advisor has the opportunity to influence students’ “motivation, beliefs, engagement, and achievement” (Miller, Groccia & Miller, 2001).

Similar to other students employed on-campus in helping roles, student advisors may experience the benefits often associated with on-campus, academically-related roles. Astin (1993) found that tutoring was positively associated with self-reported growth in analytical
and problem-solving skills, overall academic development, and leadership abilities. This suggests that this type of employment may offer benefits to student employees in academic areas as well as in teaching/facilitation skills.

Peer academic roles and residential learning community peer mentors roles may share some common characteristics. Residential learning community peer mentors also may be required to have specific knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge and skills may be primarily associated with the specific academic discipline that provides the focus for the learning community. Positive attitudes about the program are likely valued and may be emulated by the students in the learning community. Like peer academic advisors, residential learning community peer mentors are available when professional staff are not by virtue of their live-in status. As a result of living with the learning community participants, residential learning community peer mentors may have an awareness of issues impacting students’ academic performance of which faculty may be unaware due to the more formal nature of interactions with students.

**Peer Residential Roles**

A wide variety of residence hall paraprofessional employment opportunities are available to students. These include roles such as student security officers, program assistants, hall desk staff, and resident assistants. Resident assistants tend to have a combination of responsibilities that provides for a unique learning experience. Resident assistants are usually upperclass students whose responsibilities include working with individuals and small groups of students, enforcing university and residence hall policies, advising floor government, addressing administrative duties, and assessing the needs of students and planning programs based on those needs (Schuh, 1988). A literature survey by
Winston and Fitch (1993) resulted in a list of six roles/responsibilities commonly associated with the resident assistant position:

- Being a role model of an effective student
- Fostering community development
- Providing system maintenance and control
- Supplying leadership and governance
- Acting as a helper/facilitator
- Contributing or assisting with educational programming. (p. 321)

Winston, Ullom, and Werring (1984) identified seven roles that resident assistants play, some of which echo features specified by Winston and Fitch: “model of effective student, peer helper, information and referral agent, socializer, leader and organizer, clerical worker, and limit setter and conflict mediator” (p. 53). Considering the breadth of these features, it is not surprising that “[t]here is probably no more difficult position in student affairs work than that of the RA because literally the RA is expected to live where he or she works. RAs are always on call and deal with many problems that are quite difficult” (Schuh, 1988, p. 241).

Through their role, resident assistants often teach new students what is appropriate behavior in the college/university residence setting as well as serve as role models of academic success for all students on their floors/units. Through their modeling and interactions with students, peer learning is an intended outcome. Boud (2001a) stated, “Peer learning will not be effective if it is introduced in isolation from other parts of the learner’s life and without regard to what is happening in other parts of the course” (p. 11). Thus, resident assistants have a unique opportunity to benefit from and provide benefits to students through reciprocal peer learning since they perform their roles in a location that brings
together all aspects of students’ lives. For example, a student may seek help from a resident assistant in the area of campus resources, such as academic tutoring services. The resident assistant may lack familiarity or experience with tutoring services, but in the process of assisting the student, the resident assistant learns more about tutoring services and can seek out those services for himself/herself in the future or refer other students to the service. Resident assistants are expected to demonstrate what a successful student looks like and provide advice; simultaneously, they may become better resident assistants because of their resident interactions and challenges.

To summarize, resident assistants live on the floor/floor section with the students they serve and have duties ranging from programming to policy enforcement. A major part of their position is serving as a role model, teaching students behaviors that lead to success in college. Their interactions with students on their floor/floor section often involve reciprocal learning experiences as the students learn from the resident assistant, and the resident assistant learns through training as well as the process of assisting students. Similar objectives are apparent in the residential learning community peer mentor role, yet some differences exist as well.

*Residential Learning Community Peer Mentors*

While peer or paraprofessional employment opportunities have existed for a long time, this residential learning community peer mentor role is relatively new and unexplored in terms of what mentors do as well as how students change as a result of being a peer mentor. Residential learning community peer mentors’ responsibilities often are comprised of some aspects of a peer academic role and some of a peer residential role (Iowa State
University, 2000). Thus, they have a combination of responsibilities and tasks that may assist in the construction and enactment of their position.

Not all learning community programs involve peer mentors; programs that do involve peer mentors typically have specific goals for the program that are most appropriately met when students provide some leadership for aspects of the program (D. Gruenewald, personal communication, December 3, 2002). Goals such as providing student-facilitated study groups to learning community participants or social activities outside of class are examples of activities that may be best coordinated with student leadership. Peer mentors typically are undergraduate, non-first-year students who have responsibilities that may range from leading discussion sessions to establishing and maintaining formalized communication links among learning community members (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). In some instances, peer mentors are former learning community participants, bringing with them a context for their role that is specific to the learning community program with which they work. Qualifications for peer mentors may include academic standing (sophomore, junior, or senior), demonstrated high academic achievement, and ability to commit an identified number of hours to the position. Responsibilities may include planning out-of-class activities, meeting individually with students in the program, providing tutoring or study groups, and attending and assisting with a learning community class (Iowa State University, 2000). For residential learning community peer mentors, an additional requirement may be that the peer mentor live on the floor or within the hall where the learning community participants live.

Peer mentor responsibilities may be similar to those in a peer role in an academic center (Materniak, 1984). Peer mentors may be called upon to assess needs and formulate plans. They are often responsible for leading study sessions, which would require that they
provide instruction and practice opportunities. While they may not formally be required to evaluate student's progress or determine the student's future needs or goals, they certainly have opportunities to do that and provide information to the learning community coordinator and make recommendations to the student. As well, because they are experienced students living with the participants, they may be able to provide some academic advising to the students. Given their living situation, they are available to these students at times that professional or faculty advisors are not, which is considered one of the benefits of this type of role (Habley, 1984). To summarize the academic aspect of their role, peer mentors need to know their students so that they can assess their academic needs and assist in the formulation of plans to reach the students' academic goals. Peer mentors may lead study sessions or other activities fitting with the focus of the learning community. They provide feedback to the coordinator of the program regarding their knowledge of students' academic progress and involvement in the learning community activities. Finally, they often are sought out by the students for academic advisement.

Residential peer mentors tend to fulfill most of the roles identified in the resident assistant position (Winston, Ullom & Werring, 1984), having no responsibilities for administrative/clerical responsibilities in the hall (although they may have those responsibilities within their learning community program). While they are not responsible for enforcing policies, they are expected to abide by them, making them citizenship role models (Iowa State University, 2000). They also may be asked to play the role of conflict mediator, but that is not usually specified as a job responsibility. In the residence halls, they can call on resident assistants to play that role. The resident assistant areas of responsibility identified by Winston Ullom, and Werring (1984) are very similar to peer mentor
responsibilities (Iowa State University, 2000), and the six areas of resident assistant responsibility identified by Winston and Fitch (1993) are also responsibilities that are expected of residential learning community peer mentors (Iowa State University, 2000). Figure 2 outlines this comparison. It is important to note, however, that the resident assistant has these responsibilities for the entire floor/floor section, while the residential learning community peer mentor has these responsibilities only for the learning community students who live on the floor/floor section. Residential learning community peer mentors are expected to be role models of effective students, foster community development within the learning community (probably the number one responsibility), supply leadership, be helpers/facilitators, and may contribute to and assist with educational programming which may take the form of field trips/site visits, guest lectures, or other subject-related events (Iowa State University, 2000).

According to Ender and Newton (2000), the functions of peers in helping roles, such as the peer mentor role, are to assist students in their adjustment to the new environment, to promote students’ satisfaction with their experience, and to encourage persistence toward the attainment of their educational goals. The general goals for peer mentors in learning communities are consistent with those mentioned. Peer mentors are examples of successful students and models for collegiate success, which are valuable for new students to see. One assumption is that the behaviors modeled by peer mentors are positive behaviors. Bandura (1977) asserted that observing others’ behaviors and the subsequent consequences of those behaviors results in learning. Boud (2001a), in reference to peer learning, stated:

The advantage of learning from people we know is that they are, or have been, in a similar position to ourselves. They have faced the same challenges as we have in the
same context, they talk to us in our own language and we can ask them what may appear, in other situations, to be silly questions. (p. 1)

Peer mentors serve as models who have been in a similar position as the new learning communities students, and thus are in a position to be viewed by the students as models of success whose behaviors may be worth emulating. They may also be in the position to experience the reciprocal learning that is the crux of Boud’s (2001a) definition of peer learning. While the context in which Boud discusses peer learning is strictly in the classroom and not within the context of a learning community, the emphasis on shared learning among participants should not be overlooked.

To summarize literature on peer paraprofessional roles, not all peer employment positions are “paraprofessional” roles. However, those that involve such experiences as selection, training, and supervision with the goal of student development (both students served and the student paraprofessional) may lead to learning for the paraprofessional. In fact, the impact of the experience on the paraprofessional was the highest ranked reasons for utilizing paraprofessionals (Ender & Winston, 1984; cited in Ender, 1984). Other benefits of paraprofessional positions result for the students served. Peer learning outcomes that may occur include experiences such as communication and articulation of knowledge, understanding skills, and self and peer assessment (Boud, 2001a). Paraprofessional roles such as peer academic roles and peer residential roles provide opportunities to encourage as well as experience, peer learning. As it is evolving, the residential learning community peer mentor role appears to be a paraprofessional role with features of both peer academic and peer residential positions. Because of the relatively recent development of this hybrid position, peer mentors likely construct and enact the peer mentor role within the parameters
of the residential learning community. They are frequently positioned as role models, modeling appropriate behaviors for success and for collegiate involvement. For the peer mentors, the experience of involvement also may lead to positive gains. Thus, a focused exploration of both social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and involvement theory (Astin, 1984) are appropriate to this study of residential learning community peer mentors' role construction/enactment and the learning outcomes resulting from the responsibilities of this paraprofessional position.

Involvement Theory and Social Learning Theory

Residential learning community peer mentors conduct and enact their roles within the context of the residence halls. They both work in the residence hall and have the experience of on-campus work, and they live in the residence hall which may have a positive impact on their academic growth (Schuh, 1999). As a result of this positioning, they observe the students with whom they work (often both in the classroom and in the residence hall) and possibly other mentors, while also modeling behaviors that include active involvement in their university experience through their peer mentor role. As a result, it seems appropriate to view the residential learning community peer mentor experience through a combined lens that includes both student involvement theory (Astin, 1984), demonstrated through the peer mentors' active involvement with the learning community, and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), evident in the observation and modeling that occurs by the peer mentor which potentially leads to learning outcomes.

The next two sections outline the two theories used to explore the residential learning community peer mentor role: involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). In these sections, key features of each theory are provided as well as
examples from the preceding literature to highlight these features which are present but not always explicit. Finally, a theoretical model that combines both theories will be detailed within the context of the residential learning community peer mentor role to explain how the learning outcomes resulting from the construction and enactment of the role are realized.

Involvement Theory

Observations and modeling occur within contexts, and Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory focused on such actions within the context of higher education. Defined as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 297), student involvement posits that participation in college beyond the minimum involvement results in positive gains. One postulate of the theory expands upon this idea: “The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program” (Astin, 1984, p. 298). This theory emphasizes active participation by students in their learning experience.

Student involvement often includes participation in activities with peers. In *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*, Astin (1993) stated that the peer group is “the single most important environmental influence on student development” (p. xiv). He suggested that student learning and development likely will be strengthened by intentional use of peers. As well, student-student interaction was identified as influential in the academic experience, as students tended to adapt their values and behaviors to be similar to those of their identified peer group. Such intentional opportunities as extra-curricular activities and residential experiences provide for additional out-of-the-classroom interaction between students, reflecting the concept of learning as a process of making connections (The

Learning communities offer these intentional, structured experiences for students that encourage -- in fact require -- interaction among students. Due to the nature of living-learning centers, of which learning communities are an example, students ideally demonstrate involvement that represents the energy devoted to the academic experience on which Astin's involvement theory focused (1984). Results of such involvement in living-learning environments seem to include earning better grades (Schuh, 1999) and increased abilities to utilize institutional educational opportunities (Henry & Schein, 1998), both of which are posited as indicators of learning.

Peer mentors tend to be the facilitators of some of the structured experiences provided in residential learning communities, often coordinating field trips, study sessions, and social activities (Iowa State University, 2000). At the same time, peer mentors, through their involvement in the program, also have their own important learning experiences, some of which involve discovering how to foster students' participation in involvement opportunities. In addition, peer mentors are students experiencing typical development issues of their own (Winston, Ullom & Werring, 1984) and are learning how to manage their own challenges while assisting the learning community students who also likely experience typical maturation issues. Astin (1993) found that frequent student-student interactions were associated with positive cognitive development. Cognitive and personal development challenges affect the student participants as well as peer mentors, and both kinds of development may well impact peer mentors' construction/enactment of their roles and the learning that results from the mentoring experience.
In reference to peer group influence, Astin (1993) stated:

[I]f the preliminary theory of peer group effects . . . is valid, then the prime considerations for the formation of peer groups would seem to be twofold: (1) to find a common ground on which identification can occur (the possible common grounds are numerous: career interests, curricular interests, avocational interests, political interests, and so on); (2) to provide opportunities to interact on a sustained basis. This second principle means that institutions need to create structures or policies that will require or encourage student peers to interact with each other. (p. 423)

Students identify as members of the learning community program, and with that program comes a residential learning community peer mentor. The peer mentor, then, provides opportunities for sustained interaction, both through their individual interactions with students as well as the activities and events that they facilitate.

The on-campus work experience of residential learning community peer mentors is another involvement mechanism that can affect peer mentors’ developmental and educational outcomes. As previously mentioned, the benefits of student on-campus employment, which may include persistence, educational attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), self-reported gains in cognitive and affective domains, and the attainment of a bachelor’s degree (Astin, 1993) may occur because of the integration that ideally results from their campus involvement. Additionally, when the job is related to school, as is the case for peer mentors, a positive relationship exists between work and college success (Hammes & Haller, 1983; Stern & Nakata, 1991). Thus, peer mentor’s work, which appears to be a prime example of Astin’s (1984) definition of involvement, may also influence the peer mentors’ degree attainment.
**Social Learning Theory**

According to “Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning” (The American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998), learning involves social interactions among individuals. Peer mentors experience such interaction and provide a type of modeling that is consistent with Bandura’s (1977) concept of social learning theory. Learning community students associated with peer mentors are primed to view the peer mentor as a model of academic and other collegiate success behaviors. Those who supervise peer mentors, in turn, may serve in a modeling role for the peer mentors to emulate in terms of teaching students and providing them with a valuable collegiate experience. Observing is critical to the social learning process:

> Virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experience occur on a vicarious basis by observing other people’s behavior and its consequences for them. The capacity to learn by observation enables people to acquire large, integrated patterns of behavior without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error.

(Bandura, 1977, p. 12)

Due to the structure of learning communities, often involving the linking of classes for a cohort of students which provides increased and sustained interaction with both faculty and other students (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990), social learning opportunities may result from students’ observations of their peers, faculty, and peer mentor(s). The assumption is that peer mentors are to exhibit positive behaviors that learning community participants observe and from which they learn. Naturally, students also observe behaviors that may be deemed “negative.” The visibility and central positioning of peer
mentors can ideally mitigate some of the negative modeling that also may occur within the learning community student cohort.

Bandura (1977) suggested that modeling leads to quicker establishment of behaviors than other means of establishing the same behaviors. Thus, peer mentors, in their roles as models, may enable learning community students to quickly establish college success behaviors through observation of the peer mentors’ actions and the subsequent consequences. Ender and Newton (2000) noted the value of paraprofessionals as models: “There are very positive benefits attained by observation of the action of another person who has gone through similar challenges and experiences. In many cases people learn best by having role models who can demonstrate productive ways to act in a common situation” (p. 7).

Observation is a key element in the effectiveness of modeling:

Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. Because people can learn from example what to do, at least in approximate form, before performing any behavior, they are spared needless errors. (Bandura, 1977, p. 22)

It is intended that peer mentors serve as model students, not only by informing learning community students about how to be successful college students but also by demonstrating appropriate behaviors that have led to their own academic and personal success, such as studying in the residence hall where the peer mentor and the learning community participants live. Upon viewing these and other success behaviors on a frequent basis in their living area, learning community students ideally will consider employing similar behaviors to achieve similar success. Research indicates that interaction with other students may assist learning
(Astin, 1993, Boud, 2001a, Ender, 1984, Topping, 1996), supporting the concept of social learning theory which suggests that individuals learn best through interaction with and observation of other individuals (Bandura). Interaction with peers and involvement consequently result in opportunities for observation and initial experimentation with new behaviors. Thus, interaction in order to observe is important for learning to occur.

Observational learning has four components: attentional processes, retention processes, motor reproduction processes, and motivational processes (Bandura, 1977). Attentional processes involve the selection of influences one extracts from the multiple influences available. The behaviors of people with whom one chooses to associate on a regular basis will serve as influences that are learned thoroughly. For students in a residential learning community, the peer mentor with whom they interact frequently, and who they see regularly in their living environment, appears to serve as an influence to which they attend. The peer mentor also attends to the students' behaviors in a similar fashion and may be influenced to behave in particular ways as a result. For example, the peer mentor may be specifically seeking information from the students' behaviors, such as attendance at mentor-planned events, to gain information about whether or not the mentor is assessing the needs of the participants appropriately.

Retention processes require the observer of the modeling to commit the behaviors observed to memory so that those behaviors can be repeated in the future in the absence of the model. Motor reproduction processes move the symbolic representations of the modeled behavior, stored in memory, into actions. An example of retention and reproduction processes might be evident when students in the learning community utilize study methods modeled by the peer mentor. Motivational processes focus on valued outcomes. People tend
to adopt behavior that will result in desired outcomes as opposed to unrewarding outcomes. Learning community participants may learn about methods used by the peer mentor to succeed in a required class and use similar methods because they are aware of the positive outcomes that resulted for the peer mentor in using these same methods. However, not all modeling may result in enhanced behaviors, skills, or outcomes for learning community students.

Regarding the failure to adopt a modeled behavior, Bandura (1977) said:

In any given instance, then, the failure of an observer to match the behavior of a model may result from any of the following: not observing the relevant activities, inadequately coding modeled events for memory representation, failing to retain what was learned, physical inability to perform or experiencing insufficient incentives. (p. 29)

Thus, it requires more than simple observation of a model for an individual to commit to and enact model behaviors. In order to have an impact on learning, residential learning community peer mentors need to go beyond unconscious or subconscious modeling, having specific outcomes in mind for the learning that is to occur for the learning community participants through their interactions with the peer mentors. Their job descriptions often list tasks that can include discussion/processing of events and activities so as to avoid the inaccurate coding of modeled events and assist in the retention of learning. Peer mentors may, in conjunction with their supervisors, identify incentives that will encourage modeling (such as “credit” for attendance at activities), and they can coordinate relevant, even required, activities and events that will allow for observation.
Because they are experienced students, peer mentors have information and experiences to share with learning community students. That sharing goes beyond simply displaying success behaviors to students in ways that, as successful students, they may display whether or not they are employed as peer mentors. Peer mentors’ sharing that is learning-oriented includes acknowledging and then subsequently choosing behaviors that will be viewed by the learning community participants with the recognition that these behaviors may be modeled. This is important to the social learning process so that individuals are aware of the rewards of certain behaviors (and the potentially detrimental effects of other behaviors) in advance (Bandura, 1977). This allows the students to make appropriate choices for success in an informed manner. At the same time, also consistent with social learning theory, peer mentors look to each other (when possible), to their supervisors, and to the students themselves to learn not just behaviors to model but also successful behaviors that the peer mentor will want to adopt. For example, a peer mentor may have a student who indicates that he or she is struggling with a course in the learning community program. Perhaps the mentor noticed some behavior changes in that student, such as expressed frustration or withdrawal. When the mentor approaches the student about the changes in behavior, the student indicates that he or she is having trouble understanding the course. The mentor may seek information and advice from the learning community coordinator, or the mentor may have seen the coordinator use certain techniques that have helped students be successful with the course. As a result, the mentor learns what these behaviors (expressed frustration and withdrawal) may be indicators of in the future. He or she also learns from the coordinator how to assist the student. The mentor also may learn, or relearn, specific course concepts through assisting the student. Thus, the construction and
enactment of the residential learning community peer mentor role occurs through observation of the modeling provided by those within the learning community program with whom they interact, and their learning may focus on what they gain through the observation that informs their performance as a peer mentor.

*Proposed Involvement/Social Learning Model*

Involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) are not inherently conceptually related, but within the context of the residential learning community peer mentor role, these theories blend into what is presented here as an involvement/social learning model. In their role, peer mentors experience involvement and the benefits identified by Astin and others who study educational outcomes from involvement. At the same time, as a direct result of that involvement, peer mentors experience social learning and the benefits outlined by Bandura. In this section, examples from the literature are provided and placed within the context of the residential learning community peer mentor role to support use of this blended theoretical approach.

Opportunities for continued campus or residential involvement and further social learning also may attract students to the peer mentor role. Peer mentors may have chosen to be in the role as a result of observing and modeling a previous peer mentor, consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Peer mentors also may have chosen to be in the role because of the integration they experience as an involved student who subsequently continues his or her involvement by assisting other students with involvement and integration, as outlined in involvement theory (Astin, 1984). Involvement experiences, such as the peer mentor role, likely offer social learning opportunities because involvement typically includes interaction with others, which establishes observation and modeling
opportunities. Bandura's components of reproduction and motivation, in turn, result from involvement of some type with other individuals, which may lead to observation-influenced actions so the individual can experience the positive results observed and avoid negative potential consequences. Both involvement and social learning theories are present and essentially tied within the learning experience of residential learning community peer mentors.

The residential learning community peer mentor role construction and enactment will be viewed, using the blended involvement/social learning theoretical approach to examine the research questions of this study. For example, the role construction/enactment may reflect the peer mentor's involvement in learning community activities, particularly if the mentor was a learning community participant prior to taking on the mentor role. Construction/enactment also may have a strong social learning component, specifically if the peer mentor notes models that were observed (possibly a previous peer mentor or a current peer mentor colleague). As such, looking to other mentors in order to construct and then enact the peer mentor role could support a social learning interpretation of this process, which would have implications for peer mentor training and possibly selection.

Learning that results from the peer mentor experience also may be better understood using this involvement/social learning lens. One requirement of residential learning community peer mentors is living in the residence halls, and the academic gains which Schuh (1999) used as indicators of learning (grades, persistence, intellectual and cognitive development) are potential continued gains for the peer mentors as well as the learning community participants. Other gains experienced in residence hall living, noted by Pascarella, Terenzini and Blimling (1994), such as skills acquisition and personal
development, also are potentially further experienced by peer mentors. This study will explore the value of this theoretical approach by utilizing a methodological approach that probes residential learning community peer mentors’ role construction/enactment as well as the learning outcomes achieved as a result of being peer mentors.

Chapter 3 describes the methods that were used in this qualitative research study to determine how the construction/enactment of the residential learning community peer mentor role occurs and the learning that resulted from peer mentor experiences. A phenomenological framework is used and explained. The research site and participants are identified, as well as the data collection strategies, which included document analysis and focus group interviews. Data analysis methods are explained and the establishment of trustworthiness is outlined. The reflexivity and researcher role section explains my qualifications, as well as beliefs, which are brought into the study. Finally, a pilot study is described which served as a precursor to this study of residential learning community peer mentors.
CHAPTER 3. METHODS

Methods

Qualitative methods were employed for this study since the goal is to present peer mentoring as it was experienced and perceived by the peer mentors, fitting with Patton's (1991) definition of qualitative methodologies which “seek direct access to the lived experience of the human actor as he or she understands and deals with ongoing events” (p. 391). Two purposes for qualitative research are understanding the meaning of experiences of the participants, and understanding the context and the influence of that context on participants and their actions (Maxwell, 1996), both of which are purposes of this study.

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), the qualitative research process “. . . values and seeks to discover participants’ perspectives on their worlds, . . . and relies on people’s words and observable behavior as the primary data” (pp. 7-8). They also explain the importance of interaction with the participants, stating: “. . . one cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to those actions – their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds; the researcher, therefore, needs to understand the deeper perspectives captured through face-to-face interaction” (p. 57). In this study, the peer mentors’ perspectives and their words were gathered through face-to-face interaction and are critical to portraying the construction/enactment of the role and the learning outcomes that resulted.

A phenomenological approach serves as the methodological framework for this analysis. Phenomenology is defined by Marshall and Rossman (1999) as “the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. It rests on an assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be
narrated” (p. 112). Phenomenological research describes both people's experience and their thoughts about their experience of the phenomenon studied (Glesne, 1999). This approach involves constructing a description of the phenomenon as experienced by those involved in it (Schwandt, 1997), with an emphasis on the subjective component of behavior (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The phenomenon in this case is the experience of being a peer mentor, which is common to all of the participants. The goal of this research project is to understand better how learning community peer mentors created and enacted their job roles. Additionally, this study explored what and how peer mentors learned through the processes of being peer mentors.

Research Site

This study was conducted at Iowa State University, a large, research extensive institution located in the mid-west. In 1995, the first residential learning community (and possibly one of the first of the university's learning communities) was established at the institution. In 1998 the university's president allocated $1.5 million over a three-year timeframe to firmly establish learning communities within the institution. At the end of the three-year grant, permanent funding was established for learning community initiatives, with money distributed based on a funding proposal system.

Learning communities at the target institution are categorized as follows: 1) course-based learning communities which have no residential component; 2) residential learning communities which provide housing to students with similar academic interests or majors so that they can live within proximity to others who share their academic interests or majors; and 3) residential-and-course-based learning communities which have both a residential component and common courses for the students. Figure 3 highlights the features of these
different types of learning communities. For the purpose of this study, “residential learning communities” will refer to both residential and residential-and-course-based learning communities since both types of programs have students living in proximity to each other in a residence hall and both have live-in peer mentors. Sixteen residential learning communities existed in the 2002-2003 academic year, with 14 having live-in peer mentors.

A variety of staff members, professional and paraprofessional, also work in the residence halls along with the peer mentors. Professional Hall Directors provide overall direction for the environment of the residence halls by supervising student staff, advising student government groups, and addressing administrative duties. Resident Assistants (RAs) and Community Advisors (CAs) are typically part-time undergraduate student staff members whose primary responsibilities include encouraging the academic and personal success of the students on their residence hall floor or floor section and promoting community among the residents. Academic Resource Coordinators (ARCs) were present in two buildings at the study site. These student staff members primarily assist students with their academic success and meet individually with students to ensure that they are completing their involvement requirements, which include involvement in a campus organization, participation in a personal development activity, and participation in a community service activity. The purpose of this staffing information is to help readers understand the context of the study of peer mentors, not to introduce comparisons among the various positions.

Participants

Participants in this study were residential learning community peer mentors. Preliminary analysis of residential learning community peer mentor job descriptions indicated that all residential learning community peer mentors shared some similar
characteristics and responsibilities, while other characteristics and responsibilities were not common to all residential learning community peer mentors (see Figure 4). Live-in peer mentors were hired through processes conducted by the respective learning community coordinators. Most peer mentors were paid a stipend through the university learning community budget, although two programs provided additional compensation to their peer mentors in the form of room and board (the additional funds came from the respective academic department's budget). Peer mentors typically lived in a double room, having the option of paying the cost of a double room (which is less expensive than the cost of a single room) without having to accept a roommate. This is known as having a "super single," and it is an option offered to very few students. However, some peer mentors chose to have a roommate.

Criterion-based selection of participants was used and is defined by LeCompte and Preissle (1993) as selection requiring the researcher to "establish in advance a set of criteria or a list of attributes that the units for study must possess" (p. 69). In this study, the criterion for participants was that they must have been residential learning community peer mentors who lived on the floors/houses with the participants of the learning community. There were a total of 31 peer mentors who fit this criterion. The intent was to use comprehensive selection strategies (LeCompte & Preissle), with all 31 peer mentors invited to participate in the study. Participation of all invited was possible for this study. Greater representativeness would have been achieved if all invited chose to participate, since all members of the targeted population would have participated in the study. Nineteen of the 31 mentors participated in focus groups.
For the purpose of this study, peer mentors were categorized into one of three categories: solo mentor, paired mentor, or grouped mentor. "Solo mentors" are those peer mentors who served as the only peer mentor living in the residential learning community. "Paired mentors" are peer mentors who were one of two mentors in the same program living in the residential learning community (typically on different floors/houses). Those peer mentors in programs in which there were three or more mentors living in the residential learning community were considered "Grouped mentors." Figure 5 highlights the three categories.

My current role working with residential learning communities assisted in accessing both the site and the participants. In my position as a Coordinator of Residence Life for Academic Services at the target institution, I serve as a liaison to approximately half of the residential learning communities. I have no supervisory relationship with the residential learning community peer mentors. However, I meet with some of them during the academic year to discuss the successes and challenges they face in the residential component of their role. I also assist with developing and presenting training presentations for university peer mentors. Consequently, I have met most of the peer mentors and established relationships with those in the programs for which I serve as a liaison.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases. Document analysis was the focus of Phase One, and focus group interviews comprised Phase Two of data collection. Using these multiple methods to understand the phenomenon of peer mentoring enabled a degree of triangulation, the central point of which is "... to examine a single social phenomenon from more than one vantage point" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 163).
Phase One of data collection consisted of document analysis. I collected and reviewed existing peer mentor job descriptions for the residential learning communities. Job descriptions were requested from the appropriate Co-director of Learning Communities at the institution. Also, the Peer Mentor Handbook, created by the Peer Mentor subcommittee of the university's Learning Community Advisory Committee and provided to peer mentors during August training, was reviewed. These documents provided information about how the peer mentor role was constructed a priori for the peer mentor by learning community coordinators and the Learning Community Advisory Committee. These documents, which were collected in Phase One, provided perspective on the peer mentor role and provided perspective on how the individuals who constructed the documents thought about the peer mentor role (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Interpretations of the data through document analysis suggested necessary changes to the focus group questions or topics of value to explore that had not been identified prior to document analysis.

In Phase Two, focus groups were conducted for data collection. Focus groups have historically been used for survey development and market research (Morgan, 1998a). Paul Lazarsfeld, a Columbia University sociologist, used focus groups to gauge consumer response to radio programs which connected focus groups to market research. Prior to World War II, Lazarsfeld and another Columbia University sociologist, Robert Merton, collaborated to use focus groups to develop propaganda materials, create training manuals for military troops, and investigate social issues. In 1956, a noted focus group book, *The Focused Interview*, was published; current practices closely reflect those identified in this 1956 publication. Focus group use as a marketing research technique continues to be taught. Academic social scientists “rediscovered” focus groups in the late 1980s. According to
Morgan, “Applied social research was the primary vehicle that spread focus groups beyond the world of product marketing” (p. 40).

The use of focus groups was appropriate because, as Glesne (1999) stated, “To understand the nature of constructed realities, qualitative researchers interact and talk with participants about their perceptions” (p. 5). Focus groups were particularly fitting for this study because, “This method assumes that an individual’s attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: People often need to listen to others’ opinions and understandings in order to form their own” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 114). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) agreed, stating that focus groups “allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members. This synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews” (p. 16). As such, this data collection strategy also fit with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), discussed in Chapter 2. Participants reflected on their own experiences through listening to the experiences of other residential peer mentors, melding a social learning opportunity that could also have benefits for peer mentors in their work.

Focus groups allow for exploration and discovery, context and depth, and interpretation (Morgan, 1998a). With respect to exploration and discovery, focus groups provide opportunities to learn about groups or phenomena that are poorly understood, such as peer mentors. Context and depth are achieved as participants share background information about their experiences and thoughts. Interpretation provides ideas about why the groups or phenomena are the way they are. Focus groups “are the kind of encounters that make participants interested in finding out about each other, and those discussions give you the kinds of interpretive insights that you are seeking [as a researcher]” (Morgan, 1998a, p. 12).
A benefit of focus groups, according to Morgan, is that participants provide their own interpretations of experiences through the focus group conversation. In addition, immediate follow-up and clarification are possible using this method (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Review and Approval

Prior to beginning this study, the research topic was shared with the university’s Co-directors of Learning Communities and then with the university’s Learning Community Advisory Board. Approval was sought from the institution’s Human Subjects Board. Afterwards, I contacted the peer mentors by letter sent via email, explaining this research project and requesting their participation (Appendix A). I also requested assistance from the learning community coordinators of these programs. Coordinators received a letter via email explaining the research project, asking them to encourage their mentors to participate in the focus groups and share the value of the project as outlined in their letter (Appendix B). Informed consent was acquired at the beginning of the focus group session with all participants signing a consent form (Appendix C). Seven focus groups were conducted: one group with solo mentors; two groups with paired mentors; four groups with grouped mentors. Paired mentor groups were comprised of one mentor from each program so that mentors from the same program were not in the same focus group. The same approach was used for the grouped mentors. The purpose of separating mentors from the same program was to ensure that same-program mentors felt more free to share their individual perspectives in the focus groups. Reaching saturation, defined as the point “[w]hen the groups become repetitive” (Morgan, 1998b, p. 78), was achieved to an appropriate degree with paired and grouped mentors, as respondents in these groups provided much redundant information.
Saturation was not possible with solo mentors as only one focus group was conducted. Two requests for an individual interview with a solo mentor who was unable to attend the focus group time went unanswered.

Groups had two to four participants, with three groups having two participants, three groups having three participants, and one group with four participants. Focus groups lasted approximately one hour each. Focus group protocol questions are located in Appendix D. Focus group discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. Written notes also were taken during the focus groups. Equipment failure during one focus group resulted in detailed notes but no transcription. Follow-up focus groups or individual interviews were to be used as needed for member checking purposes, but these were not necessary. However, a follow-up email containing a minimum of three questions was sent to all participants (Appendix E). Ten of 19 participants responded to the email.

Data Analysis Strategies

Inductive analysis was used in data analysis. Inductive analysis occurs as “categories and patterns emerge from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to collection” (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Krueger (1998) suggested considering the following questions in data analysis:

- What was previously known and then confirmed or challenged by this study?
- What was suspected and then confirmed or challenged by this study?
- What was new that wasn’t previously suspected?
- What implications do these results have for the product or service? (p. 14)

I considered these questions in the process of analyzing the data both from document analysis and focus groups.
Focus group data were completely transcribed for analysis, as transcript-based analysis is considered rigorous (Krueger, 1998). Due to equipment failure, transcription was not possible for one focus group. Detailed notes were created to replace the transcript. After transcribing the tapes, I read through the transcriptions to identify recurring themes.

Document and focus group data were grouped into initial categories, which identified common themes. Transcripts and notes from document analysis were re-read to finalize categories and code the data. Coding occurred based on some predetermined categories, but most categories were developed by reviewing the data. Based on the information available in the documents as well as the focus group questions, predetermined categories included the following: “how they knew how to do the job,” “role models for job performance,” “learning through work,” and “peer mentor-related learning outcomes.” Data coded for each category were then grouped together, using a “cut-and-paste” technique (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). These themes were explored and interpreted within the context of the theoretical foundations established for this research along with the research questions. Specific quotes which highlight the themes are presented in the interpretation. Negative cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which contradict or present variations on the themes, also were explored, but none emerged.

Krueger (1998) stated that the researcher must consider frequency, extensiveness, and intensity of comments. The frequency with which a “common” response is given was noted, but frequency may not always suggest what is most important:

Frequency does not relate to the number of different people making the comment but only to the number of times the comment occurs. Therefore, frequency could be high even if only one person continually brings up a particular topic. . . . The issue raised
most frequently is not necessarily the most important, even when it is raised by a large number of people. At times, a comment will be made by only one person in a series of groups, but it is a gem. It might be a new way of thinking about a problem or a fresh idea. (Krueger, p. 36)

I considered both the frequency of common or similar responses without overlooking significant comments that occurred one time. Extensiveness was measured by the number of different people who talked about an issue. This, too, was observed and recorded. Finally, notes were made about the intensity of comments which might be demonstrated through voice inflection or other non-verbal communication.

Participant review was used to ensure that the transcriptions and interpretations were accurate. Krueger (1998) recommended providing drafts of data analysis results to participants to invite their comments. Focus group participants were sent the transcript of their focus group and an initial draft of the themes via email for their review and were asked to modify inaccuracies that they found. Nine of 19 mentors responded to the request to review the transcripts and themes. One provided additional information to clarify her comments in places where her voice had not recorded well enough to be accurately transcribed. Another responded that he had limited computer access and was not able to review the information.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was important to establish in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as indicators of trustworthiness. Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checks are activities
that indicate credibility. Decisions regarding transferability are facilitated through the use of
thick description, which may allow others to determine if the information provided is
transferable. Dependability typically is assumed when credibility is established.
Confirmability techniques include establishing an audit trail that will in this study consist of
field notes, focus group transcripts, and analytic memos (Maxwell, 1996). Finally, using a
reflexive journal can have broad applicability to all four indicators. These methods for
establishing trustworthiness were applied to the research study at hand.

Triangulation is one method that was used in this study to establish credibility.
Schwandt (1997) stated, “Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of the inferences
one draws. . . . The central point of the procedure is to examine a single social phenomenon
from more than one vantage point” (p. 163). Using multiple data sources (Lincoln & Guba,
1985; Schwandt, 1997) was one way in which triangulation occurred in this study. Data
analysis and focus group data were used to view the phenomenon of the peer mentor role
from multiple vantage points.

To minimize researcher bias and address issues of validity (Maxwell, 1996), peer
debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was employed. Peer debriefing involves
“. . . exposing oneself to a disinterested peer. . . for the purpose of exploring aspects of the
inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (p. 308). Peer
debriefing provides opportunities for the researcher to check biases and clarify
interpretations, to test hypotheses, and to develop and test the next steps in the design. In this
study, peer debriefing occurred by having Diann Burright, a member of the Peer Mentor
Subcommittee of the university’s Learning Community Advisory Committee and a
supervisor of residential peer mentors, review the themes and categories. Kurt Earnest, an
Academic Services Coordinator in the Department of Residence who works with residential learning communities and residential learning community peer mentors, reviewed the themes and categories as well. These individuals were appropriate because they fit with Lincoln and Guba’s description of acceptable debriefers since the members of these groups are my peers, know a great deal about peer mentors, and have some experience working with residential learning community peer mentors.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also identified negative case analysis as a method of establishing trustworthiness. They stated, “Negative case analysis may be regarded as a ‘process of revising hypotheses with hindsight.’ The object of the game is continuously to refine a hypothesis until it accounts for all known cases without exception” (p. 309). By inviting all residential learning community peer mentors to participate in one of the focus groups, I hoped to gather information about all cases. However, 12 peer mentors chose not to participate in the study; thus, all known cases cannot be accounted for in this study. No negative case (or cases) emerged which would have required that I conduct further data collection through an individual interview.

Member checks, where participants have the opportunity to check data, categories, interpretations, and conclusions, is considered the most crucial method of establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple goals are accomplished through member checks. Participants can correct errors, challenge interpretations, and offer additional information. This process also confirms the participants’ agreement to interpretations or not. Member checks in this study occurred by emailing the focus group transcripts and themes to the participants to review for accuracy and completeness. I also emailed categories and
interpretations that emerged as well as the findings and conclusions so that the participants could confirm or disconfirm my interpretations.

Transferability, another trustworthiness criterion, is based on "thick description," and it is this description that may enable another researcher or reader to determine transferability of the findings to a different setting or context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Schwandt (1997) stated, "[T]o thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode. It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick" (p. 161). I attempted to thickly describe the peer mentor experience by concentrating carefully on the data from document analysis and the stories gathered in the focus groups.

A demonstration of credibility is usually sufficient to establish dependability, a third trustworthiness criterion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is defined by Schwandt (1997) as "focusing on the process of the inquiry and the inquirer's responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented" (p. 164). Committee members assisted in determining that the process was logical. I maintained all documents in the process of this inquiry in order for it to be both traceable and documented. Documents maintained include field notes, focus group transcripts, analytic memos, residential learning community peer mentor job descriptions, the Peer Mentor Handbook, and drafts of interpretations and category selection.

The final trustworthiness criterion, confirmability, requires "linking assertions, findings, interpretations, and so on to the data themselves in readily discernible ways"
One technique that Lincoln and Guba (1985) cited as being applicable to all four criteria is a reflexive journal, explained as follows:

With respect to the self, the reflexive journal might be thought of as providing the same kind of data about the human instrument that is often provided about the paper-and-pencil or brass instruments used in conventional studies. With respect to method, the journal provides information about methodological decisions made and the reasons for making them. (p. 327)

Important components of a reflexive journal, as identified by Lincoln and Guba, are daily schedules and logistics; a “personal diary” for catharsis, reflection, and speculation; and a methodological log. I used such a journal throughout this study of peer mentors, addressing all four criteria for trustworthiness.

The researcher's own understanding of his or her role and what he or she brings to the research is also important for trustworthiness. Some of this understanding may be reached during the process. However, I am aware of at least some of what I brought to this inquiry and address this topic in the following section.

Reflexivity and Researcher Role

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) maintain that researchers must acknowledge who they are within the context of their research, stating that “no matter how much you try you can not divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe and what you value. Being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable” (p. 34). As such, it is my responsibility to identify who I am within the context of this study of residential learning community peer mentors. I explain the connections to my career and my job
responsibilities as well as my beliefs about residential education within this section and how these factors influence my stance and role as the researcher in this study.

My qualifications for conducting this study include my academic training and my job responsibilities. As a Coordinator of Residence Life for Academic Services, I work as the departmental liaison for seven residential learning communities. Part of this work involves conducting learning community “team meetings” which include the residential learning community peer mentors, the resident assistants or community advisors, the hall directors and the learning community coordinators. As such, I serve as a primary Department of Residence contact for the peer mentors in the learning community.

I also serve as the co-chair of the university's Learning Community Advisory Committee Peer Mentor sub-committee. Through that role, I have conducted focus groups with both peer mentors and learning community coordinators to study the experiences of peer mentors and supervising peer mentors. I also conducted an evaluation of the residential learning community peer mentor program at Ohio University in Fall, 2002, which adds to my experience in studying this population.

My professional work in residence life for the past nine years has led me to believe that the residence hall experience (both living in and working in the halls) provides unique learning opportunities. Specifically, live-in paraprofessionals can have significant learning experiences from their training and from the performance of their job responsibilities. I believe that live-in paraprofessionals learn a great deal from their experiences, although the specific outcomes may not always be articulated or identified prior to the learning experience and may remain unarticulated for many afterwards.
I also believe that students who seek paraprofessional roles do so for a variety of reasons, since they often state these reasons in interviews and other conversations that I have had with live-in paraprofessionals. While some take on these roles for the compensation, most have non-remunerative motivations. Live-in paraprofessional staff often express a strong desire to help other students, and to stay connected to a community to which they belonged and within which they had positive experiences (whether that is the learning community program or simply the community on the floor). While these roles may also “look good on a resume,” students who seek these positions typically have a strong desire to provide something positive to their peers’ academic experiences and their peers’ experiences of residential living. I anticipated that this would be true for and would be communicated on some level by the residential learning community peer mentors who participated in this study.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted as a class assignment for an introductory qualitative research methodology course in Summer 2000. The experience of conducting this study allowed me to learn about and practice the skills needed for qualitative research. The focus of the study was to explore the learning experience of one residential peer mentor. One residential learning community peer mentor was interviewed twice to gather information about the learning outcomes of being a peer mentor. She identified having learned primarily about interpersonal skills and working with individual students. She also reported having little to no experience of greater subject-area knowledge as a result of being a peer mentor. What she did perceive, however, was that she had greater visibility in her academic department which, according to her, led to more opportunities being offered to her than to
other, less known, students. She also believed that faculty were less harsh with their criticism of her work than they were to other students, again attributed to her status as a “known” student leader in the college.

Building on this pilot study, I have identified the new focus on peer mentor construction and enactment of their roles. Learning outcomes remain critical to the study as well, but by studying the construction and enactment of the residential learning community peer mentor role, I hoped to discover how these students made decisions about what the peer mentor role is and how it should be performed. Subsequently, I hoped to uncover what they perceived that they learned as a result of constructing and enacting this paraprofessional role in the residence halls. This led to suggestions for changes and improvements to peer mentor job descriptions, the Peer Mentor Handbook, supervision of peer mentors, and peer mentor training. As well, it offers deeper understanding of the learning processes experienced by students in the role of residential learning community peer mentor.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Introduction to Findings

Student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) were adapted as appropriate theoretical frameworks for this study of residential learning community peer mentors. Student involvement theory (Astin) posits that the amount of energy students commit to their academic experience is proportional to the developmental gains they experience. Social learning theory (Bandura) suggests that individuals learn through observation of individuals and subsequent modeling of behaviors that lead to success. While Bandura does not state that direct interaction with the model is necessary in order to learn through observation, in many instances the peer mentors in this study had the benefit of both observation and interaction in order to learn. These two theoretical lenses were employed in this study for the purposes of viewing role construction/enactment and subsequent learning outcomes that result from students serving as residential learning community peer mentors. The research questions guiding the study are:

1. How do residential learning community peer mentors construct and enact their roles?
2. Who do they look to, if anyone, for guidance or models in that role construction and enactment?
3. What do residential learning community peer mentors perceive as the learning outcomes of being a peer mentor?

By conducting document analysis and focus groups, data were gathered to answer these questions. Finding are presented and discussed in this chapter.
Findings

For the purposes of this study, peer mentors were categorized into three groups: solo, paired, and grouped mentors. The findings of this study reflect both themes common across all residential learning community peer mentors as well as themes characteristic of mentors representing the three specific categories. In the sections that follow, these findings are presented and discussed. First, those themes and experiences that reflect the general residential learning community peer mentor experiences or those shared by more than one category of mentor are presented. Themes are discussed in a chronological order based on when the highlighted events or experiences occurred within the peer mentor role. Second, each category of mentor is discussed in turn along with the unique experiences those group members shared. Within each section, theoretical implications from student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) are also identified. Finally, conclusions are presented.

Role Construction/Enactment

Role construction/enactment was influenced by various factors. Analyses of the participating peer mentors' job descriptions and the university's Peer Mentor Handbook provided information about how these documents aimed to influence subsequent role construction/enactment. Focus groups of residential learning community peer mentors were conducted to gather additional data from the perspectives of the peer mentors themselves. Data from these data collection methods are analyzed with regard to role construction/enactment.

Document analysis indicated that very basic elements of the role and the very broad expectations for enacting those elements were constructed by learning community...
coordinators and appeared in the peer mentor job descriptions. The university's Peer Mentor Subcommittee also contributed to attempts to define that role for the peer mentors through the creation of the Peer Mentor Handbook, which was distributed to new peer mentors during August training. Findings based on data from these documents also are presented in this section.

Various individuals contributed to peer mentors' role construction/enactment. As a result, two research questions are addressed in this section: how peer mentors construct/enact their roles and who helped them learn their jobs. Role construction/enactment for many peer mentors began when they were learning community participants observing their peer mentor. Peer mentors also cited a number of other individuals, both by name and by group, who helped them learn to enact their roles as peer mentors. Their responses to the question, "Who, if anyone, helped you learn how to do your job?" suggested that observation of, and for many interactions with, these individuals facilitated social learning (Bandura, 1977).

**Job Responsibilities**

While peer mentor job descriptions and job responsibilities differed by residential learning community program, some peer mentors identified their respective written job descriptions and lists of job responsibilities as primary information sources about role construction/enactment. Categories from the job descriptions indicated some responsibilities that were specific to mentors in certain residential learning community programs. The Peer Mentor Handbook also articulated broad peer mentor job responsibilities. The ways in which role construction/enactment was fostered through these written sources and their interpretation by supervisors and others are explained in this section.
Job descriptions. Job descriptions for the 2002-2003 academic year for peer mentors who participated in this study were gathered from one of the Co-directors of Learning Communities at the study site. These job descriptions were included by the learning community coordinators as part of the packet that learning community coordinators submitted to request funding for their programs for 2002-2003. Peer mentors were not asked during the focus groups if they received a written job description but were asked that question in a follow-up email message. Of the ten mentors who responded, seven stated that they did receive a written job description and three indicated they did not receive -- or did not remember receiving -- a written job description. However, the job descriptions analyzed were the job descriptions under which these peer mentors were expected to perform. Within the focus groups, some peer mentors mentioned seeing or receiving a written job description when asked when they knew and how they found out what their job responsibilities were. Others did not reference a job description at all which may suggest they either did not receive one or did not find it to be an important source of job information.

Examination of the job descriptions provides some understanding of what learning community coordinators in general viewed as most important to the peer mentor role. An analysis of residential learning community peer mentor job descriptions produced the following general categories of responsibilities. Common responsibilities of all peer mentor categories in this study included:

- Planning/attending learning community activities;
- Acquainting students with/referring students to resources;
- Working in conjunction with residence hall staff;
- Meeting with supervisors;
• Assisting with/attending learning community class;
• Attending peer mentor training;
• Addressing/assisting learning community students with academic issues;
• Making individual or group contact with students on a particular timeframe; and
• Working a specified number of hours per week.

Figures 6, 7 and 8 outline all of the duties by mentor category and frequency of appearance on job descriptions. Planning/attending activities was the responsibility that appeared on most job descriptions. These types of activities present opportunities for the students as well as the peer mentors to be actively involved in the learning community, hopefully leading to student (and peer mentor) academic and social success. This aim is consistent with, and attempts to capitalize on, the benefits of involvement theory (Astin, 1984), which suggests that the quality and quantity of student involvement is associated with student learning and personal development. Even if it was not an intended benefit, peer mentors were well positioned to potentially attain the educational outcomes suggested by student involvement theory (Astin) and social learning theory (Bandura) by virtue of their carrying out this particular peer mentor responsibility.

The second most commonly cited responsibility for peer mentors was acquainting students with and referring students to resources. This responsibility requires that the peer mentor be familiar with services available to students. Peer mentors are asked to model awareness and self-advocacy behaviors from which the learning community students can learn as peer mentors share their own experiences in using the services available or take the students to various offices in order to demonstrate that going to these places can foster academic and personal success. This common peer mentor responsibility is consistent with
the findings of one prior study (Henry & Schein, 1998), in which anecdotal information suggested that involvement in living-learning centers led to residents' increased abilities to utilize educational opportunities, presumably including resources on campus. This responsibility benefits the students in the residential learning community program as well as affirms the peer mentors who may have continuing needs to utilize such educational services themselves.

A number of peer mentor job descriptions specifically stated that peer mentors were expected to work in conjunction with the residence hall staff (i.e., Resident Assistants, Community Advisors, Hall Directors) in the building where the learning community was housed. Because the peer mentors and the Resident Assistants/Community Advisors live on the same floor and serve the same students, albeit in different capacities, some learning community coordinators acknowledged through the peer mentor job description the importance of collaboration among the staff members in the living environment. This expectation of collaboration is not mirrored in the Hall Director, Resident Assistant, or Community Advisor job description, although it is verbally reinforced to those staff members by professional staff in the Department of Residence who work directly with the learning community programs. Both peer mentors and Resident Assistants/Community Advisors serve as upper-division models for learning community students and are ideally examples of successful students who demonstrate the benefits of involvement suggested by Astin (1984). It seems plausible that collaboration among the peer mentors and the Resident Assistants/Community Advisors would provide a peer group of leaders from whom the learning community students could learn. Astin (1993) identified the peer group as most influential on student development, and a peer group of these “higher status” individuals to
observe and model may benefit learning community students, as suggested in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). As well, the peer mentors and Resident Assistants/Community Advisors could benefit and learn from their collaboration with each other, consistent with the assumptions of both Bandura and Astin.

Assisting with/attending the learning community class appeared on five peer mentor job descriptions. In most cases, peer mentors assisted with the course by presenting a lesson occasionally or being present to assist students with work in the course. Classes are typically orientation-type courses that offer an introduction to college life and to the academic college or major with which the learning community is associated. These job expectations represent opportunities that are especially consistent with benefits associated with student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Peer mentors’ involvement in respective learning community classes requires more than passing investment of time and energy into the peer mentor experience (Astin). It also positions peer mentors to be regarded by the learning community students as ones who have been singled out as models of successful college students (Bandura, 1977). As well, peer mentors have the benefit of observational learning by closely attending to the course instructor’s approach to teaching, since the peer mentors are expected to reinforce the subject matter among the residential learning community students.

Two responsibilities that may be tacit expectations for all peer mentors but do not appear on all job descriptions are attending August training and meeting regularly with the supervisor(s). Some peer mentors are required to attend August training (see Appendix F for schedule). Six peer mentor job descriptions identify attendance at training as a responsibility of the peer mentor. The expectation of attending training may not be identified on job
descriptions but may be an expectation for other mentors that is either tacit or orally communicated. Learning community coordinators determine if their peer mentors are required to attend August training.

Another potentially tacit expectation of the peer mentor role is attending regular supervisory meetings with the learning community coordinator(s). Although meeting with supervisors is likely an expectation of all peer mentors to some degree, it did not appear as a job responsibility on all mentor job descriptions. Only five of ten peer mentor job descriptions listed this responsibility. Some learning community coordinators may assume that peer mentors realize that regular meetings will occur.

Addressing/assisting learning community students with academic issues also appears on a number of job descriptions. Again, this may be an unstated/unwritten expectation of all peer mentor jobs and may be simply assumed by coordinators and peer mentors. Because most peer mentor roles are part of learning community programs associated with specific academic majors or colleges, and since the peer mentors live in the residence hall and are accessible to the students who likely see them as knowledgeable about academic issues, it is quite possibly a tacit understanding that this responsibility is part of the peer mentor role. However, there likely are benefits to this expectation being overt because it indicates to the peer mentors that they must invest time into the academic component of the learning community. Thus, specifically for the peer mentors working with academic college or major-related learning communities, clearly establishing this expectation provides an opportunity for the peer mentors’ greater involvement in their academic experience which may lead to learning outcomes and to the developmental benefits as suggested by Astin (1984).
Some mentor job descriptions identify timeframes for carrying out responsibilities, particularly as it applies to making individual or group contact with students. Depending on the job description, this contact was to be made regularly, most often weekly. The number of hours per week that the mentor was expected to be engaged in peer mentor-related activities also was specified in writing for peer mentors in four of the ten job descriptions. Astin (1984) mentioned student time as a valuable resource and the use of that time in meaningful involvement activities as beneficial to students' development. These structured requirements for peer mentors offer minimum guidelines for their involvement in, and potential benefit from, their peer mentor role. Based on the developmental level of the peer mentors, directing their time, as opposed to allowing them to make all the decisions about the ways to use that time, may be both developmentally necessary and beneficial to the peer mentors and to the students.

No standard protocol exists for all learning communities regarding interview or selection processes. Six of ten job descriptions included specific qualifications that peer mentor applicants must have in order to be considered for the peer mentor role. Five of the above six, plus two other job descriptions, also mentioned an application process. Three of the six mentioned initially, plus one other job description, mentioned an interview process. However, a document entitled "Peer Mentor Application Suggestions" (Appendix G) was made available to all learning community coordinators through the learning communities website. A common qualification listed is a specified grade point average. Other qualifications included previous participation in the (or a) learning community, experience living in the residence halls, demonstrated leadership skills, a positive attitude, and a valid driver's license. Based on the qualifications listed on job descriptions, learning community
coordinators in general appear to be seeking academically successful students to serve as models for the learning community participants. No other qualifications, such as limited time commitments outside the peer mentor job or knowledge of basic computer skills, are common; thus the only particular "type" of student who seems to be desired for this role is one who has demonstrated academic success.

Peer mentor-identified job responsibilities. In focus group conversations, peer mentors mentioned many of the responsibilities that also were listed on their job descriptions. However, they gave primary focus and emphasis to aspects of the position that did not always appear on the written job descriptions. Sometimes peer mentors' interpretations of their job responsibilities were not explicitly listed as job responsibilities on their particular job description. Other times, however, the job responsibilities they enumerated within the focus groups were very consistent with the written job description. The following sections discuss these relative levels of consistencies with respect to role construction and enactment, as these are ultimately determined by the peer mentors themselves.

All three categories of peer mentors cited job expectations and/or responsibilities such as being available and planning events. Due to the residential nature of their positions, "being available" referred to being present on the residence hall floor so that learning community students could access them. "Being available" could have been passive, meaning that they were simply accessible to the students, or their availability could have been active, meaning that they were present and conducting out-reach activities by initiating contact with the students who were available. For peer mentors, "being available" typically involved both the passive and active approaches. This accessibility allowed the peer mentors to provide services that they identified as part of their roles, such as answering questions, initiating and
being available for regular contact with the students, and helping students with homework. "Being available" also suggests a presence on the part of the peer mentor that would afford the mentor the opportunity for modeling behaviors that learning community students could then observe and potentially incorporate into their own behaviors, consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). The mentor's presence also may have served as a visual reminder of the mentor's and the students' involvement in the learning community, further communicating the value of involvement to the students through their observation of a model involved with the learning community. Astin (1993) asserted that "students learn what they study" (p. 231), and peer mentor availability allows students to "study" behaviors of peer mentors that may produce greater involvement in the learning community specifically and in their academic or college experience in general. Such involvement may subsequently lead to learning and personal development as posited by student involvement theory (Astin, 1984).

Peer mentors commented on availability as an important job responsibility. One solo peer mentor viewed availability as the most significant responsibility, stating, "I feel my biggest responsibility is just being there, just being available at virtually any time." For a solo mentor, that need to be available may seem even more necessary since there is no other mentor to whom students can turn. However, in all but one learning community with paired mentors, each mentor lives on a separate floor or floor section from the other mentor in the pair, and students may not consider seeking out the other (in the case of paired mentors) or another (in the case of grouped mentors) peer mentor on another floor or floor section. A paired mentor mentioned "just being there" as one of his most important responsibilities. In terms of expectations for their availability, some mentors verified that they were required to be available a certain number of hours per week. One grouped mentor indicated that she was
expected to be available a minimum of 20 hours per week. This availability requirement ensured that she was in her room or on the learning community floor or floor section where students could access her.

For the mentors in one paired mentor program and the mentors in four grouped mentor programs, availability resulted from mandated “office hours” that peer mentors were expected to hold. This was the case for a grouped mentor: “What I’m expected to do basically is, I have office hours in the dorm. More [often] last year than this year, guys would come by, you know, [to] get help with their homework.” Another grouped mentor mentioned being required to hold office hours; however, she did not find them to be effective. She shared,

I’m required to hold office hours. But really people don’t come to my office hours. It’s more just like, I’m there [living on the floor and being available in a non-structured way] as an inspiration. I’m there if they need help and I interact with them on a casual basis, you know, almost every day.

This peer mentor viewed her influence on the students as a result of casual interactions, reinforcing the social learning that occurred by having a live-in mentor. As Bandura (1977) stated, “Much social learning occurs on the basis of casual or directed observation of behavior as it is performed by others in everyday situations” (p. 39). Everyday interactions potentially led to the peer mentor inspiring or motivating the students in their academic work. These may serve as “casual” observation opportunities, while a “directed” observation may be more formal and individually initiated. For example, a “directed” opportunity may constitute the student and peer mentor meeting during the peer mentor’s office hours for tutoring purposes. For this mentor as well as others, their job responsibilities required
structured availability, such as office hours. Others had more freedom to determine the
nature of their availability, yet virtually all respondents recognized that being available
remained a central part of their role.

Peer mentors cited planning events, whether social or academic, as a common
responsibility among peer mentors, which is consistent with their written job descriptions.
These events, such as field trips or pizza parties, provided opportunities for learning
community students to experience a level of involvement with their program that required a
higher investment of physical and psychological energy than would have been invested had
they chosen not to participate or had they not been required to participate, as is sometimes
the case. Participation and energy investment, according to Astin (1984), produce positive
results in student learning and personal development. By participating in a structured event
held specifically for the members of the learning community with the intended goals of
establishing and reinforcing the “community” within the learning community as well as
occasionally providing the students with experiences related to their academic program, peer
mentors contributed to students’ opportunities for involvement. These events also allowed
peer mentors to play an active role as involved students, benefiting both the students and
mentors in ways described by involvement theory (Astin, 1984) while also allowing mentors
to model successful college behaviors for the students to observe, important to the experience
of social learning (Bandura, 1977).

According to Astin (1984), “The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is
directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement” (p.
298). The practice of offering social and educational events through the learning community,
and the “policy” of planning these events as a peer mentor job responsibility, suggest a
commitment to the benefits produced by student involvement. Others, such as Resident Assistant, Community Advisors, or floor government groups, also may be providing social and educational events to all the students on a residence hall floor or floor section.

Residential learning community students benefit from additional intentional activities due to their involvement in the learning community. As such, peer mentors serve as an additional source of reinforcement by providing educational opportunities for involvement. Such programs also may have “social incentives” (Bandura, 1977) which have implications for social learning because they “provide a convenient way for people to influence each other without having to resort continuously to physical consequences” (p. 102). Typically there are no “physical consequences” or punishments for (students) not attending learning community events, but there may be social incentives that encourage participation which then leads to opportunities to observe and learn from others.

Social learning theory posits that individuals learn best through interaction with and observation of others (Bandura, 1977), and social and academic events are planned by peer mentors to provide these interaction and observation opportunities. However, peer mentors had varying levels of success, mostly equated with attendance, with planned activities and commented on what worked and what did not. According to one solo mentor,

[T]here’s a little bit of planning and organizing [in the peer mentor job]. I’ve found that it’s just best to do random stuff. Organized stuff doesn’t fly well. I mean... unless it’s paid for. If you’re gonna take them out for food, they’ll like that. But if you’re just wanting to go out and do something, like “We want to go skiing,”... but it... costs them money and it’s hard to work on that.
Other mentors discussed organizing pizza parties or being asked to take students to events, serving more as a program promoter than program planner. This mentor stated,

[W]e'd set up some activities throughout the year, mostly social events. Every once in awhile [our learning community coordinator] would set up larger, big group events, and we'd be expected to go out and get all the students to go and attend those. It was really a laid back approach, not really, really pushy with the students. They didn't really want to get involved a whole lot, and they were out doing other things.

Academic commitments, considered of primary importance and ones that take precedence over learning community activities, perhaps ironically interfered at times with the success of program planning. A grouped mentor noted:

Sometimes it's hard to get events planned. . . . [There are] lots of the more fun activities that they like to do, but when you're doing group projects, it's sometimes hard to get together. And they'd like to do more things.

While they may have been expected to coordinate structured activities, peer mentors indicated that such activities were not often well-attended by students. Less structured activities, or structured activities that were funded by the learning community instead of by the individual students, were viewed as more successful because students seemed more interested in spontaneous events or activities that perhaps had a financial obligation involved that they either could not afford or did not want to fund themselves. This may suggest that students' attendance at and satisfaction with structured events reflects a lack of involvement in the learning community, which may lead to fewer of the learning and development benefits suggested by student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and promoted by learning community programs in general. Peer mentors' response to this lack of involvement may
reflect their experience of social learning as students employ unwanted behaviors (not attending events) which may lead mentors to change their own behaviors regarding the planning of such events. Therefore, mentors may choose to coordinate less structured, more casual events for students in the hopes of appealing to students’ interests in less structured, more casual activities. This approach involves less time and energy from the peer mentor, potentially providing them with a less valuable involvement experience. Being less intentional about planning activities and identifying outcomes for these activities also may limit the social learning opportunities of the students. According to Bandura (1977), “observational learning can be achieved more effectively by informing observers in advance about the benefits of adopting modeled behavior than by waiting until they happen to imitate a model and then rewarding them for it” (p. 37). Through structured, organized activities, such as field trips or demonstrations of equipment use, students can be alerted to the benefits of participating in and observing during the events. This opportunity may be missed when activities are more spontaneous and less intentionally connected to the learning community’s academic component.

Paired and grouped mentors identified other tasks connected to the responsibility of being available that were not identified as part of the solo mentors’ experiences. These responsibilities included serving as a resource and maintaining communication with the students. This involved interaction such as: having regular contact with the students, gathering student feedback, helping them with problems, and answering questions. Paired and grouped mentors also identified assisting students with their transition from high school to college as their responsibility. One grouped mentor framed it as follows:

I guess your responsibilities are, well I look at it as kind of an upperclass student
who’s living with a bunch of freshmen, typically. And you’re kinda there as someone who’s kinda like an advisor/upperclass-student who’s there for them when they first come into Iowa State, so that if they have any problems or questions, academic help of any kind, there’s someone that’s there that they can go to, rather close, and who’s there most of the time when they’re... not in classes. So kind of a regularly available resource for information and help.

Another grouped mentor referred to his role as a “resource” in the context of helping students find the appropriate office or individual to provide the assistance they needed. He stated, “[M]y responsibility is to be a resource for the students. To help them... figure out what their problem [is] and then be able to send them to the right person that will help them solve that problem.” Being “a resource” means being a source of information, which requires the peer mentors to have particular knowledge about the institution and about being a college student. Thus, part of being available to students means being a readily available source of information, requiring peer mentors to learn more about the institution and college life than simply what they need to know for their own success, which may demonstrate more in-depth involvement in the institution.

While serving as a resource by answering questions and pointing students in the right direction may not overtly appear to reflect social learning (Bandura, 1977) or student involvement theory (Astin, 1984), a peer mentor’s ability to perform these tasks suggests the mentor’s higher level of involvement in his or her collegiate experience since knowledge of resources likely results from energy invested while at the institution and/or during peer mentor training. It also allows the peer mentor to model knowledge about the institution and college success that learning community students may see as valuable and may choose to
emulate by becoming knowledgeable about these resources. If, as Bandura stated, "virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experience occur on a vicarious basis by observing other people's behavior and its consequences for them" (p. 12), then students may learn vicariously from peer mentors by observing their behaviors and the results. In the case of serving as a resource, the behaviors demonstrated by the peer mentor include providing ready answers and finding information. The consequences observed that may encourage the student to adopt these behaviors may be simply that having knowledge of the institution and information that leads to student success saves time and enables one to assist oneself as well as other students. In the cases of peer mentors who observed their own peer mentor, this may have been an important learning outcome since many of the mentors claimed to have applied for the peer mentor position so that they could help other students.

Paired and grouped mentors mentioned academically-oriented job responsibilities that included teaching an orientation class, answering academic questions, and helping students form study groups. Involvement in these sets of endeavors, which exceeds base-level student academic involvement, provided opportunities for peer mentors to achieve the positive developmental gains suggested by Astin (1984). Teaching a class within the learning community is a responsibility that not all peer mentors experienced. However, for those peer mentors involved in preparing the lesson(s) and presenting the information, along with subsequent assessment of student learning, the amount of energy invested was likely substantial. Astin indicated that the "quality and quantity of student involvement" (p. 298) is proportional to the learning and development that results. For those who were involved to some degree with teaching a class on a regular basis, the results for them may have been substantial. For those involved in teaching occasionally or once, the results may not have
been as substantial but still may have been valuable, as stated by a grouped mentor who taught one lesson: "... I learned stuff even just going to their orientation class and like helping teach the session. ... When you teach it to someone else you learn so much more about it yourself." Opportunities like teaching, answering academic questions, and helping form study groups can lead to learning experiences for the mentor due to the interaction the peer mentor has with the course material or course-related information. Especially with respect to teaching and involvement in study groups, peer mentors are positioned within their residential learning communities as heavily involved students. Residential learning community students may choose to become more involved students as well as a result of observing the benefits of this type of involvement, such as greater academic knowledge or experiential opportunities. Bandura (1977) stated, "As a general rule, seeing behavior succeed for others increases the tendency to behave in similar ways." (p. 117). When students see peer mentors succeed through teaching, assisting with study groups, or answering academic questions, they may be influenced to attempt similar behaviors by taking advantage of opportunities to gain knowledge and even further, to create opportunities to share their knowledge with others, following the peer mentors' model.

Availability and the tasks associated with being accessible to students led to peer mentors in the focus groups identifying specific roles that they played. Peer mentors identified responsibilities that related to particular roles of "role model" and "friend." Paired and grouped mentors made strong statements about their responsibilities as role models. One grouped mentor stated that, as a peer mentor,

[Y]ou are a role model now, I guess. ... [B]efore you only really had to worry about yourself and now, you know, you have to worry about what others think
about what you’re doing. . . . [S]o you kinda have to take a step back and analyze
that.

Paired mentors used phrases such as “to be a positive upperclassman living with a majority
of freshmen,” and “just set a good example for them” to describe their role modeling
responsibilities. Other mentors mentioned the importance of ensuring that their own
behavior reflected the advice they gave to students. A few mentors stated that they had to
“practice what [they] preach” in order to be considered credible. One paired mentor stated:

I guess the whole point of me being a positive role model is to pretty much practice
what you preach, and I guess take on the added responsibility of . . . going ahead and
studying and doing work because your students really aren’t gonna look up to you if
you tell them one thing and you do and be, like, opposite.

A grouped mentor shared a similar perspective:

I’d go around [and say to students], “No, you’re not gonna wait ‘til the last minute.
You’re gonna do it [academic work] now.” And then I’d get back to my room and I’d
sit down at my computer and [tell myself], “Ok, I can’t play games now because then
I’d be a hypocrite.” So I’d actually do work because I . . . told the students they
shouldn’t procrastinate.

Beyond carrying out the tasks of this particular job, these peer mentors felt obliged to fulfill a
role. They also may have recognized their role as individuals with a particular status in
comparison to the learning community students. Bandura (1977) indicated that individuals
with high status are often emulated. Peer mentors, positioned by higher authority figures to
have high status, realized that their choices to match their behavior with their words were
important for credibility. Bandura also noted that verbal messages are not always as
effective in encouraging certain behavior as one’s demonstrated behavior is in encouraging
the behavior in others. The “practice what you preach” messages suggest that peer mentors
may understand that their behavior, more than their words, sends important messages to
students.

Choosing consciously to demonstrate behavior interpreted as positive and success-
oriented was deemed important by the peer mentors who saw themselves as role models to
the students in the learning community. These choices and behaviors demonstrate greater
“physical and psychological energy [devoted] to the academic experience” (Astin, 1984, p.
297) on the part of the peer mentor, which can lead to positive gains for the peer mentors as
well as for the students observing them. Because the peer mentors in this study recognized
the influence that their academically-related behavior could have on the learning community
students, peer mentors made it a standard practice to match their messages with behaviors
that demonstrated “active participation of the student in the learning process” (Astin, 1984, p.
301). Astin also stated, “Involvement. . . is more susceptible to direct observation and
measurement than is the more abstract psychological construct of motivation” (p. 301).
Thus, statements encouraging academic involvement plus demonstrations of such academic
involvement likely provided more than motivation to residential learning community
students. Students could observe at close range their peer mentor engaged in academic
activities, since the mentor lived on the floor with the students, and this complements
learning both through observation (Bandura, 1977) and through involvement (Astin).
Although peer mentors rarely shared any specific instances of changes in academic behaviors
among the learning community students, the modeled behaviors also may have had
additional benefits for the students observing the peer mentors since, according to Bandura
(1977), modeling leads to quicker establishment of behaviors. Peer mentors stated that they had a responsibility to model positive academic behaviors for the students in the learning community, and they recognized that their behaviors were potentially influential to the learning community students.

Peer mentors in all three groups mentioned “being a friend” as one of their responsibilities, yet this responsibility did not appear on any of their written job descriptions. While the term “friend” was used, the role they described playing seemed to indicate a role of approachability and accessibility more than what might typically be defined as friendship. “Friend” can also underscore the personal dimensions of their work and the relative lack of social distance between the peer mentors and the residential learning community students. In other words, faculty members could also model aspects of these same behaviors, but likely not as effectively because of the “peer” nature of the student-peer mentor interactions. While some mentors undoubtedly did establish friendships in a traditional sense of the word with some of the learning community students, similar to the friendship formation that is part of the overall residential experience for all residential students, being available and able to assist, as previously described, appeared to mean “being a friend” for the peer mentors in this study. A paired mentor noted that he thought mentors should try “... to be [students’] friend more than anything, I guess, instead of an authority figure or something. Just kinda try to blend in with the group a little bit.” Another mentor felt a familial role with students, caring on an “official” as well as an “unofficial” level:

I feel I’m like... a big sister... [They are] going through the freshman year, through all those trouble[s], and I’m the one they could depend on... if they needed anything.
[They] can call me or just email me... I will get... right back to them right away once I get the message.

This mentor’s comments suggest a willingness to be the students’ primary resource and contact which seems less an example of friendship and more an example of caring beyond what is expected of the peer mentor role.

In trying to be a “friend,” however, boundaries occasionally were an issue, as one paired mentor experienced. She shared that students came into her room and were not respectful with her belongings; they would “sit down and go through [her] stuff.” She said,

I think a couple times... the... friendship/peer mentor boundary has been crossed in my experience... I have to remind myself that I am setting a good example for them and am supposed to be the mentor before the friend... although friendship is important. Yet I [have to] show them that I have a little bit of an authoritative ability over them.

The experience of this mentor suggested that some role confusion accompanied being a “peer” mentor. This role confusion may have fostered different perceptions of the level of authority that the peer mentor, as well as the students, perceived the peer mentor to have. Bandura (1977) indicated that consequences of behavior influenced subsequent behavior primarily due to the informative value of the consequences. The consequences of this boundary-crossing certainly appeared to have been informative for the above peer mentor. While she did not discuss if or how her behavior may have influenced the students’ behavior of disrespecting her belongings, she determined that she needed to emphasize her “peer mentor” role and potentially de-emphasize the “friend” role in order to be perceived, possibly by herself as well as the students, as an individual with “high status” and thus more likely to
be viewed as a model whose behaviors would be emulated (Bandura). While peer mentors recognized their status differential, occasionally they also wanted to minimize the difference in order to “blend in with the group a little bit.” At times, however, demonstrating “a little bit of an authoritative ability over them [the students]” seemed appropriate in order to be viewed as setting “a good example for them.” In order to effectively construct and enact the role of peer mentor, the peer mentors must play both the role of “peers” so that the learning community students view them as approachable individuals with similar experiences as well as “mentors” which suggests greater experience and knowledge about college life and the learning community experience. It is through experiences such as the one previously described that peer mentors learn how to differentiate the components of the role by observing the behaviors of the students and choosing subsequent responses that they deem consistent with the peer mentor role based on those observations.

*Peer Mentor Handbook.* After initially determining their respective job responsibilities, peer mentors had a written resource available for constructing/enacting their roles in the Peer Mentor Handbook. The university’s Peer Mentor Subcommittee, comprised of faculty and staff who work with learning communities, created the Peer Mentor Handbook in 2002 as a general resource for all peer mentors and an intended influence on peer mentors as they constructed and enacted their roles. The handbook was distributed in paper form to all peer mentors who attended Peer Mentor Training in August. An electronic copy of the handbook was also made available online. Mentors were asked via email if they had used the handbook, and if so, what parts of the handbook they used. Of the ten who responded to the question, six peer mentors indicated that they used or read the Peer Mentor Handbook. Sections identified as useful included the Resources, Common Adjustment Issues for First-
Year Students, Challenges You May Encounter as a Mentor, Ice-breakers/Energizers/Conversation Starters, and Skills for Effective Mentors. One mentor stated that he never received a copy of the manual; he also did not attend August training which is when the manual was distributed. Only one solo mentor mentioned the handbook as a resource during the focus group.

A review of the table of contents highlights aspects of peer mentors' role and responsibilities that were identified by this subcommittee as important for success. The topics in the handbook are:

- Learning Community Characteristics
- Skills for Effective Mentors
- Importance of Confidentiality
- Common Adjustment Issues for First-Year Students
- Challenges You May Encounter as a Mentor
- What to Expect from Supervisors
- Tracking Student Information
- Ice-breakers/Energizers/Conversation Starters
- Establishing Effective Study Groups
- Programming/Activities
- Resources
- Highlights from the Residential Terms and Conditions

These topics in many respects mirror the written job descriptions and what peer mentors identified as their responsibilities. Specifically, the section on adjustment issues affirms the
peer mentors' perspectives that they are expected to assist with the students' transitions to college life. Since some peer mentors identified the responsibility of providing academic assistance, including establishing study groups, the section focused on that topic may have been useful, although no mentors commented on their consultation of this section. Programming/Activities provided information about planning events, something mentors in all categories shared as a job responsibility. Finally, the Resources section was a six-page listing of resources that would allow peer mentors to "be a resource" for the students.

Although in the course of the focus groups only one peer mentor commented on being aware of the handbook, the peer mentors' descriptions of their roles suggested that topics in the handbook were consistent with information they said they needed and responsibilities they said they had. Specifically, the "Skills for Effective Mentors" section of the handbook focused on communication skills, which were mentioned by peer mentors throughout the focus group interviews as important to their role. In the section entitled "Challenges You May Encounter as a Mentor," categories of challenges were listed. This section simply highlighted the possible issues; it did not offer suggestions for how to address the issues as peer mentors were expected to seek guidance from their supervisors so that they acted in accordance with the expectations of their specific peer mentor job. Subsections of the "Challenges" section highlighted various challenges and are explained below.

"Motivating/encouraging" addressed issues of student participation in the learning community. "Role perceptions" identified challenges such as "not being viewed as a peer" as well as "not being seen as an authority figure," which was in fact a challenge faced by one peer mentor previously mentioned. "Time issues" cited scheduling challenges as well as balance, and peer mentors in the focus groups noted this as a challenge in their roles.
“Personal issues” involved assisting students with non-academic issues. All peer mentors dealt with programs and activities, which involved both planning and executing events while being inclusive of all individuals. This responsibility was addressed in the “Programming/activities” subsection. Finally, “Addressing questions” highlighted some of the challenges that peer mentors might face as they enacted their responsibility of being a resource.

Initially, peer mentor job responsibilities were defined in written documents such as job descriptions and the Peer Mentor Handbook. In discussing their job responsibilities, peer mentors identified tasks that they had and roles that they played. Tasks included being available, planning events, serving as a resource, maintaining communication, and performing academic functions such as teaching a class. “Role model” was a role peer mentors played as experienced upper-division students. Mentors also identified playing the role of “friend;” however, their descriptions of this role suggested less of a traditional friendship role and more of a characteristic of approachability that they needed to display. Although only specifically identified in one job description, role modeling seemed to be expected of peer mentors, based on an analysis of the job descriptions. Furthermore, most of the peer mentors in the focus groups identified and discussed the role modeling aspect of their jobs. However, the expectation of being a friend is one that peer mentors seemed to have determined on their own.

**Overall Peer Mentor Role Construction/Enactment Factors**

In this section, the factors that were relatively common in role construction/enactment among all three categories of the peer mentors are discussed. Peer mentor role construction/enactment occurred in a variety of ways for respondents in all three categories.
Findings are presented in chronological order as they were experienced by the mentors, since role construction/enactment began at different times for the mentors and resulted from observing different individuals involved with the learning community programs. In brief, peer mentors learned how to do their jobs by observation. They also learned by experience, both on the job and, for many, as student participants in the same learning community prior to becoming peer mentors. While information was conveyed to peer mentors during training to assist in their role construction/enactment, little formal feedback from students or supervisors was provided to peer mentors throughout their time in the role that could have assisted in or impacted their role construction/enactment as peer mentors.

*Timing of role construction/enactment.* Peer mentors constructed their role prior to and during their experience as peer mentors. For those who participated as learning community students in the program for which they served as peer mentors, some of that role construction was a result of observing their peer mentor. Having positive relationships with their peer mentors as learning community students aided some of these peer mentors in understanding the mentor role prior to being in the position. One grouped mentor explained,

> For me, already being involved in the [learning community] when I was a freshman, I kind of understood the general basics of what a peer mentor did because I had some decent interaction with the [peer mentor]. . . . I kind of understood the role that he took. . . .

One paired mentor suggested that students interested in being peer mentors should seek out information from a peer mentor who has done the job. However, not all peer mentors learned about the position by observing their peer mentor. Another paired mentor stated, “I didn’t really pay attention to the peer mentor my freshman year. He was . . . kind of just there. He
was just another guy who lived on the floor.” That peer mentor's lack of “higher status” as viewed by one of the learning community participants who later became a peer mentor resulted in little observation and thus little opportunity of advance social learning (Bandura, 1977) with respect to the role that he would subsequently occupy. While this mentor did not state any particular reasons for not having interactions with his peer mentor, it is clear, through other comments made by this particular mentor about his disproportionate reliance on on-the-job experience for role construction/enactment, that what little he observed of his peer mentor did not assist him in his role construction/enactment prior to taking on the position himself.

Other methods of role construction involved accessing information about the position prior to the beginning of the academic year. According to respondents, information used as starting points to assist in role construction included some combination of reading job descriptions, participating in the peer mentor selection process, and discussing the position with the learning community coordinator. Having a vague sense of expectations was how one peer mentor began role construction/enactment, “[W]hen I applied for the position...and I read the description, I got a...general...maybe somewhat vague idea of what I had to do.” He stated that he later discovered that there also was unwritten information that would have been helpful, such as how to plan events. A grouped mentor who was one of the first peer mentors in his residential learning community program, said, “I got a printout...right when I talked to [the learning community coordinator] where initially he gave me, like a couple pages...that list[ed] some of the duties that peer mentors would do.” In general, peer mentors either did not mention receiving or referring to a written job description, or they saw their job description as vague and general. For the most part, instead of being a useful
resource for constructing an understanding of the position, the job description was regarded by these respondents who received one only as a starting point.

Some mentors learned about being a peer mentor during the interview process itself. One paired mentor mentioned the interview process as an opportunity to learn what the role entailed: "I guess through the interview process, they kind of told us what was expected..." A grouped mentor also mentioned the interview as a place where she gained information about the role: "During the interview process, we were told... our responsibilities and everything that we would have to do. About how many hours we were supposed to dedicate to doing our job." For these mentors, the interview process served as an opportunity to gain more information about the peer mentor role, informing their role construction/enactment process.

Peer mentors mentioned training designed by the Department of Residence and delivered by Department of Residence and other professional staff on campus that occurs in August as another tool that provided a starting point for role construction/enactment. Some found this training to be helpful. Specifically, two peer mentors who were the first peer mentors in their program identified training as providing them with the information they needed to begin role construction. Yet others indicated that there is no way to completely train peer mentors for their jobs. While training was perceived as helpful by some peer mentors, it did not prepare them for some of the more situational aspects of their role, as this mentor stated:

I just kinda learned as I went primarily. I mean, all the training tools and... seminars that you go to really doesn't prepare you for some of the...questions or some of the things that might spring up. So, pretty much you just kind of learn on
the fly. . . . There are certain things that, you know, handling
roommate issues or. . . . helping them with calculus or any other subject or telling
them where a certain building is, you can prepare for that. But for some other
things, you just pretty much go on a gut instinct. That’s how I learned.

One solo mentor found training to be too theoretical and potentially not practical enough.
His comment suggested a desire for more tips about how to enact the role:

[T]he [training] classes were nice but I think. . . .the instruction is a lot like
theoretical, like you want to set up all these groups and you want to do this. And
a lot of them are good ideas, but it’s hard to get that kind of interaction in reality.
It was for me anyway.

A grouped mentor found training to be beneficial: “I learned a lot of my stuff probably from
peer mentor training. . . . That’s probably where we covered most of the material.” Mentors
in this study clearly had different views of and experiences with training, and these views and
experiences tended to influence their role construction/enactment to the degree that they
found training useful and/or helpful.

While training provided a general overview of common responsibilities, peer mentors
noted that it could not prepare them for all situations. Training primarily served as an
opportunity to gain resource information and begin discussing issues that learning
community students would likely face and how peer mentors would assist them. Thus it
allowed peer mentors to begin to anticipate and prepare for the issues that they would
encounter. However, because training was a university-wide peer mentor training, no
information about their specific programs or specific job responsibilities as connected to their
particular learning community were addressed. It was assumed that learning community
coordinators could follow up with more specific training and information for their peer mentors. This assumption was stated at various lunch programs held for, but not required of, learning community coordinators. Mentors were asked via email if they received additional training from their learning community coordinators/supervisors after the August training. Of those mentors who responded, one of ten peer mentors indicated that she received additional informal training. Four stated they had no additional training. One mentor said he had "[n]o official training. We sat down a few times and discussed job responsibilities and [he] had me attend the workshop." The "workshop" was the annual Learning Communities Institute held at the study site. Another mentor stated, "We didn't actually have a training[;] we just had planning meetings to address issues. And plan possible activities." In the focus groups, few mentors mentioned any program-specific training experiences.

Most peer mentors noted that their role construction/enactment was grounded in drawing on their previous experience as learning community participants. Once in their peer mentor role, they reflected back on their own experiences to inform their approach to mentoring. Their experiences as learning community participants may have provided both group identification with the learning community and opportunities for sustained interaction with peers, both consistent with Astin (1984), which may have led to a desire for continued involvement in the learning community as a peer mentor. The experience as former learning community members was cited by most peer mentors as a strong basis for constructing/enacting their subsequent role as a peer mentor in the same learning community. This experience was especially important to one grouped mentor who could not attend the formal August training. He explained how his experiences from the learning community benefited his role construction/enactment:
As far as learning what to do, I kinda just went off of my own, the way I learned to do things last year [as a residential learning community student] as kind of a guide to, you know, tell them how, or encourage them how to do things, what to go do, what to see. And then whatever questions they had, [I] just kinda based off my experience 'cause most things they ask me, I had run into the prior year.

For this peer mentor, role construction/enactment was based on his experiences and occurred in a responsive, situational manner as students approached him with issues. He also stated that he relied on his learning community coordinator when faced with issues that he had not experienced himself or did not know how to address. Thus, he both counted on his own experience as a guide but acknowledged that he occasionally needed assistance when the student issues he encountered as a peer mentor differed from his experience in the learning community.

This use of previous experience was cited as an important source of information for a paired mentor who indicated having had similar experiences in her first year to the experiences that the students she mentored had during their first year. Thus, she understood what they were going through. This mentor wanted to identify with the residential learning community students by letting them know that their experiences and feelings were not unique so that they would not feel like the "only one" who was having a particular negative experience. She mentioned that, as a first year student, she really felt like the "only one" struggling and felt it would be helpful to the students to know that others were having similar struggles. Like the previous mentor who relied on his situational knowledge based on experience, this mentor relied on her experiences of specific issues and was prepared to assist
the students with the same types of issues. Thus, her own experience in the program served as an important tool for construction/enactment of her role.

Another former residential learning community member, a paired mentor, commented on learning his peer mentor role through experience as a learning community participant and as a peer mentor:

Because I was in the learning community, I kinda had an understanding of what was expected. But, I mean, it becomes more obvious as you get into the semester, or the school year. You kinda learn the dynamics of the group and what you need to do to most benefit the students in the group.

Being in the position and assessing the group and situation provided this mentor with his primary sources of information to construct and enact his role. A grouped mentor also commented on assessing the situation by meeting the students. She stated, “[I]t was just kind of... dive in, meet the people, and find out... individually how you’re gonna interact with each person... [O]nce you meet the people, it kinda goes [on a] person by person basis.”

Peer mentors generally personalized their role by using their own experiences prior to and during their peer mentor tenure for construction/enactment based on various situations. In some cases, they anticipated in advance issues to which they would have to respond. At other times, they individualized their approach based on the people in the learning community.

*Personality characteristics.* Role construction/enactment also occurred for peer mentors based on their personality characteristics, or what one solo mentor referred to as “by nature.” A paired mentor added, “[You] kind of like go with your gut instincts... And I try not to give them any advice that I wouldn’t want someone to give me.” A solo mentor
indicated that important characteristics are part of one’s personality: “[A] lot of it’s personality and how well you get along with others and can you recognize when people are in need or if they need some help. I mean, those things are hard to teach. . . .” One grouped mentor suggested that being a peer mentor was not different than simply being humane:

[A] part of it is almost natural human reactions. I mean, if a person, for instance if there’s a person in your room complaining about something, it’s almost natural to empathize with them. If somebody has a problem with something, it’s human nature to help them with their problem. . . . I went into this [peer mentor position] because I was doing this type of thing to begin with anyway. I think a lot of the peer mentor stuff. . . that goes on can be reduced to. . . just basically how should you react as a human being in this situation.

This mentor emphasized a responsiveness to being human as a key component of enacting his role. There seemed to be a prevailing sense of being a helpful, empathic person that constituted the “by nature” approach to role construction/enactment. This sense of role construction/enactment being a natural part of human interactions was shared by all mentor categories. While they may have been responsive regardless of being a peer mentor, being in the role seemed to heighten the perceived responsibility to act in this manner.

Observing previous peer mentors. In referencing the previous peer mentors whom they observed, peer mentors mentioned both positive models from whom they learned and less positive models. The positive models provided them with examples of how to approach the position and be successful, examples deemed worthy of emulation. Mentors did not mention anything specific that the previous peer mentor did that was especially valuable, but mentors in all categories identified the previous peer mentor as someone they observed in
order to construct/enact their role. One mentor stated, "I was a member of this learning community. And I was watching... what my peer mentor was, and I really always wanted to be like him... That's kinda like why I wanted... to become a peer mentor for the learning community." This peer mentor used attentional processes in observing (Bandura, 1977), choosing to attend to her peer mentor, to learn about the peer mentor role with direct reference for how the role was embodied by a particular person. The models who were viewed as less positive provided the same type of information; in these cases, peer mentors determined what they would not do or those approaches that did not result in success as a peer mentor. A solo mentor said he hoped to "improve in areas where I thought he [the previous mentor] could've maybe done a little more;" examples he cited included wishing that the mentor had been more available, more interactive with all the students, and "more proactive in general." He also stated, "I felt there were moral issues I would like to set a better example for... i.e. coming back drunk frequently." These mentors determined the effectiveness of their previous peer mentors and chose behaviors based on the relative influence of those individuals. Bandura (1977) stated, "Knowing that a given model's behavior is effective in producing valued outcomes or in averting punishing ones can improve observational learning by increasing observers' attentiveness to the model's actions" (p. 37). The first peer mentor's comments suggest that "valued outcomes" resulted from the behavior she observed, potentially leading to even more observation on her part because she wanted to be like her peer mentor. The statement from the second peer mentor, however, suggests that the outcomes of his previous mentor's actions were not as valued. Such observation and modeling reflects the social nature of the peer mentor learning experience, consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977).
Faculty/staff also were mentioned as individuals who assisted in peer mentor role construction. Most often the faculty or staff member mentioned was the learning community coordinator. Because of the differing nature of the residential learning community programs, a coordinator may be a faculty member or a professional staff member. When asked who helped her learn to do her job, a solo mentor cited both the previous peer mentors and the learning community coordinators: "I always had my previous peer mentors and coordinators. Coordinators probably the most. I always keep in touch with them once a week, and . . . they will tell me what we’re gonna do." Setting goals for the learning community was what was provided by the learning community coordinator for one of the paired mentors, giving him information to use to plan activities and events for the learning community. The type of interaction peer mentors had with the learning community coordinators occurred because of the peer mentor’s level of involvement with the learning community. Consistent with the tenets of student involvement theory, that involvement led to greater learning on the part of the peer mentors, who subsequently learned more about how to enact the peer mentor role with direction from the coordinator (Astin, 1984). Learning community coordinators were cited frequently as individuals aiding in role construction/enactment. In this study, coordinators played an important role for the peer mentors as they provided interactions and learning opportunities for peer mentors that assisted in mentors’ role construction/enactment.

*On-the-job trial and error.* Simply being in the position and taking on the responsibilities of a peer mentor seemed to be the most common method of and most critical factor in role construction/enactment across the peer mentor respondents. The phrase “trial and error” was most frequently used by mentors to describe how they learned to do their job. Bandura (1977) suggested that “[t]he capacity to learn by observation enables people to
acquire large, integrated patterns of behavior without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error” (p. 12). Observing previous peer mentors, which may have reduced the potential scope of errors, apparently did not negate the need for peer mentors to learn by experience. One grouped mentor explained how he knew how to carry out his peer mentor role:

I think a lot of it was just assuming the responsibility of what it is that you do. That’s probably the biggest factor there is. It was just taking that role that you knew you had to take, and then the rest of it was just a... learn by doing process.

Peer mentors agreed that doing the job and learning from those experiences were the primary ways that they constructed/enacted their roles. One mentor said that the “big, extreme failures,” such as planning an event that he and the other mentors thought would appeal to the students that resulted in a low turnout, taught him lessons about his role and what to do in the role such as assessing student interest in the activity and determining, as much as possible, how many students planned to attend the event. Having the experiences, both successes and failures, was deemed more beneficial in role construction/enactment than any amount of training, no matter how helpful:

[Y]ou can do all the training in the world, but until you’re actually, you know, approached with a problem or like if someone needs help or, you know, something, someone’s unhappy with something... until you actually go through it and, and learn from that experience there’s really, those are pretty much the best way to learning, I guess.

Mentors valued their experiences “on-the-job” and found them beneficial to constructing/enacting their role. Social learning theory posits that “[t]he capacity to regulate
one's responsiveness on the basis of antecedent events predictive of response consequences provides the mechanism for foresightful behavior” (Bandura, 1977, p. 85). For example, when peer mentors planned activities for the learning community students, they relied on prior experiences of planning events and the conclusions about whether or not the events were successful. These experiences of planning and evaluating outcomes serve as “antecedent events predictive of response consequences.” If the event was successful, peer mentors “regulate [their] responsiveness” by potentially planning another similar program because the previous experience of success suggests a possible future experience of success; that success may predict the future response of the students to such an activity. Regardless of the success of the activity, the experience of planning and implementing the activity encourages “foresightful behavior” due to peer mentors having had the experience and being able to predict possible future outcomes. The learning that occurred through their successes and failures led to greater confidence in their abilities to predict consequences of future events, such as attendance at or interest in specific programs or activities.

*Feedback.* Although peer mentors indicated on the whole that they received minimal feedback, continued role construction/enactment occurred through more informal and unstructured processes through which information relevant to their role and role enactment was gained. Most peer mentors indicated that they had not received any “formal” feedback from supervisors or learning community students. For the participating peer mentors, “formal” feedback meant feedback that was usually written and was gathered through a formal process such as a survey. Oral feedback often came from learning community coordinators who, according to peer mentors in this study, offered praise and suggestions for improvement. A solo mentor shared that she received feedback on program planning from
the learning community coordinators who told her that she had done a good job organizing an event. Weekly staff meetings were a time when one paired mentor received oral feedback from her learning community coordinator. A grouped mentor also received oral feedback during staff meetings. Such feedback was most often reinforcing of their behaviors and choices. While such reinforcement did not create the behaviors since the behaviors preceded the feedback, the feedback may have regulated them such that peer mentors would continue or modify their choices related to role enactment (Bandura, 1977).

Peer mentors also cited students' informal, everyday comments made to them, such as thanking them for assistance or for providing an activity, as a type of feedback that was helpful in constructing/enacting their role. Students' observations of the mentor's actions, and even at times simply the mentor's presence, resulted in comments that mentors used as feedback:

I think feedback's when they say, "Hey, where've you been? You know, we haven't seen you." Like when I have a busy week and I'm not around, I bet seven or eight people are asking me where I've been, you know, what's going on, what's up. And I think that's pretty good feedback that they're wondering what's going on.

Such comments suggested that this peer mentor's students viewed him as part of the floor group, and the feedback indicated that his absence was noted by the students who were aware of his (un)availability since it was a departure from his normal pattern of being around and available.

The presence of other non-learning community students, such as a roommate, suggested to one mentor that his perceived availability had changed. A grouped mentor chose to have a roommate instead of a single room for 2002-2003, and he felt that having a
roommate made students less likely to stop by his room. He noticed that fewer students were visiting compared to the previous year when he did not have a roommate, and he received some comments from students which he used as feedback:

[M]y roommate's cool and everything, but he likes to have the door closed a lot more. And I had my door open a lot, and I've noticed a big difference, you know. . . . I think that's one reason I don't talk to all the guys, 'cause they don't stop by my room as often. . . . And I've had. . . some people comment on that. More jokingly than anything, but. . . I think it makes a difference.

In comparison to the mentor above, the feedback again was interpreted as he was less available to students, however indirectly the messages were delivered. His own observations, coupled with comments from students, led this mentor to his conclusion that having a roommate may have been a barrier to greater interactions and more modeling opportunities with the learning community students.

Summary. Peer mentors constructed their roles before they began their positions as well as while they were in the role. By being participants in the learning community, observing their peer mentor, reading the job description, participating in the interview process, attending training, and performing their job responsibilities, peer mentors were able to construct/enact their roles. They cited experience on the job or "trial and error" as the primary way in which they learned to carry out their responsibilities. Feedback was provided both by learning community coordinators and by the students in the learning community program, although little formal feedback was provided to the peer mentors. Often casual comments from students served to provide messages of success or failure to the peer mentors.
Solo Mentor Role Construction/Enactment Factors

In general, solo mentors seemed to have the fewest unique characteristics of the mentor groups. While they shared many similarities with mentors in all other categories with regard to role construction/enactment, solo mentors indicated a few experiences that were not identified by mentors in other categories. Specifically, solo mentors did not mention written job descriptions as being a factor in their role construction/enactment. Solo mentors also identified individuals beyond the learning community and the university as helping them learn how to be successful in the job. Finally, both solo mentors had experienced feedback in a very formal and public way by receiving peer mentor awards.

Neither solo mentor mentioned gaining information about their role by reading the peer mentor job description. However, solo mentors mentioned their learning community coordinators as individuals who provided information about how to construct/enact their roles. They also referenced the previous peer mentor a great deal in discussing how they came to understand their role. Unique to the solo mentor group was the mention of individuals outside the learning community program and the university who assisted in role construction/enactment. One mentor identified others, such as parents and a church minister, as influential in the mentor’s learning how to do the job:

I think, like your parents and the people you surround yourself with previously, like... through my church, you know, I’ve learned a lot from my campus minister... Just how to be sensitive when people are in need and helping people out in that way...

This mentor seemed to suggest that in order to be successful, peer mentors had to have certain qualities, such as compassion and sensitivity, that were learned through the
maturation process and through interactions with and observations of influential others as much as, if not more than, through other peer mentor training-type activities.

Both solo mentors stated that they had not received any formal feedback or seen the results of surveys completed by learning community participants. However, both indicated that their recent receipt of the Exemplary Mentor awards, which are awarded to peer mentors based on recommendation letters provided by learning community coordinators and student learning community participants, was a type of feedback. Both were very modest about their awards, almost overlooking them as feedback. One of the mentors mentioned receiving comments from students, and added, “... and then the, you know, the Exemplary Mentor thing. I guess that’s some sort of feedback...” This feedback was almost an afterthought but clearly indicated that the learning community coordinators and the participants who wrote letters of support observed positive behaviors and found the performance of these mentors to be noteworthy.

In summary, solo mentors constructed/enacted their role based on assistance from learning community coordinators, observations of previous peer mentors, and interactions with influential others in their lives, such as parents and a minister. Neither referenced a written job description as a tool for role construction/enactment. Both solo mentors felt they received minimal feedback. However, they acknowledged that the Exemplary Mentor award, of which they both were recipients, served as a type of feedback from their learning community coordinators and the student participants in the program.

*Paired Mentor Role Construction/Enactment Factors*

Paired mentors experienced many of the same factors as other mentors in role construction/enactment. A factor specifically mentioned by paired mentors was their partner
mentor who, contrary to expectations, seemed to play a minimal role in role
construction/enactment. Paired mentors identified the students in the learning community as
influencing their role construction/enactment, and one mentioned his academic major as
having an influence on his peer mentor role.

Partner mentors. Like other mentors, paired mentors mentioned learning community
coordinators and previous mentors as individuals who assisted in their role construction.
Having a partner mentor was assumed to have provided an additional support/assistance
mechanism and an opportunity for peer learning for the paired mentors due to an expectation
of frequent interactions as team members in providing learning community services. This
assumption is fitting with Astin’s study (1993) which indicated that the frequency of student-
to-student interactions are associated with gains which, in the case of residential learning
community paired peer mentors, may have included best practices for enacting their roles.
However, surprisingly little was mentioned about their partner peer mentor. In fact, in many
respects “paired mentors” constructed/enacted their roles in much the same way as solo
mentors and indicated little of the expected value of being in a pair. With respect to Astin’s
student-to-student interactions, these paired peer mentors did not interact meaningfully with
each other – at least with respect to the role construction and enactment in which each was
presumably engaged.

In the three programs represented that had paired mentors, both paired/partner
mentors were new in Fall 2002 for one program, one mentor was new and one returning for
another, and the final program had two returning mentors. Mentors were not asked
specifically about their interactions or relationship with their partner mentors in order to
determine if, based on frequency and types of comments, partner mentors seemed to have
much impact on the peer mentor's role. One paired mentor never referenced her partner mentor at all. This was especially surprising since this pair of mentors lived on the same floor. All other paired mentors noted the influences, positive or not, that their partner mentor had had on them. However, they generally spoke very little about their partner mentors.

One mention of a partner peer mentor in the area of role construction/enactment was when one returning mentor mentioned that his first partner peer mentor (not the current one) was not helpful:

I pretty much learned on my own. I had a partner peer mentor, but she never kinda really did anything. I never had any contact with her. So I just... took it on my own. And I went to meetings and I met with other peer mentors in other communities, and they... kinda showed me the ropes and gave me advice. But as being on the floor, it was just me, myself and I primarily and... [I] just taught myself. While this mentor did not find his partner to be helpful as he learned his new role, he did rely on other peer mentors to provide that kind of assistance. However, the one peer mentor who had a partner mentor who was a returner indicated that her partner helped her: “My partner peer mentor had been a peer mentor before, so I kind of relied on him to instruct me on how to do things. And our advisors, also.” Both mentors constructed their roles by observation of another mentor, one being positive and the other less positive. The mentor with the less positive model found others to observe and possibly emulate through his interactions with peer mentors in other learning communities. The tenets of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the importance of observation for learning again are clear in these two examples.

Student influences. Students who influenced peer mentors’ role construction/enactment included previous peer mentors (as already discussed) as well as
other peer mentors from other learning community programs and the students in the program. The paired mentor who found his initial partner mentor unhelpful said, “I went to meetings and I met with other peer mentors in other communities and they were kinda, they kinda showed me the ropes and gave me advice.” While they rarely mentioned their partner mentors as influences, only this one paired mentor mentioned seeking out assistance from mentors in other programs. One mentor indicated that she constructed/enacted her role based on her interactions with the students in the residential learning community. She indicated that the students were the primary individuals who helped her learn to do her job through what they expressed as needs and wants. This peer mentor based her role on what she perceived that the students needed, based on her own experience as a student in the program and by assessing the group, as well as responded to students’ feedback about wants and needs.

*Academic major influence.* Only one mentor suggested that his academic major assisted with his role construction as a peer mentor. He stated that being an education major aided him in assisting the learning community students. One possible interpretation of this statement is that what he learned in his education courses, which prepared him to be educator, helped him construct/enact his role. This mentor was the only education major serving as a residential learning community peer mentor in this study as well as the only peer mentor who indicated any connection between his peer mentor role and his major.

*First-year experience as an influence.* Only returning paired mentors explicitly stated that the second year of being a peer mentor was easier than the first. This is presumably because they had spent a year “on the job” and had this extra year to construct/enact the role, even though it may have been played differently during the second year. Two of the three
returning paired mentors stated their belief that a year of experience was a valuable resource in constructing/enacting their peer mentor role. After committing a year to this type of involvement, peer mentors’ continuation of such expenditures of time and energy toward this involvement also may have resulted in further learning and personal development (Astin, 1984).

Feedback. Some of the paired mentors received specific feedback on the success of their role construction/enactment in the sense of how well they did their jobs, while others did not. One mentor stated that students had completed a survey that included information about the peer mentors, but he had not seen the results. However, two of the mentors did see the results of the survey completed by the learning community students. One mentor identified the feedback as helpful. She noted that 70% of the students were satisfied, presumably with the peer mentors. She stated that the 30% who were not satisfied did not seek out the peer mentors, but she did not explain how she knew this information. The other mentor who saw survey results made a change to his approach based on that feedback. He stated, “I’m not real good with names, and I didn’t know the other girls’ names, well, like one or two of them. Not ten or twelve... So the feedback was to learn their names,” which he did. Like other mentors, paired mentors also mentioned receiving primarily oral, mostly informal, feedback from their supervisors and from students.

Summary. Paired mentors were less influenced by their partner mentors than was anticipated. While most mentioned their partner mentor, very little was shared to indicate that the partner mentor had a meaningful impact in their role construction/enactment. Mentors in other learning communities were mentioned by one paired mentor as helpful as he learned to do his job. Another mentor regarded the students in the learning community as
those most influential in her role construction/enactment. Returning paired mentors indicated
that the second year in the role was easier, presumably because they had experience upon
which to draw. A few paired mentors received written feedback from surveys that were
conducted and used that feedback to inform their practice. However, the majority of
feedback was oral from learning community coordinators and students in the program.

**Grouped Mentor Role Construction/Enactment Factors**

Grouped mentors, like other mentors, constructed/enacted their roles based on the
influence of a number of factors. Factors unique to some of the grouped peer mentors
included their noting of a greater variety of others within the university community, beyond
the learning community coordinator and previous peer mentors, in helping them
construct/enact their role. They also noted the value of the other peer mentors with whom
they worked more often and indicated that teamwork had a greater influence on their role
construction/enactment than did the paired mentors. Feedback for grouped mentors was
provided in similar manners as the other groups, with the exception of a grouped mentor
citing the interview process as a specific opportunity for gathering feedback.

**Faculty/staff influences.** Grouped mentors identified a number of individuals who
assisted in their role construction. Only grouped mentors mentioned faculty/staff beyond the
learning community coordinators who helped them learn their roles. Other peer mentors
along with learning community coordinators, Academic Services Coordinators in the
Department of Residence, a faculty member, a teaching assistant, and others holding
leadership positions on the residence hall floor were named as those who helped peer
mentors construct/enact their roles. Other peer mentors included those in their program
(other members of their “group”) and previous peer mentors.
One faculty member was named by a grouped mentor as influential in helping her construct/enact her role. Two coordinators in the Academic Services unit in the Department of Residence were named as individuals who helped the peer mentors learn to do their jobs. One of these individuals also served as the learning community coordinator and supervisor of the peer mentors for one learning community program. The teaching assistant involved with one program was mentioned by both peer mentors from that specific learning community who participated in the study. One mentor described the teaching assistant’s involvement:

For our learning community, the teaching assistant that runs the lab was the main contact. He had, he plays a huge role. . . . Yeah, he’s really great. This year he kinda got held back a little bit because he was working on his Ph.D. so that cut him back. . . .

This peer mentor shared that the same teaching assistant was active with the learning community when she was a learning community student, and she described his presence in the residence hall and his involvement in social activities as very positive interactions. Her observations of his involvement, both when she was a student participant and as a peer mentor, were positive and potentially influential on her role construction/enactment.

*Student influences.* Other students holding leadership positions on the residence hall floor included the Resident Assistant/Community Advisor, the house president, and the house cabinet members. One peer mentor mentioned these individuals and stated that they taught her both positive ways to do her job as well as approaches she found to be less positive and thus unlikely to use:
I kind of watch the example of my RA and the house president and house cabinet and stuff and I learn, like I picked and chose things – ways that I wanted to be and ways I didn’t want to be like.

This particular mentor had not been a participant in the learning community as a first-year student and thus had no previous peer mentor whom she could have observed. However, she used attentional processes (Bandura, 1977) to select leaders who had perceived status on the floor from among the multiple influences available to which she could attend, and she incorporated what she learned as she deemed appropriate.

Interactions with other mentors on their learning community team led to information used in role construction/enactment. Grouped mentors regularly mentioned the other mentors on their learning community team when they discussed their experiences. One first-year mentor relied on her returning mentor co-workers for assistance:

They [had] already been a peer mentor for, like, a while, so I came to them for help ‘cause they have more experience than me. And I ask[ed] them, you know, “How do I do these things?” and... then they just [led] me to the right way.

Another mentor stated that her interactions with co-workers were positive as well, “[W]e all get along really, really well. So we all lean on each other. . . . Our meetings are just so much fun. So, we help each other out if we have problems.” Challenges to working with a group of mentors were identified by one mentor in the same program:

I find [the interaction between peer mentors] to be almost as challenging as dealing with the students sometimes because the thing is, you have, in our case we have five peer mentors. . . . [and] having five different, extremely unique personalities, a lot of it is a challenge in trying to. . . link up times when we need to be together to work on
things and plan things. . . . And with the inclusion of the two coordinators, you know that's seven people that you're trying to work out schedules with. And so that ends up being something that's also extremely challenging. . . because if you don't have everybody on that same page, then you have to take the time to make sure everybody understands what's going on before going and presenting stuff to the students.

While they found benefits to working as a team, mentors also acknowledged logistical challenges as well as those related to having, or not having, a shared understanding about job and learning community information.

Reliance on returning mentors also was mentioned by grouped mentors. A mentor who was one of two new mentors in the three-mentor team shared how she constructed/enacted her role:

Basically [by] talking with the peer mentors I'd be working with this year. We kind of had some discussions through email over the summer, with some ideas. And we had one peer mentor that was from the previous year, and he kinda told us what they had done that we didn't know about already, that was behind the scenes. And we just kinda discussed new ideas and kinda brought it out for ourselves.

Only two of the twelve grouped mentors who participated in the focus groups had been mentors the year before. It is clear, though, that when a returning mentor was available, new mentors utilized that individual in determining how to do the peer mentor job. As such, they seemed to trust what the returning mentor learned through his or her previous year of involvement as a peer mentor but may not unquestioningly accept and incorporate that information.
Feedback. Grouped mentors shared similar experiences regarding feedback with solo and paired mentors. Oral feedback came from students, often as casual comments or messages of appreciation. Learning community coordinators provided some forms of feedback as well. Again, a few peer mentors in this group mentioned that learning community student survey information was gathered or was being gathered but had not been shared with them at the time of the focus group. Others received feedback from the surveys, and one stated that no survey was given to students. Only one grouped peer mentor noted that feedback about the program was gathered through the interview process to hire upcoming peer mentors:

The most recent thing was we just conducted interviews on Friday, and we got a little bit of feedback from some of the people that were in the team last year and then some of the people that were in the team this year. So we just kinda got ideas of what... might need to happen next year. . . . Because one of the questions is “How... can we improve the program?” Or . . . “What ideas do you have to help improve the program?” So that’s one way we can kind of get feedback, but it’s kind of late to change it now. But for next year.

Utilizing the Spring interview process to gather feedback may have been helpful for the next peer mentor group, but not for current peer mentors. Not all peer mentors mentioned involvement in the interviewing process, so only those who were involved had the opportunity to gain this type of feedback. Another grouped mentor indicated disappointment that she received feedback from students at the end of the year when it was too late to make changes. In general, peer mentors seemed interested in having feedback, based on the
experiences and observations of students and coordinators, that they could use to better perform their job responsibilities and raise satisfaction levels among the students.

**Summary.** Grouped mentors identified a wider variety of individuals who influenced their role construction/enactment. They were the only group to identify faculty/staff beyond the learning community coordinators and students in other leadership positions who helped them learn to do their jobs. Grouped mentors also cited the other mentors on their team as important in their role construction/enactment, especially when a returning mentor was part of that team. Feedback experiences for grouped mentors were similar to those of other mentors. However, gathering feedback for the next year via the interview process was unique to some mentors in the grouped mentor category.

**Conclusions**

Sources of information for peer mentors' role construction/enactment included written information and interactions with various individuals. Job responsibilities were highlighted in formal written materials such as job descriptions specific to residential learning communities and the Peer Mentor Handbook for all learning community peer mentors. Job qualifications were present on most job descriptions. Peer mentors themselves provided relatively clear descriptions of what they believed their responsibilities to be, although few referenced a job description as providing them with information about their role. Their role construction/enactment began for many as a result of observing their own peer mentor from the previous year(s). These observations are consistent with the tenets of involvement theory (Astin, 1984) since their own student-level involvement in the learning community quite possibly led them to undertake greater investments of time and energy in their college experience by taking on the peer mentor position. Social learning theory
(Bandura, 1977) was also evident since peer mentors identified a number of individuals whose behavior they observed and incorporated as they deemed appropriate, based on how successful the behaviors were judged to be.

Experience was considered the greatest teacher as peer mentors indicated learning how to do their jobs primarily through "trial and error." While they identified models whom they observed, peer mentors believed that "trial and error" was an important and inevitable way of learning their role. Bandura (1977) claimed that observation of models could reduce errors in performing a role or function. Additionally, however, some peer mentors seemed to believe that they needed to experience some errors in order to learn how to better enact their roles. Other mentors mentioned error as a natural by-product of the experience, not necessarily something they needed to experience but something that they were not necessarily surprised to have experienced.

Peer mentors in general reported receiving minimal if any formal feedback. "Formal" feedback for mentors was defined as written information. Most received oral feedback from supervisors as well as from students. Peer mentors in this study also were aware of written feedback that was collected, but in many cases that information was not shared with the peer mentors or was shared too late for them to utilize the information in their role enactment.

Social learning theory posits that individuals can exercise some control over their behavior through self-regulatory processes that are informed by consequences for actions (Bandura, 1977). Consequences for performance may have been experienced in the form of this kind of systematically gathered feedback which could have led mentors to behaviors that may have been more helpful to the students they served.
While it is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether or not the specific differences resulted from the mentor categories identified, solo, paired, and grouped mentors each offered some unique information that was category-specific. Only a solo mentor cited individuals outside of the university as influential to his peer mentor role construction/enactment. Solo mentors received little formal feedback but happened to be recipients of Exemplary Mentor awards, which they took as feedback in the form of validation. Paired mentors made surprisingly few references to their partner mentor as being influential to their role construction/enactment. They identified students in the learning community as important individuals who assisted them in their role construction/enactment. Paired mentors in this study had greater access to survey information, which provided them with one source of formal feedback. Grouped mentors were the only group to identify other university personnel, beyond the learning community coordinator and previous peer mentor, as assisting in their role construction/enactment. Feedback seemed to come late in the process; typically it was too late to use the feedback to make changes in the current year. One grouped mentor used the interview process, through which potential new mentors were interviewed, to gain feedback to be used for the next year.

The previous section of Chapter 4 addressed the first two research questions of this study, which are:

1. How do residential learning community peer mentors construct and enact their roles?
2. Who do they look to, if anyone, for guidance or models in that role construction and enactment?
Through the construction/enactment of their role, peer mentors also identified what they learned and contextualized that learning within their peer mentor role when applicable. They also acknowledged learning outcomes that occurred during their time as peer mentors that they deemed not a result of being a peer mentor. The next section outlines these learning outcomes as identified by peer mentors. First, learning outcomes that were highlighted across mentor categories are shared. Those learning outcomes that were unique to each specific mentor category are then discussed. Conclusions for the section as well as for the chapter are then presented.

Peer Mentor Learning Outcomes

Peer mentors were asked what they gained, how they changed, and what they learned since becoming peer mentors. Many of those gains were interpersonal, including improved skills in areas of communication, leadership, and observation. Some also mentioned that they became more outgoing and outspoken as a result of being peer mentors. They cited a change in their personal awareness of how their experiences mirrored or did not mirror their students’ experiences and of their role model status, which was discussed earlier. Academic gains were not frequently identified but included experiencing a motivation to study harder, often in order to carry out their role modeling responsibilities. A few mentors, however, concluded that they did not believe they gained/learned anything specifically as a result of being in the peer mentor role.

*Overall Mentor Gains/Changes/Learning*

Peer mentors in all categories mentioned gaining or learning communication skills and leadership skills. They also cited a greater recognition of their own abilities as well as the subtleties of working with groups and individuals. A few mentors had the opportunity to
play a structured teaching role, which resulted in learning outcomes related to this opportunity. Most mentors indicated that they did not learn more about their academic major as a result of being in the mentor role even though most mentor positions were associated with a specific academic major or discipline. However, many stated that they learned more about other academic majors within their discipline. For those who believed the mentor role had an impact on their academic success, much of that impact was credited to the mentors’ need to: (A) “practice what they preach” by modeling good study behaviors, or (B) to their need to manage their time well due to the busy schedules that they attributed partially to the peer mentor role.

*Communication skills.* Communication skills included verbal skills, listening skills, and a new recognition for many that people receive messages differently. For one mentor, verbal skills included being “professional”:

> I think I have learned, probably better verbal skills, being able to communicate what I’m trying to communicate to the person a little bit better. Being able to balance where you have to be professional, you know, [the] professional aspect with a student and also have to live with the person in the same floor or the same house.

Living with the students, he realized that communication could differ depending on the role he chose to play – peer mentor with perceived authority or floor member with a more casual relationship. As a result, he was more conscious of choices in self-presentation and the consequences of those choices. This recognition of the potential challenges of communication in the peer mentor role were noted by another respondent who realized, “I have to be able to communicate with everybody, and not... every student is the same. And not every student receives the message the same way.” This mentor indicated that some
students heard most messages from the mentor as being mandates, while others heard most messages as options, such as attending events or arriving at events at a certain time. This reflects not only their communication but the mentor's level of authority and how students viewed/accepted that authority. Because they are positioned as "high status" individuals within the learning community (Bandura, 1977), mentors acknowledged this need to be attentive to their communication skills in order to accomplish the outcomes of their role. However, they also seemed to realize that being positioned as "high status" was not sufficient to keeping a high status among the students. Peer mentors developed multiple strategies for communication, such as being clear and acknowledging factors that influenced communication with the learning community students.

Communication was certainly a factor in peer mentors' reflections on a change that surfaced in all mentor categories – being more outgoing. Mentors in each category shared that they became more outgoing as a result of being in their role. Reflecting the accessibility/availability that peer mentors seemed to emphasize in role construction/enactment, "being outgoing" fostered an interpretation of accessibility among the learning community students. Both solo mentors said that they became more social and outgoing as a result of being a peer mentor. In fact, they saw that as a job requirement even though the extent to which they felt the need to reach out to students was greater than what was natural for either of them. One of the mentors said,

I think I've learned I'm maybe a little more outgoing than I thought I was. I thought I was pretty, I wouldn't say shy, but I would never consider myself outgoing. . . . So I guess I learned that I'm a little more outgoing. And I think being a peer mentor
makes, makes me even more outgoing because I feel like, feel a little obligated to get to know everybody.

A paired mentor shared that she became more of a conversation initiator as a result of being a peer mentor. While she was willing to engage in conversations before being in her role, since being a peer mentor she has been more willing to also initiate conversations. A grouped mentor commented on how the role helped him prepare for future interactions. When asked how he has changed since being a peer mentor, he replied:

My biggest part is just my social aspects in my life. I'm more outgoing than I used to be. I came in, I've always been a shy person. I'm still shy, but I'm not as shy as I used to be which has helped me in other endeavors in my life where I've had to go out and meeting people. . . . I've met a lot [of people] too that I know that I can refer to if I have to get in contact with them sometime in the future.

Being more comfortable with social interactions and identifying themselves as more outgoing was a common theme regarding ways peer mentors have changed and grown. The mentors experienced personal development as a result of the investment of energy for involvement (Astin, 1984) that these mentors demonstrated by becoming more "outgoing." This particular change seemed necessary and inevitable given their responsibilities, and they specifically attributed this change, which they all identified as positive, to their peer mentor role.

**Leadership skills.** Peer mentors generally stated that they gained leadership skills through their role. When asked what he had gained by being a peer mentor, one grouped mentor identified the opportunity of leadership as well as the challenges of being a leader of a group of students who were four years younger than he:
I guess kinda [the peer mentor role is] just a general leadership role in that you had to take the helm as opposed to just being... a cautious observer. You kinda had to steer people in the right direction, especially when it was something that was difficult because, you know, having such a huge gap [with] me being a fifth year [student] to a bunch of freshmen and just that mentality [with] that age group and age difference, [being a peer mentor] just helped me understand that it is difficult to be in that leadership role.

This mentor conveyed an understanding of the maturational differences between himself and the learning community students, as well as the experiential differences that positioned him to provide a specific kind of leadership. Another grouped mentor stated, “I gained leadership, too, from the whole process. I didn’t have a whole lot of experience in that field.” A solo mentor mentioned that the learning community coordinator attended to leadership skills in the peer mentor position: “[My learning community coordinator] has been really good. I mean, he’s really big on leadership and taking initiative and he teaches a leadership class. We meet once every two weeks. And I think that helps you learn.” Peer mentors uniformly identified the acquisition of leadership skills as a positive learning outcome that seemed to be a result of playing the peer mentor role.

**Self-efficacy.** Peer mentors frequently mentioned an increased self-efficacy as a learning outcome, resulting from some situations that they found themselves in as peer mentors. A first-year grouped mentor shared her thoughts and concerns, which began at the application stage of the process:

I learned that I could do things that I never thought I could do, because I remember when I first applied to be a peer mentor. And I was, I asked my advisor...
“Are you sure I can do this?” ... And ... just two semester[s] [are] almost over and I’m doing fine and everyone’s happy and that makes me feel good because I actually did something.

One paired mentor explained his recognition of his abilities to help students:

I guess I learned I could help people. I always knew I could help somebody with a subject, but to have a greater impact than just, you know, showing them how to do the homework. I think that’s what I’ve learned. I know that I can really, really, really help somebody. ... That might not just be homework. It might be with...problems with a girlfriend or somebody who’s feeling depressed and might want to hurt themselves or something like that. Knowing that I could help them, that they could call on me, that’s the biggest thing I learned. I learned that I can handle things like that.

Another mentor echoed that belief, stating, “I guess I learned that I can handle hard situations, too. When placed in that situation, I know what to do and know what resources I have.” Being in the peer mentor position offered opportunities for the mentors to gain confidence and recognize the abilities that they had to be successful and help others.

By working with the learning community students, peer mentors learned the limits of their abilities as well. Mentors mentioned learning that they could not control everything, and they periodically faced the unexpected that, at times, required them to re-prioritize their time and attention. A grouped mentor shared a situation where, in the unexpected absence of the teaching assistant during a final exam, he had to respond:

I had to take care of like the first section and a half all by myself, which was a big surprise. And I had nothing to work with. I didn’t have the final, so I had to chase
down people, like [the professor], and I had to find [the student services coordinator] and find out what was going on and just kind of take care of it. So... I learned about myself that I was capable of handling it, you know, under a little bit of pressure. And it was a big surprise and we got it all worked out and it worked out fine.

Such problem-solving resulted in greater self-confidence that the mentor could handle unexpected challenges. One paired mentor identified it as "flexibility" and indicated learning that sometimes issues come up that must be addressed, requiring the mentor to "drop everything." A grouped mentor echoed that belief:

I guess I've learned that you can't plan for everything. You can plan for most of the stuff, but there's always gonna be things that come up, and you just kinda have to deal with them as best you can.

Another mentor agreed, and shared a unique situation for which he was not prepared:

[Another mentor and I] had two of the most extraordinary events happen to one of our students each. One of them was arrested, the charges for images on his computer. And then one of them was arrested, well not arrested, was ridiculed for posting images of this same type. And so, it, there's nothing, it's not a situation you can ever plan for. And I guess the thing I learned is, I don't know that training, I guess I'd say that planning for all these various scenarios isn't going to help you. You just have to, you almost have to go, take it as it comes along.

This mentor also echoed the inability of training to fully prepare peer mentors, which was mentioned previously. This retrospective observation is consistent with the peer mentor orientation and training. An examination of trainers' workshop information and a follow-up conversation with the training facilitator (K. Earnest, personal communication, July 7, 2003)
confirmed that those individuals providing the training stipulate that the goal of training is to provide peer mentors with tools to use in their position. It was not the goal of the trainers to “fully prepare” peer mentors as this kind of preparation is not possible (which the peer mentor above also acknowledged).

As the mentors indicated, some situations arose for which they could not plan or have advance preparation, and they had to rely on their judgment and problem-solving skills to address the situations. Bandura (1977) stated, “The experiences generated by behavior also partly determine what a person becomes and can do which, in turn, affects subsequent behavior” (p. 9). Having successfully handled unanticipated situations, peer mentors experienced heightened self-efficacy and believed that they could successfully handle unexpected situations in the future.

*Working with others.* Working with groups and individuals was a part of the peer mentor position for peer mentors in all three categories, and mentors commented on what they learned about these interactions. Learning how to interact with and provide assistance to others, as well as observing groups and individuals in order to assess needs were mentioned by the peer mentors. A solo mentor discussed interacting with students based on the students’ needs:

I’ve learned... a lot about just interacting with people, with different people. Just being able to get along. Even though I don’t think I had a problem with that before. I think this opportunity’s [being a peer mentor] enhanced... my ability to just get along with people and be able to help out a person. Like when people come and sit in your room and talk to you for three or four hours, and it’s like... “Ok, I can keep
talking here for an hour or two” or however long they want to go until they feel comfortable with whatever they’re struggling with.

A grouped mentor indicated that he needed to casually approach student issues because students did not respond to direct questions about issues:

Basically, the main thing I learned that... was never covered in any of the training or anything like that was students, almost invariably, will not talk about something if you bring it up directly. Like for instance, if you want to figure out if a student has changed majors, you can go up to him and ask him, “Have you changed majors?” But if you just go up to him and ask him, “Hey, how are classes going?” they’re gonna say, “Fine.” They’re not gonna tell you, “Hey, I’m not taking [learning community] classes anymore. I switched to [a different major].” The best way to do it is to ask them... how their day is going. . . Casual is probably the best way to go about doing this. . . I learned the best way to go about getting the information about peer mentor stuff was to start out the conversation [with] absolutely nothing to do with the peer mentor [information].

Peer mentors made choices about how to enact the peer mentor role and acknowledged the various options available for that enactment, clearly demonstrated by this peer mentor.

Personalization and personal identification with residents resulted in gains for mentors. Basing interactions on personal experience was the initial method of one paired mentor. She indicated that she gained an understanding of people in general by being a peer mentor and noted that her experiences and those of the students with whom she worked were often similar. As a result, it was important to her to reassure them, using her own experiences as examples. By sharing her experiences with them, she offered them a
vicarious observing opportunity, and she seemed to hope to spare them the need for failures that is one of the benefits of observation and subsequent modeling, according to Bandura (1977).

An appreciation of at least one type of diversity resulted for peer mentors. A realization that occurred to one solo mentor was that issues vary, even among a group of students who have many similar characteristics, such as all being first-year students in the same academic discipline. He shared, “I think I’ve learned more about the struggles people go through academically and how their struggles might be a little different than what I experienced.” Unlike the paired mentor who identified her reliance on her own experiences to understand and assist the learning community students, this solo mentor recognized that his experience may not have been a common experience that all learning community students had. A grouped mentor learned how to deal with these differences:

I learned a little bit about like tolerance, I guess, because everybody learns differently. And you can’t force people to come to you for help and you can’t force them to go to class and join in activities. And you just have to do what you can with each individual person, you know. Everyone learns differently and everyone will interact with you differently, and you just have to learn to deal with that.

Another grouped mentor commented on recognizing the differences in learning styles – broadly constructed -- stating,

I think I learned to become a lot more patient with people because right away I learned that people, you know, don’t learn the same way as me. So it’s really difficult to try and explain stuff to some people because they just don’t catch onto it right away.
No training sessions were offered on learning style differences during the August training. However, through their observations of and experiences with the learning community students, peer mentors became more aware of the diversity of learning styles and personalities that they needed to address within their groups.

*Teaching.* A teaching role was listed as a responsibility in five of the ten peer mentor job descriptions. These peer mentors were responsible for assisting with or teaching a class. If they taught at all, most mentors typically had some teaching responsibility for an orientation-type class. Teaching responsibilities ranged from one mentor who indicated he had a primary teaching role to other mentors who stated that they were responsible for teaching a session of a course. Some also mentioned assisting students with academic issues. These opportunities offered benefits to peer mentors consistent with involvement theory (Astin, 1984) because they required the mentors to focus their energy on academic experiences and/or content. As well, these teaching responsibilities provided an opportunity for mentors to model and positioned mentors to be observed by the students in an academic situation. This situation had the potential for providing a learning experience for the peer mentors who could demonstrate some semblance of teaching behaviors they had observed, and it may have provided students with behaviors to model based on their observations of the peer mentor (Bandura, 1977).

When assisting with academic issues, some mentors needed to recall, or sometimes brush up on, previously-learned material. A paired mentor explained:

*All the stuff I learned in class my freshman and sophomore years, I have to relearn it. I need to know it. I can’t forget all that calculus. I can’t forget the chemistry or the physics or even the political science and sociology some of my students take.*
I've taken that before... but some of them have to learn it, and they come to me first
[for help].

Modeling the retention, or need for the retention, of academic material was yet another way
mentors offered themselves as examples for students to observe and potentially incorporate
similar approaches into their own behaviors, demonstrating the tenets of social learning
theory (Bandura, 1977).

Having an opportunity to teach resulted in learning outcomes related to the specific
class topic for one mentor who described her experience preparing for an orientation class
that was part of the learning community:

I learned stuff even just going to their orientation class and, like, helping teach the
session and learning about the different majors in the . . . college from working with
them. . . . [I] especially [learned from] the session that I led which was all about like
resumes and portfolios and job searches. . . . [W]hen you teach it to someone else you
learn so much more about it yourself.

Peer mentors learned, or re-learned, information pertinent to the learning community courses
as a result of being called upon for assistance or being required to teach a class. One grouped
mentor, also responsible for teaching in a class, suggested that more training in instructing
and conducting meetings would be helpful with this aspect of the peer mentor role.

*Knowledge of academic major.* Although some assisted with or attended a class
associated with the learning community (and thus, in most cases, their academic major or
discipline), peer mentors in general did not indicate they gained greater knowledge of their
academic major as a result of being a peer mentor. Two of the ten learning communities
represented were interdisciplinary, with peer mentors from a variety of majors. The others,
however, were college or major-specific, and the peer mentors were in an academic program related to that college or major. One paired mentor in a college-specific learning community shared that, by working with the advisors and professors through the learning community, he learned the "behind the scenes stuff." He defined this "stuff" as "university rules[,] how and what professors can and can't do for students[,] . . . and contacts for later dates," which helped him address student issues. He was aware that he had information not generally available to students due to his status as a peer mentor. In general, mentors did not perceive having learned more about their majors due to being peer mentors. Any additional knowledge acquired was attributed to being a student progressing through the academic program.

Knowledge of academic options. All categories of peer mentors mentioned that they learned more about related academic majors or programs within their disciplines as a result of being peer mentors. This likely was related to being an effective resource for students as mentioned previously. Because students had questions about other majors within the academic discipline, peer mentors sought out additional information beyond their own majors to provide assistance. A solo mentor explained why it was necessary to learn about other options and majors:

I would make assumptions sometimes, like "Oh, you have to take that class, this class" because I had to. . . . And then I went back and looked at it later, and you know, their option was a little different and so they didn't have to take that. . . . I looked through all the options now, [made] sure I know a little bit more what I'm talking about.
A paired mentor stated that he did not learn more about his major because of being in the mentor role, but he did gain other information that was pertinent to his role:

I may pay more attention to some things now than I did before so I can try to relay the information more effectively, but I don’t know that... I’ve picked up anything about the major that I wouldn’t have otherwise.

Because of the likelihood of having had similar experiences to the students, a grouped mentor indicated the value in learning about other aspects of the discipline:

I’m mentoring people who are in all different... majors in the... college, not just my own [major]. So I had to learn to apply my experiences to their experiences, too.... Because it’s not gonna be the same, but the principles [of the particular discipline] can be applied through the different majors.

Peer mentors generally felt a responsibility to learn about the other majors in their college in order to assist the learning community students. While this greater involvement may not have led to learning outcomes about their own majors, they gained a degree of confidence about their knowledge of other majors, which served them well as resources for the students.

**Impact on academic success.** Nine of the 19 peer mentors shared that their grade point averages increased since becoming a peer mentor. Four indicated a decrease in grade point average. Five stated that their grade point averages remained the same, and one responded “[a] little bit” which indicated neither a notable increase or decrease, nor a constant grade point average. When asked if the peer mentor position had an impact (positive or negative) on their academic success, few said it did while most said that it did not. A solo mentor stated that taking fewer credits was what led to his improved grade point
average. He also strongly believed that the peer mentor should be a junior or senior who would take fewer credits and could devote the time to the peer mentor role:

[The peer mentor job is] not affecting me because, I think... if this was my sophomore or junior year it would. I would either sacrifice grades or I would sacrifice peer mentor performance. So I personally feel strongly about having a junior or senior... for [this learning community] anyway... because they'll be taking lighter loads. They'll be taking what they enjoy more so it won't be as tedious, I guess.

Some mentors did not attribute an increase or decrease in grade point average to their peer mentor role. A paired mentor commented on academic success and the credibility with the students that may result from the mentor's academic success:

I don't know that my grades have been, or my academic success has been affected by [being a peer mentor]. I certainly try to get good marks so they see me as being successful and someone they can trust. And I give them suggestions on how to study....

He recognized that students were observing his academic behaviors, and he believed that demonstrating behaviors that led to academic success that the students could emulate also resulted in credibility as a role model. One such behavior may have been modeling studying and teaching the students how to study when needed.

The academic impact of role modeling, inherent in the peer mentor position, was raised by other mentors as well. A paired mentor said that the role had a positive impact on his academic success for similar reasons of credibility:

I guess, being a peer mentor, I had to tell students about study skills and time
management and ... [how] to pretty much learn efficiently. And then I had to back it up. You know, I couldn't tell students... “Studying is important, so make sure you do your calculus,” and then go out and party every night.

Other peer mentors made similar statements, indicating their awareness that their behavior was observed by the students and their credibility as peer mentors was based on acting in accordance with behaviors that they encouraged in the students. These statements suggest that peer mentors believed that what they modeled for students to observe was an important part of their role and led to them being perceived as credible models, consistent with the espoused importance of modeling in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977).

Two grouped mentors reflected on study habits and available time, which may have been signs of academic commitment and which they believed impacted their academic success. One mentor shared an interaction with a learning community student that helped her regain her studying focus:

I had a student come in and say, ... “How do you study?” And I had to think; it's like, “Well how do I study?” And so... I had to... kinda map out some ideas... and that helped me get back into the groove because, you know, half way through the semester you start getting to that hump where you don’t really want to do anything. It was about that time, and so I’m like, “Oh, these are some good ideas.”

The other mentor mentioned mapping as well, but she referred to it in the sense of time management:

For me, I’d say... I’m not really sure how much of an impact [being a peer mentor] had on my academics. But if it did, it had to do with, because I was so busy and because... I knew I had responsibilities, I had to kind of map out my academic time
more. And so that made me more focused academically, at least time management-wise.

This mentor internalized her external role as a model for students of an academically serious student. Another grouped mentor mentioned the necessity of time management in his academic success: “I’d say, since [my grade point average remained the same after becoming a peer mentor], it’s definitely a positive effect because I obviously have more responsibility. . . . I was able to manage my time better, so I’d say [it was] positive.” He was able to take on more responsibility without negative consequences to his grade point average, suggesting an ability to successfully carry out multiple tasks.

**Summary.** Learning outcomes that were identified by peer mentors had few connections to the content of their academic majors but greater implications for their interpersonal skills and abilities to work with others. Communication skills surfaced most prominently in the learning outcomes. Becoming more “outgoing” was viewed as a requirement for success in the position, and for many that meant learning to be so. This type of trait further positioned peer mentors to be noticed and observed by the students with whom they worked. Leadership skills also were gained in the peer mentor role. Peer mentors cited an increased self-efficacy that seemed to surprise them, and they also learned about flexibility and dealing with situations over which they had no control. In learning about groups, peer mentors discussed their development of varied approaches to use with students as well as their new awareness of individual learning differences.

Although most stated that they did not have greater knowledge of the subject matter of their academic major as a result of being a peer mentor, many indicated greater knowledge of the various academic options within their disciplines. Those who taught a class learned
about the material they presented. In providing academic assistance to students, one mentor learned that he needed to re-learn previous course material to be helpful to the students.

Most peer mentors' grade point averages increased or remained the same during their tenure as mentors; respondents in general did not think that the mentor position had a direct impact on their grade point averages. Peer mentors recognized the importance of modeling positive study behaviors, and they reflected on their own study habits and time management in order to assist students as well as manage their own study time.

Solo Mentor Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes of solo mentors were similar to those of paired and grouped mentors. A solo mentor did identify some communication/language skills learning that was unique to an individual in this mentor group. Another solo mentor was surprised that the age difference between himself and the students was not an issue. Also identified was a recognition of how availability impacted one mentor's academic success.

One of the solo mentors was an international student who worked with a learning community that paired international with American students. Often the area of communication skills emerged as a learning outcome for her. She mentioned improved English skills as a result of her role. She also identified having learned more about people, especially Americans: "Now I [am] really able to speak, and I can be friends [and am] more comfortable speaking and . . . be[ing] friends with American students." Observing others to learn more about their background characteristics was a method she used that resulted in these learning outcomes. This learning through interaction and observation supports the theory of social learning (Bandura, 1977).
A solo mentor mentioned the age difference between himself as a senior and the learning community students who were first-year students. He talked about learning to interact with them, despite the age difference:

I think I've learned to interact... I'm a senior, and I have totally different perspective[s], I guess than, everybody on my floor is, seems like they're all freshmen. There's like maybe 10 or 12 sophomores... I guess previously I thought, "They're freshmen... [Y]ou can’t be friends with them" kind of thing. But I'm just as good of buddies with, even though they're freshmen, as I am with people I've had all my classes with throughout all of college. So, I think it's knocked down some barriers between age differences. Nineteen to 22 isn’t that much of a difference, really.

While some maturational and experiential differences existed, they were not barriers to the interactions or development of relationships he found he could have with the younger learning community students. Coming to this understanding may have helped him relate to the students and potentially provide better assistance to them.

Relating positively to the students also presented some challenges to academic success. Discussing whether or not the peer mentor role had an impact on her academic success, a solo mentor reflected on her availability to students:

I think most of the time, or actually I devote my time a lot to hanging out with people and getting together, so my own time, like my personal time was less than the, like, year before [when I was not a peer mentor]... Sometimes I should have shut the door and said, "I’m studying," and, but I really just open the door and let the people
come in. So it was hard for me to find a place to study because my room was always open. Like, people just stop by, come by. . . .

Being so available to students may have been detrimental to this peer mentor's academic success. She may have modeled behaviors that were not as beneficial to students if she was unable to demonstrate ways to balance her social interactions with the learning community students and her study time. Social learning theory suggests that individuals tend to behave in similar ways to those they observe if they see that behavior as successful (Bandura, 1977). While the students with whom this mentor worked may have seen her behavior of being available to them as successful in fostering social interaction, they may have been unaware of the consequences to her studies. As such, they may have chosen to model the behaviors she demonstrated, being socially available most of the time, and they may not have been aware of the potentially negative academic consequences that may have resulted for them. As a result, this type of modeling may not have provided opportunities for them to view their peer mentor as an academically focused college student.

Solo mentors experienced many of the same learning outcomes as other mentors. One international mentor learned about communication and language skills. Another mentor learned that the age difference between himself and the students was not a barrier. Finally, one mentor shared that making herself available almost all the time may not have been advantageous to her academically as she was not able to study in her room due to constant visitors.

**Paired Mentor Learning Outcomes**

Much of what paired mentors identified as having learned mirrored the learning outcomes of solo and grouped mentors. However, their limited unique experiences are
presented in this section. Their specific learning outcomes focused on what they learned about people. One paired mentor mentioned learning more about faculty. Others mentioned their interactions, or lack of interactions, with their partner mentor.

A paired mentor suggested a new understanding of faculty as a result of working with them through the peer mentor role. He stated that he learned that most professors “are human” and that as he worked with more professors, he learned that they were willing to work with the students. First-year students, according to this mentor, put professors “up on a pedestal.” The mentor’s experience suggests that his peer mentor role offered him opportunities to interact with, and learn about, faculty in a new way. Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified such student-faculty interactions as being highly influential on students’ development. These interactions may have offered greater observation opportunities for the mentor, which may have been beneficial to his learning and development.

Only one paired mentor indicated having learned anything about working with the other mentor in the program. Although his comment suggested that this learning outcome may not have been significant to him, it does acknowledge the paired nature of the program. When asked what he learned as a peer mentor, he responded, “Maybe to depend on others a little bit, like my co-mentor. Depending on her to organize something or taking turns with things, stuff like that.” Only one other paired mentor even mentioned their current co-mentor. As a first-year mentor, she stated that her co-mentor who had been a peer mentor the year before was helpful to her achieving the learning outcome of understanding and enacting her role as a peer mentor. One other paired mentor mentioned a previous co-mentor as unhelpful and essentially absent. While paired mentors, by virtue of the structure of the partnership, had a model whom they could conceivably observe in their partner mentor, only
one identified having learned anything from that individual. Surprisingly, no strong statements were made about the value of being one of two mentors in the same program. Features of social learning (Bandura, 1977), which seemed a plausible strength of the paired mentor format, were not strongly present. The possibilities for the casual, everyday interactions that Bandura suggested influence learning may not have occurred for these peer mentors if they chose to operate largely autonomously, especially since most of them lived on separate floors from each other and could easily not have those types of regular, informal interactions that are one of the benefits of living in the residence hall.

However, paired mentors’ learning outcomes focused on learning about or with individuals. A paired mentor’s experience working with faculty led to greater understanding of and interactions with faculty. Other mentors identified learning, or specifically not learning, about working with a partner mentor. While one casually mentioned learning to work cooperatively with his partner mentor, another mentor had little contact with a previous partner mentor. One paired mentor, however, identified her partner as helpful in her learning to be a peer mentor. Although their “social” learning was not typically with their partner mentor, paired mentors experienced “social learning” (Bandura, 1977) through their opportunities to observe and interact with others who were involved with the learning community.

*Grouped Mentor Learning Outcomes*

Personal and academic gains, along with behavioral changes, were also realized by grouped mentors. Grouped mentors in this study mentioned learning about themselves and their values as well as having a chance to gain skills they were seeking. These mentors
identified behavioral changes that occurred for them as peer mentors, and a few noted the challenges of living in the residence hall.

Mentors learned about themselves during the time that they served as peer mentors. One grouped mentor discussed his experience with an interdisciplinary learning community:

[A]nyone can be any major [in this learning community], so . . . you get all sorts of different people. So, you just get to learn a lot about different backgrounds and why people think the way they do. And you have to really respect, you know, other people's opinions. So it just kinda makes you, you know, analyze . . . your own thoughts and convictions and stuff. And just like think more about yourself and why you believe what you believe in, I guess.

This mentor's comments reflect an awareness of self-development through enacting the peer mentor role. Other mentors did not believe they changed much as a result of being peer mentors. This conflicts with the theory of student involvement which suggests that one of the benefits of involvement is personal development (Astin, 1984). A grouped mentor indicated that he knew what his responsibilities were in the job and did what needed to be done. He made the somewhat contradictory statement, "[I]t's [the peer mentor role] helped me better myself in different aspects, but it hasn't really changed me a great deal." Another grouped mentor echoed that experience, and added, "[I]t helped me to do the job the way I did it because I was the way I was." His statement indicated that he already recognized the benefits of his personality style as applied to the peer mentor role, and his approach to his work was consistent with his personality, which made him successful.

Grouped mentors cited behavioral changes potentially resulting from maturation as learning outcomes. Such phrases as "more organized," "less lazy," "more outspoken" and
“more mature” surfaced in the focus groups. A mentor in her senior year identified her maturity as a combination of situations:

Maybe it's just the combination of everything, being, as a role model and being a senior, getting ready to graduate soon, I just feel like I [am] more mature, more ready to handle the world. . . more organized 'cause I have to keep track of a lot of things in [the learning community].

Peer mentors uniformly identified these behavior changes as positive and beneficial to their success. While these changes may have occurred during their time as peer mentors, such changes may have been a more general result of both maturation and involvement, which according to Astin (1984), tends to yield personal development.

Unique to the grouped mentors were comments on the negative results of living in the residence hall on their academic success. Although she felt it was essential for the peer mentor to live in the residence hall, this mentor also believed it was detrimental to her academic success:

[Being a residential peer mentor is] negative because I moved back from living off campus to the dorm and it’s a lot louder and it’s harder to study in my room unless it’s late at night. . . . I didn’t really like moving back to the dorms just because I’ve never really had a good experience living in the dorms and it’s a lot louder there and how do I get my work done. But I think it’s essential for my role, for what I do.

Another grouped mentor mentioned the challenges of living with the students and being available for them:

Second semester in my first year of doing this [being a peer mentor] was actually the lowest gpa I got. . . . I don’t really say it was totally due to[being a] peer mentor,
maybe a little bit. I was taking Physics at the time. That semester there were just a
couple guys who just always needed, you know, a little extra help. So I'd end up
helping them, and . . . I wouldn't get around to doing homework until like 1[am]. . . .
I'd help them first. Or I'd do homework and then help them late, and then stay up
later doing my homework. That was really the only time that it hurt me. I probably
procrastinated some, too. It's probably a mixture.

The environment of the residence hall and being available to assist students by living on the
residence hall floor with them presented some academic challenges noted by grouped
mentors. As was the case with the solo mentor who had difficulty managing social time with
academic time in her room, this mentor may have demonstrated some questionable modeling
for the students when he sacrificed his own study time to assist them. This also may have
sent messages about his time management abilities that would not have been considered
positive. Again, Bandura (1977) suggested that individuals tend to model behaviors for
which they see positive consequences and avoid those that result in negative consequences,
but the students may have been unaware of the negative consequences the peer mentor
experienced as a result of his self-sacrificial approach to assisting them. The possible
detriment to this type of over involvement were mentioned by Astin (1984), "Although the
theory of involvement generally holds that 'more is better,' there are probably limits beyond
which increasing involvement ceases to produce desirable results and can even become
counter-productive" (p. 307). In the case of this mentor, the results of investing his study
time in the academic success of the students seems to have been somewhat counter
productive.
Grouped mentors identified such learning outcomes as making behavioral changes that were helpful to their success. Grouped mentors acknowledged the challenges of living on the residence hall floor with the learning community students as partially responsible for some negative academic outcomes. However, they also recognized other influences that may have contributed to these negative outcomes.

**Conclusion**

Peer mentor learning outcomes can be categorized as skills learned and knowledge gained. Communication and leadership skills were cited by mentors in each category as results of being a peer mentor. Mentors also acknowledged a self-efficacy that they did not realize they had prior to enacting their role. They learned how to work with others, especially how to most successfully work with the learning community students. Teaching opportunities resulted in learning new material or re-learning previously studied material. While few felt that they gained additional knowledge of their academic majors as a result of being peer mentors, many indicated that they gained greater knowledge of other options within their academic discipline. Most increased or maintained their grade point averages during their peer mentor employment, but some did see a decrease. Mentors generally did not attribute the increase or decrease to the peer mentor role.

Learning outcomes for peer mentors resulted less from concurrent modeling for and observation of each other than from their individual experiences in the position. Peer mentors did not necessarily observe each other or reference much learning from current fellow mentors. As discussed earlier, peer mentors' observations of previous mentors presaged and flowed into their eventual role construction/enactment. Thus, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) was less evident in the contemporary learning outcomes that mentors
identified. What peer mentors modeled for the students to observe may well have resulted in the learning outcomes (for the students) that social learning theory suggests, evident in the comments made about the peer mentors’ own experiences as students in the learning community. However, this aspect of social learning was not explored in this study.

In student involvement theory, Astin (1984) indicates that the quality and quantity of students’ involvement in their collegiate experience leads to proportional gains in their learning and development. Statements by peer mentors suggest a high quality and quantity of efforts devoted to the peer mentor position, which may be only one of many involvement opportunities for respondents. Some of that involvement seems to have led to positive learning outcomes, such as skill attainment and understanding of group dynamics. However, that involvement clearly also fostered some academic challenges for the mentors who gave up their academic time to be available for the students in the learning community. Time is viewed as an important resource, according to Astin:

[T]he theory of student involvement. . . . suggests that the most precious institutional resource may be student time. . . . The theory of student involvement explicitly acknowledged that the psychic and physical time and energy of students are finite. Thus, educators are competing with other forces in the student’s life for a share of that finite time and energy. (p. 301)

In the case of the peer mentors, not only educators but other students are competing for their time, quite literally so. Involvement to the level that some mentors identified may have been less advantageous due to their inability to manage the competing demands for their time, although other mentors noted their improved time management skills. Astin suggests that over involvement, however, is detrimental to development.
Each category of mentors had unique learning outcomes connected to their role construction/enactment. In most cases, however, these outcomes can be more attributable to their involvement and maturation than to the peer mentor role specifically. A solo mentor identified an increase in English language skills and ability to interact with American students. Another solo mentor learned that the age difference between himself and the students was not a barrier to their interactions or the development of friendships. The negative academic impact of making herself available almost constantly was a learning experience of one solo mentor. While these learning outcomes were reported only by solo mentors, they do not seem to be artifacts of the structure of these learning community programs which employ only one live-in peer mentor.

Paired mentors’ learning outcomes were largely centered on learning about people. For example, a paired mentor stated that he learned more about faculty. Mentors’ mentions of their partner mentor were surprisingly minimal. One paired mentor stated that her partner mentor was very helpful, while another indicated that a previous partner mentor was virtually absent. Other paired mentors mentioned their partner mentor in passing or not at all. It seems that these mentors did not experience the potential benefits of having another mentor to observe and from whom they could learn. It also is possible that, within this particular group of paired mentors, each believed that he or she should independently approach their responsibilities and provide assistance to the students on the respective floor or floor section where they lived since most of these mentors lived on different floors or floor sections. They may have seen themselves and the learning community students less as one team with two parts and more as two teams, at least in the residence halls due to their living typically on two separate floors. Messages from learning community coordinators of whether or not peer
mentors were expected to approach their work as a "team" were not mentioned. Nor are these messages apparent in the Peer Mentor Handbook which, as written, assumes mentors are to be autonomous. It is uncertain if that "team" approach was considered important by these mentors' supervisors or other professionals responsible for learning community programs. Personality differences between mentors or a lack of interest in collaboration also could lead them to choose to be less of a "team" and enact their roles more like solo mentors.

Grouped mentors indicated learning outcomes that were both personal and academic. These outcomes may have been experienced while being peer mentors but are likely not specifically resulting from the peer mentor role. One mentor reflected on and analyzed his own values as a result of his mentor role. Given the focus of this particular learning community, this reflection may have begun for him when he was a member of the learning community prior to being a peer mentor. Behavioral changes, such as being less lazy or more organized, were mentioned as learning outcomes by grouped mentors. These may have been natural maturational changes, perhaps resulting from their chosen level of involvement. Such behaviors would be necessary for successful student involvement. Living in the residence hall was deemed personally negative in terms of academic success by two grouped mentors. However, they also stressed the importance of the residential component of the program, with one citing that component as critical to her work due to the interaction that she was able to have with the students. In particular, she cited the casual interactions as the most valuable.

Chapter 5 presents conclusions drawn from the findings explained in this chapter. Recommendations for the residential peer mentor programs and for future also are included. Such recommendations will hopefully be useful to those staff members at the study site in
improving the residential learning community peer mentor roles. In addition, it is hoped that this study will be transferable to other programs and provide useful information to their programs as well.
CHAPTER 5. LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, residential learning community peer mentors' role construction/enactment and the resulting learning outcomes were examined using a qualitative approach. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) were selected as the appropriate theoretical frameworks from which to view the phenomenon of peer mentoring in a residential learning community. Through document analysis of job descriptions and the Peer Mentor Handbook, as well as focus group data, I obtained information about the lived experiences of residential learning community peer mentors. The ways in which they constructed/enacted their roles along with the learning outcomes they noted experiencing were discussed in Chapter 4.

Presented in this chapter are the limitations and ethical considerations regarding this study as well as conclusions and recommendations regarding residential learning community peer mentors. Recommendations may be most directly applicable to learning community coordinators, professionals in the Department of Residence, and to the university’s Learning Community Advisory Committee. However, professionals in other institutions and program settings utilizing peer mentor staff members may find the conclusions and recommendations useful as well. Finally, recommendations for future research are provided.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

While I hoped that all 31 residential learning community peer mentors would choose to participate in the study, this did not occur. Thus, one limitation of this study was that all residential learning community peer mentors did not choose to participate even though they were all invited. This resulted in missing personal stories since 19 of 31 peer mentors...
participated. Negative cases may have been missed as a result of not having 100 percent participation.

Another limitation of this study is that the data were collected in Spring 2003 but not completely analyzed until Summer 2003 due to the multiple projects I was conducting in Spring 2003. Delaying data analysis, while necessary, was not ideal because such factors as the mood of the discussion and the enthusiasm that may or may not exist in the discussion are not captured on the transcript and may be lost to some degree (Krueger, 1998), even though the reflexive journal and other notes provide contemporary reference points that were consulted during the later analysis.

Member checking also was complicated by the fact that some of the peer mentors left the institution without providing me with accurate contact information. As a result, all participants did not receive the information to be reviewed for comment. Of those who did receive the information, nine chose to respond to the request for their feedback on themes identified from the written transcripts. Four participants responded to a request for their feedback on the findings of the study. A second request for feedback on the findings resulted in two additional responses.

A number of limitations can be attributed to the methods of data collection. First, focus groups provide a great deal of information about a range of experiences. However, they do not provide as much information about specific peer mentors' experiences as individual interviews. Second, peer mentors were asked to share their experiences during focus groups, and if a peer mentor's experience was negative, that experience may have been less likely to surface in a group setting than in an individual interview. As well, negative
experiences, depending on the nature of the episodes, may have raised ethical considerations. However, mentors mentioned few issues of concern.

One mentor did state that he was encouraged to apply for the peer mentor position by the learning community coordinator. The peer mentor indicated that the learning community coordinator described the position to him as follows: "Well, you basically get paid. You don't have to do a whole lot. You just help people to go to see other people for help." This statement may require follow-up with the coordinator. My ethical responsibilities as a researcher require consideration of confidentiality and anonymity. A statement on the Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) provided to focus group participants explains that complete anonymity is not possible to provide, but confidentiality will be maintained in reporting the results of the study. As a staff member who works with learning communities, I have a responsibility to act on information provided to assure the quality of the residential programs. Since the statement was made by a grouped mentor, it is possible for me to share my concerns with the coordinator without identifying the individual peer mentor since the peer mentor respondent has left the position. Thus, no adverse consequences will result for the peer mentor should the supervisor be able to identify the individual.

Another potential limitation during data collection was that, while Krueger (1998) encourages the use of an assistant moderator for note-taking and debriefing of focus groups, I did not have an assistant moderator for the focus groups. Having an assistant moderator may have been beneficial for capturing to a greater degree the non-verbal communication during the focus group. It also may have been valuable to discuss the information immediately following the focus groups with another individual who was present in order to further
confirm initial interpretations. However, I chose not to ask anyone to assist because of the amount of time needed for participation in all of the focus groups.

Conclusions

This study sought to determine how residential learning community peer mentors constructed and enacted their roles as well as the learning outcomes that resulted for them in the peer mentor role. In summary, the following conclusions were reached:

- Peer mentors began role construction prior to performing the job and continued that construction and enactment while in the peer mentor position.
- Previous peer mentors were key informants about role construction/enactment as peer mentors observed and modeled behaviors they viewed as leading to success.
- The peer mentor position was not highly influenced by written documents provided and available to the peer mentors. However, multiple sources of information, including trial and error, allowed for role construction/enactment.
- Feedback on the peer mentors’ job performance was minimal; peer mentors would have liked more and timely feedback.
- Learning outcomes identified by respondents were interpersonal in nature, such as communication and leadership skills.
- Student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) were evident in various job responsibilities that led to these learning outcomes, like teaching.
- Finally, while some differences were noted among the three categories of peer mentors, few of these differences appeared to be the result of the different mentor formats.
Each of the conclusions is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Peer mentors constructed their understanding of the peer mentor role prior to and while performing their jobs. The influence of the previous peer mentor was great and served as signals to the mentor of what he or she may choose to do or not do regarding their own role enactment. Peer mentor comments clearly indicate that they experienced social learning (Bandura, 1977) through their observations of and interactions with the peer mentors before them. Some of the behaviors of previous peer mentors were modeled and others were not, based on the actual or potential consequences that the current peer mentors associated with the behavior. A peer mentor is apparently a model not only for learning community students but also for upcoming peer mentors who are likely students within the learning community.

Role construction/enactment was not highly influenced by the range of formal, written documents available to peer mentors. Not all peer mentors received written copies of their job descriptions or the Peer Mentor Handbook. Only those who attended August training received a copy of the Peer Mentor Handbook. For all others, the Handbook was available on-line, and the responsibility for sharing that resource was placed on the learning community coordinator who may or may not have guided the peer mentors to this resource. This relative lack of formal documentation appeared to result in peer mentors not having clarification of their specific job responsibilities. Yet it did not stop the process of peer mentors actively constructing and enacting their roles. Furthermore, although a detailed analysis was not conducted, the constructed roles and responsibilities discussed by the peer mentors did not depart greatly from the expectations of peer mentors set out in the written documents.
On the balance, peer mentors used combinations of information sources for constructing/enacting their roles. They used the written documents previously described, their observations of previous peer mentors, their own beliefs about what a role model should do and be, and information gathered by informally assessing their student group. "Trial and error" was frequently cited as a primary way by which peer mentors learned their responsibilities and how to be most effective. "Error" was not necessarily considered negative but served an informative purpose for peer mentors and their future actions. Peer mentors stated that training was useful to the extent that it could be, but that ultimately their role construction/enactment was more influenced by experience than by training. As such, the tenets of student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) were realized because greater developmental benefits of involvement were cited by respondents when they were actually enacting their role. The effort and energy invested in the role was greater while carrying out the responsibilities because on the whole they spent more time enacting the role than training for the job. Additionally, more was at stake when enacting the role, due to the expectations of learning community coordinators and learning community students, than was at stake during training where they were learning skills and information which they later put to use in the peer mentor job.

According to the peer mentors, formal feedback was minimal, but they received informal, mostly oral, feedback from students and supervisors. While they were aware that feedback was being collected through a standardized university learning community survey, few peer mentors actually saw that feedback. One mentor indicated, not surprisingly, that receiving formal feedback early enough to use it to modify her performance would have been helpful.
The learning outcomes emphasized by peer mentor respondents largely represented interpersonal skills such as communication and leadership. Few mentors indicated any specific learning outcomes related to their academic majors, even though most learning community programs in which they worked were conceived and organized around their academic major or college. Because most learning communities were organized by academic college and/or major, it seems reasonable to believe that a goal of participation for learning community members, including peer mentors, is providing a heightened academically-related experience related to their major or college. That outcome was generally not realized for this group of peer mentors. The exceptions were the peer mentor respondents who had teaching responsibilities. These peer mentors reported subject-matter learning outcomes that they regarded as positive and strong. Teaching-related experiences also positioned peer mentors to be observed by learning community participants as successful, involved students, serving as examples of the benefits of both social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and student involvement theory (Astin, 1984).

Dynamics related to student involvement theory and social learning theory were evident in the construction and enactment of the peer mentor role. While peer mentors came to their job as involved students, they also reported further benefits described by Astin (1984) as they discussed their improvement in areas such as leadership and interpersonal skills. They also recognized and endorsed their roles as models to be observed for learning purposes (Bandura, 1977), and they cited conducting themselves as appropriate models as an important part of their job. Their identification as “role models” was taken very seriously by this group of peer mentors as they discussed conscious, intentional behavior choices like studying instead of socializing. Respondents also noted some mindset changes or realizations, such as
recognizing that not all students learn the same way that the peer mentor learns, that not only informed their ongoing role construction and enactment but also contributed to their own learning.

Few differences among the three categories of peer mentors (solo, paired, grouped) seemed to have resulted because of the different mentor formats. However, some differences were noted among the groups. Solo mentors relied primarily on their learning community coordinators for support and assistance while in the role. Paired mentors did the same, which was surprising as I had assumed that they would take advantage of their partner mentor for learning and support. While social learning appears to have occurred, the models and social referent groups were somewhat different than expected. One paired mentor specifically indicated that she learned the most about how to enact her role from observing the students in the learning community. Another paired mentor stated that he sought out peer mentors from other programs during his first year as a peer mentor. He believed that other peer mentors’ experiences could be helpful to him in his role construction and enactment. However, he did not find the same to be true of his partner mentor who was a returning mentor. The participant who was new (and who had a partner who was also new) did not indicate much interaction with his partner, possibly because he believed that she was not more knowledgeable about how to construct/enact the role than he was. The only paired mentor who referenced her partner as helpful to her role construction/enactment was a new mentor whose partner was a returning mentor who was viewed as a source of information and support. Thus, it appears that “same status mentors” (both new or both returning) did not view their partner mentor as someone from whom they learned or could have learned. This is a missed opportunity for social learning as these peer mentors could have observed or
discussed each other’s experiences in the new situations they shared and incorporated behaviors and approaches that they judged successful.

Grouped mentors mentioned the greatest interaction with other peer mentors, primarily in their own program. Like the one returning paired mentor, returning grouped mentors also served as sources of information and support for new mentors. Returning mentors played an important role in the social learning experience almost exclusively to new peer mentors in the grouped staff format. When all or many of the peer mentors in a pair or group were returning mentors, within-staff social learning experiences appeared almost nonexistent. Possibly the returning peer mentors felt that their role construction had taken place when they were new peer mentors. They also were comfortable enough with the skills and abilities that they acquired during their first year in the position that they did not seek out additional social learning opportunities from their fellow returning peer mentors. Instead, if new peer mentors had been hired, the returning peer mentors’ role seemed to be one of mentoring the new mentor.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) focuses on the importance of observation and modeling that can best occur when individuals are aware of the opportunity to observe and later utilize their observations in modeled behaviors. Paired mentors generally did not indicate the use of opportunities such as meetings or co-planned activities that could have led to greater social learning for the peer mentors through their interactions with their partner mentors. Returning paired and grouped mentors were viewed in most cases — but virtually only by new mentors -- as individuals to observe and model for role construction/enactment. Greater opportunities for interaction between peer mentors in the same learning community,
and possibly those in other learning communities, can contribute to greater social learning experiences for peer mentors.

Recommendations

As a result of the information gathered for this study, recommendations are listed that may be beneficial in improving the experiences of peer mentors. These recommendations specifically address information that should be provided to peer mentors, experiences that should be part of the peer mentor role, and teambuilding that might result in greater social learning (Bandura, 1977).

First, all peer mentors must receive a written copy of their job descriptions and should be referred to the job description so that they gain a sufficient understanding of their job responsibilities. Since some peer mentors did use their job description to assist in their role construction/enactment, it seems that this document could have value for each peer mentor. While job descriptions will be different based on the goals of the individual learning communities, all peer mentors should have a written “starting point” for their role construction/enactment to best occur. Job descriptions should include the responsibilities that the learning community coordinator expects the peer mentor to assume, as well as a caveat for “other duties as assigned” since not all responsibilities can be predicted in advance. The needs of students in a learning community may change slightly from one year to the next, and the job description should reflect that possibility. An example of a change might be that one year the peer mentor was expected to establish study groups for the students in the program, but the next year the peer mentor may be needed as a tutor for a course in the program instead of a study group coordinator. As well, expectations of attendance at training and meetings should be included in the job description so that peer
mentors are aware of the time commitments of the job. Such documents are intended to provide information and assist peer mentors in their role construction and can only be useful if peer mentors have read the information. This information allows the peer mentors to appropriately enact the role and provides a gauge for them in terms of fulfilling job expectations.

“Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning” (American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998) suggests that connections are foundations for learning and that learning is positively influenced by interaction with others. Consistent with this endorsement of social learning, peer mentors need to have structured interactions with learning community coordinators and other peer mentors in order to maximize their continued learning. Regular supervisory meetings with learning community coordinators should include on-going training that is program-specific. Based on the relatively high endorsement by respondents of the August training as a useful source of skill-building and resources, all peer mentors could benefit from the August training that is offered by the Department of Residence. Requiring peer mentors to attend that training would be ideal. This training also represents another opportunity for the peer mentors to benefit from social learning (Bandura, 1977) as they learn about mentoring with other mentors, and organizers of such training should overtly structure social learning opportunities and expectations into the training if continued use of social learning by peer mentors is desired. That training, however, is insufficient to train peer mentors for the entirety of their role due to the specific information that is unique to the individual learning community program. In fact, the intent of training is to provide a base of general information that is applicable to all
peer mentors. The uniqueness of each learning community program is considered a strength of the learning community initiative at the study site; thus such individualities would endorse the design and provision of program-specific training for peer mentors that is best provided by the coordinator(s) of the specific learning community. According to most mentors in this study, on-going training is rare. Centralized on-going training may be possible, but there are benefits and challenges to creating such a program. Having a central training committee, possibly comprised of members of the Peer Mentor Subcommittee of the university’s Learning Community Advisory Committee, coordinate on-going training would minimize the additional burden to learning community coordinators. Additionally, “standard” messages could be communicated to all peer mentors using such a process. This could be accomplished if training was identified as mandatory in all peer mentor job descriptions. However, the number of peer mentors campus-wide may make this type of program prohibitive. Also, it remains that some of the on-going training that is needed is program specific and can only be provided by the coordinator of the specific learning community. A message alerting learning community coordinators to the expectation that they provide program-specific training as well as the rationales for and perceived benefits of this training should be sent by the Learning Community Advisory Committee or the Co-directors of Learning Communities. An even stronger message could be sent if learning community coordinators were required to identify, in writing when they submit their paperwork for funding, what that additional training program will entail. In order to provide assistance for the coordinators, however, the Peer Mentor Subcommittee could be identified as a resource for planning this additional training. Individuals from the subcommittee, or the co-chairs of
the committee, could be called upon by individual learning community programs to assist in tailoring their on-going training to fit with the specific goals of the learning community.

Additional opportunities for residential learning community peer mentors to meet informally and discuss their experiences that are unique as a result of their live-in status also should be coordinated. Research indicates that student learning is fostered through interaction with other students (Astin, 1993; Boud, 2001a; Ender, 1984; Topping, 1996), and it seems reasonable that peer mentors could learn about peer mentoring through interaction with other peer mentors who share similar experiences, such as living and working in a residential learning community. Attempts have been made to coordinate such gatherings for all peer mentors, but having specific sessions for residential peer mentors may allow them to share experiences and gather ideas from each other. Additionally, if the peer mentors in this study are similar to the students in Baxter Magolda’s (1992) study of students’ cognitive development, most college sophomores, juniors, and seniors may be identified as “transitional knowers” who view peers as increasingly important in the process of learning but potentially not yet legitimate sources of knowledge. Specifically encouraging the participation of returning peer mentors who may be viewed as “experts” by new peer mentors could serve to encourage peer mentors to view their peers as legitimate knowledge sources. As well, the benefits of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) can be realized through these group interactions. This may be especially beneficial for the solo mentors who have no other peer colleagues in their program to consult.

Because mentors cited on-the-job training and trial and error as the primary method of learning to do the job, there may be a greater need for more experiential training to prepare them to address problems that they may encounter. For example, in August training as it is
currently designed, one session on communication skills involves role playing. Disproportionately focusing on such practice opportunities to “think on your feet” may be necessary for peer mentors to get a better sense of the types of issues they may encounter. More on-going training to accompany the experiences instead of primarily frontloading training at the beginning of the academic year also would likely assist the peer mentors to recognize progress and further build their skills. Additionally, such opportunities foster reflection leading to learning. Because of the relatively central influence of the learning community coordinators on the peer mentors in this study, this reflection should take place with the learning community coordinators, and ideally for paired or grouped mentors it would take place with their fellow mentors for greater social learning benefits. On-going training with other mentors creates possibilities for social learning (Bandura, 1977) as peer mentors gather together for this purpose – to share and observe each other’s experiences.

Both August training and on-going training should emphasize the responsibility of role modeling that peer mentors in this study cited as critical to their role enactment, especially with regard to credibility with students. An exercise asking them to reflect on their previous peer mentor, what they observed him/her doing, and how they may be influenced by that observation might structure and highlight the extent to which learning community participants attend to the behaviors of the peer mentor. Discussions about appropriate behaviors and the messages sent by various behaviors would provide mentors with further information to contemplate as they construct and enact their role and offer a vicarious learning experience that could result if this activity took place with a group of mentors.
In addition, having peer mentors reflect on what they hope to learn as a result of being in the role should occur during training so that they recognize that learning opportunities for them exist. This reflection can and should continue through the supervision process. Learning community coordinators should consider the learning outcomes they hope the peer mentors achieve and discuss those outcomes with the mentors. These learning outcomes would provide a framework for continued reflection by the mentors and continued discussion with the learning community coordinator about what the peer mentors learn through their role. This reflective opportunity for peer mentors may be missed if it is not structured by the learning community coordinator through the supervision process.

Learning community coordinators should encourage peer mentors to capitalize on the support and potential learning that may result from having a partner mentor (for paired and grouped mentors). Sampson and Cohen (2001) identified working together to share knowledge and experiences, listening to each other's opinions, beliefs and values, and providing and receiving feedback as key features of peer learning strategies. These learning strategies can and should be encouraged through peer mentors' interactions with each other, especially with the other(s) working in the same learning community. The opportunities to interact with a partner mentor(s) position the peer mentors to be viewed by each other as important to their learning experiences within the position. Again, because they may be "transitional knowers" (Baxter Magolda, 1992), these interactions may assist in moving the peer mentors toward seeing each other as legitimate sources of knowledge. Paired mentors in this study did not seem to benefit from having a partner and were admittedly limited by having only one other mentor in their program to whom to turn for collaboration. However, grouped mentors seemed to have greater connections to each other and either utilized each
other because they had meetings together that forced collaboration, because they saw each other as legitimate resources, or perhaps because being on a staff with more than one other mentor provides choices for consultation and relationships to develop. Conducting teambuilding activities throughout the year that highlight peer mentors' background experiences and knowledge may allow peer mentors to learn more about each other's skills and abilities. This may result in a recognition that peer mentors can teach each other and benefit from increased collaborative work experiences.

Professional staff members, including the learning community coordinators and Department of Residence staff working with learning communities also can recognize and acknowledge peer mentors as information sources and authorities on the life/concerns of college students by teaching them and then asking them to assess situations and events within the learning community and report their observations and thoughts/ideas during regular staff meetings. This approach allows the "authority figure" who the peer mentors may see as most knowledgeable to position the individual peer mentors as having important and legitimate knowledge which may result in the peer mentors viewing each other in the same way.

Individuals in both paired and grouped mentor groups saw returning mentors as important sources of information and assistance. When possible, having at least one returning peer mentor will likely be beneficial as learning communities grow and develop. In this study, new mentors sought out returning mentors, and they judged returning mentors to have experience that allowed them to make more informed judgments about ways to enact the role, which they then shared with new mentors. Returning mentors can and should be utilized as "mentors to the mentors." This role would best be enacted through the individual learning community programs since returning mentors know the job expectations and can
provide support and guidance to new mentors on their own learning community team. Returning mentors also could be invited to assist with August or on-going training as “experts” with experience to share. An obstacle to their participation in the August training may be the need for them to return to campus early, and thus give up a summer job earlier than planned.

On a very concrete level, peer mentors in academic college-specific programs should have training on the various academic options within the college. The peer mentors in this study liked to be as informed as possible, and they sought out the information they needed. However, they did not seem to anticipate that they would be asked questions about other options within their academic college, and they learned about those options as the questions arose. Providing earlier, or on-going, training in this area assists peer mentors’ confidence and ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource. Developing contacts between the peer mentors and academic advisors, some of whom also serve as learning community coordinators, might provide the peer mentors with information they need to more readily assist students of different majors.

Opportunities for greater learning occurred when peer mentors participated in teaching, tutoring or facilitating study groups. Adding this role as a regular part of the peer mentor job would be consistent with aims to enhance peer mentors’ learning experience, provide opportunities for greater involvement, and result in positive developmental gains (Astin, 1984). These roles also position peer mentors to be observed as models (Bandura, 1977) of involvement for the learning community students, which position them for greater involvement in their academic experience (Astin). Advantages also may result for learning community students who view their peer mentor as a source of knowledge on a particular
subject. According to Boud, "The advantage of learning from people we know is that they are, or have been, in a similar position to ourselves" (2001a, p. 1). The benefits of peer mentors taking on teaching responsibilities likely exist for the mentors as well as the learning community students.

If Bandura's statement that "virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experience occur on a vicarious basis by observing other people's behavior and its consequences for them" (1977, p. 12) is accurate, peer mentors who are first-time mentors in new programs have had no one to observe and may be at a disadvantage. Their subsequent role construction/enactment may be premised on no direct observation of learning community peer mentors at all, unless they participated in a different learning community. This disadvantage may be mediated by providing an opportunity for mentors in this position to shadow mentors in other, possibly similar, programs. These new mentors also may have a greater need before and during role construction/enactment for supervisory support or for mentor meetings beyond their specific group.

Learning community coordinators as peer mentors' supervisors have an important role to play in the experience of peer mentors. Based on the comments from respondents in this study, some coordinators are providing appropriate levels of support in the form of detailed job descriptions, regular meetings, and on-going training. As well, many coordinators allow the peer mentors to benefit from the "trial and error" approach that the mentors in this study cited as crucial to their role construction/enactment. It is important for coordinators to remember that peer mentors are "paraprofessional" staff and accordingly require training and supervision. Coordinators, however, may believe that peer mentors have adequate information about the program and the job responsibilities since most peer mentors
were students in the learning community prior to becoming peer mentors and typically had a peer mentor during that time to observe. This may result in an absence of ongoing training, monitoring and feedback from which peer mentors in this study said they would benefit. Social learning opportunities abound within many of the learning community staff groups as often there are other peer mentors, learning community coordinator(s), and sometimes graduate assistants and Department of Residence Staff involved with the learning community. It must be acknowledged, however, that learning community coordinators rarely have the learning community as their sole or primary responsibility. For most, it is an additional responsibility on top of their “regular” job. As such, the responsibility of supervising peer mentors may be a responsibility in which the learning community coordinator lacks experience. While some training has been provided for peer mentor supervisors in the past, additional training may be beneficial. Supervisors could receive information about establishing learning outcomes for the mentors, tips on how to incorporate reflection into the peer mentor position as well as suggestions on ways to utilize the reflection information to assist the peer mentor in achieving the learning outcomes identified. The primary challenge to providing additional training for peer mentor supervisors is one of time. For those coordinators whose learning community responsibilities are an “add-on,” time may not exist to attend such training.

“Formal” feedback should be collected by learning community coordinators and provided to peer mentors throughout the semester and year so that they can utilize that feedback to improve their role enactment and job performance. Learning community programs may not be able to change drastically during the semester and year, but peer mentors stand a better chance of modifying their approaches if they receive the feedback in a
timely fashion. It should be noted that the peer mentors in this study were not only open to feedback but some sought it out. A brief written survey about peer mentor performance given to participants in late September and again in early November would allow the peer mentors to accommodate student wants/needs and reflect on the effectiveness of their work. Further discussions with their supervisors can aid peer mentors in modifying their approaches appropriately, based on the feedback they receive.

Other individuals who can, and often do, provide assistance to peer mentors through collaboration, support and assistance are the student and professional staff members in the Department of Residence. Hall Directors, Resident Assistants/Community Advisors, and Academic Resource Coordinators all are part of the residential environment in which the learning communities are situated. Written job descriptions for some of these roles outline expectations for collaboration with the learning community program and staff. However, current practices are to communicate this expectation orally to residence hall staff members. Including in these job descriptions information about the importance of collaborating with and supporting the peer mentors may also allow the residence hall staff to have a better understanding of the roles they can play with the learning communities located within their halls.

The recommendations identified in this study are based on residential programs only. While some of these recommendations may be useful to peer mentor programs that are not residential, the data informing these recommendations come from one group – residential learning community peer mentors. Learning community coordinators with residential programs, Department of Residence professional staff, and the Learning Communities
Advisory Committee (specifically the Peer Mentor Subcommittee) will ideally be able to utilize and benefit from this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the relative newness of learning communities and peer mentor programs, further research is necessary to determine the benefits and challenges experienced by students and peer mentors in learning communities. Because this study is focused on peer mentors, I will address recommendations for future research that focus specifically on peer mentor programs.

One question to consider is “What do we want peer mentors to learn or gain from the experience?” It seems that this paraprofessional role offers many opportunities for academic and developmental gains. However, little if any information exists about how this role can be structured or implemented to enhance the educational experience of the peer mentors. Identifying the intentional experiences that will result in identified outcomes is necessary. As well, determining how this paraprofessional role benefits peer mentors is worthy of study.

A study on the differences between first and second-year mentors and how role construction/enactment seems to be different for peer mentors in these groups may be valuable. This information could assist learning community coordinators and others in training roles to determine what returning mentors can offer to new mentors as well as what returning mentors need in terms of training that builds on their prior experiences and learning.

The absence of collaboration and connection between the partner mentors in paired groups was an unexpected finding of this study. Based on the theoretical frameworks used in this study, there is reason to believe that these mentors are not fully benefiting from their
involvement experience (Astin, 1984). They also could be experiencing fewer benefits of social learning (Bandura, 1977). This deserves further exploration.

If meetings for residential learning community peer mentors occur, determining the value of certain types of on-going training would be advantageous. Finding out what peer mentors gain or do not gain through that experience could provide information to support the further development of peer mentor programs. Non-residential peer mentors, or those who have some commonality in their job responsibilities, also may benefit from this social learning opportunity to share experiences and gather feedback from each other.

An examination of supervisory practices with regard to peer mentors may be beneficial to current supervisors and those who may be taking on that role in the future. It seems that most individuals who take on the role of learning community coordinator at the study site take on this responsibility in addition to their current full-time role as a faculty or staff member. In addition to a lack of available time, some also may not have experience supervising paraprofessional staff. Identifying "best practices" that lead to successful experiences for peer mentors and learning community students may be beneficial to supervisors and peer mentors.

The residential peer mentor learning experience requires significant commitment on the part of the peer mentors. They recognize that, in many respects, they are viewed as the "model" student who has many responsibilities. What the peer mentors in this study indicated is that the behavior of peer mentors and the ways in which they construct and enact their role has an impact on the students who observe them, on their own college experience, and on the learning community program in which they work. They acknowledged that peer mentors are observed by students in the learning community, including the future peer
mentors of the program who begin to learn how to construct the role as a result of these early observations. The peer mentors recognized that being a role model for the community required certain behavioral approaches that would lead to credibility and success in their dual roles of peer mentor and college student. While peer mentors are typically enthusiastic and capable individuals who are eager to provide leadership for their peers in the learning community, it cannot be overlooked that they remain college students who are experiencing some of the same maturational and developmental issues that students generally face. As such, peer mentors need support, assistance, training, and feedback in order to accomplish their work as mentors and students.
REFERENCES


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residential life: A handbook for professionals committed to student development goals (pp. 25-64). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.


APPENDIX A. LETTER OF INVITATION TO RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY PEER MENTORS

Dear Peer Mentor,

In early Spring 2003, a dissertation study will be conducted of Residential Learning Community Peer Mentors’ experiences. The purpose of this study is to learn about how peer mentors construct and enact their roles and to discover what peer mentors learn as a result of being in this role. This study includes a focus-group component, which will involve groups of Residential Learning Community Peer Mentors talking together about the peer mentor experience with me (and being tape-recorded with your permission). The focus groups will be conducted during the Spring 2003 semester (primarily in late February, March, and April). Your focus group will last no more than 2 hours. I will email (or provide a paper copy at your request) the complete transcript of your focus group to you for accuracy checking and also will email you (or provide a paper copy at your request) the interpretations that I make from the transcript data so that you may check that my interpretations accurately reflect your statements. A final report will be prepared and presented to my dissertation committee, the Iowa State University Parks Library, and the Learning Community Advisory Committee.

I serve as the researcher in this study. I am currently a doctoral student in Higher Education at Iowa State University. This study is conducted under the supervision of my major professor, Dr. Florence Hamrick, associate professor in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Iowa State University (N234 Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, IA; 515-294-9628; fhamrick@iastate.edu). I also am employed here by the Department of Residence, where I work closely with Iowa State University’s residential learning communities.

It is my hope that you will be willing to participate in this study. I will be in contact with you closer to the time when the focus groups will be conducted to provide you with specific information about time, date and location of the focus group. Know that your identity will be kept confidential throughout this process. While I will know who provided what information, your name will not be disclosed at any point in the process. You may discontinue your involvement in this study at any time without penalty or repercussions to your peer mentor position.

Please feel free to contact me at any time during this process if you have questions, comments or concerns. I would greatly appreciate your participation and look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Mimi Benjamin
Coordinator of Residence Life – Academic Services
Department of Residence
Iowa State University
mibenjami@iastate.edu
515-294-1198
APPENDIX B. LETTER TO LEARNING COMMUNITY COORDINATORS

Dear Learning Community Coordinator:

In early Spring 2003, a dissertation study will be conducted of Residential Learning Community Peer Mentors’ experiences. The purpose of this study is to learn about how peer mentors construct and enact their roles and to discover what peer mentors learn as a result of being in this role. This study involves research and includes a focus-group component, which will involve groups of Residential Learning Community Peer Mentors talking together about the peer mentor experience with me (and being tape-recorded). The focus groups will be conducted during the Spring 2003 semester (primarily in late February, March, and April); mentors from the same program will be invited to participate in different focus groups. A final report will be prepared and presented to my dissertation committee, the Iowa State University Parks Library, and the Learning Community Advisory Committee.

The peer mentor or peer mentors from your program have received a letter from me, informing them of the upcoming study and that they will be invited to participate. It is my hope that all of the peer mentors invited will choose to participate in the study. I ask your assistance in this recruiting process. Please encourage your peer mentors to participate in this study, while also assuring them that participation is voluntary and will have no adverse consequences on their status as a peer mentor. My hope is that the information gathered will provide us with further direction in the areas of peer mentor job descriptions, training, and supervision. I also believe it may provide us with additional valuable information in the revision of the Peer Mentor Handbook as well as informing us about what peer mentors perceive as the learning outcomes of their involvement with peer mentoring.

I would be happy to share with you what I learn through this study, either by providing an electronic copy of the findings or by meeting with you to discuss the results of the study.

Thank you for your assistance in this project.

Sincerely,

Mimi Benjamin
Coordinator of Residence Life – Academic Services
Department of Residence
Iowa State University
mbenjami@iastate.edu
515-294-1198
APPENDIX C. CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Informed Consent to Peer Mentor Evaluation Focus Group Participants

To: Focus Group Participants

From: Mimi Benjamin, Evaluator

Subject: Participation in Residential Learning Community Peer Mentor Focus Group

Purpose: The purpose of this focus group is to gather information about the Residential Learning Community Peer Mentor role, how it is constructed, enacted, and what learning outcomes result from being a peer mentor.

Recording: Today’s focus group will be audio-taped so that the information gathered at this session will be complete. In addition, the tape will be transcribed for analysis.

Time required: The focus group will not exceed 2 hours in duration. You may be contacted at a future time for an additional focus group or to review the findings to ensure accuracy.

Preserving Confidentiality: Your participation in the focus group is voluntary. While the nature of a focus group makes it impossible to provide complete anonymity, your confidentiality will be maintained by the evaluator during future reporting of the evaluation results. Your name will not appear in any reports or written documents beyond those used by the evaluator.

I have read the memo describing this project and understand the nature of this work and the nature of my participation.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this focus group, which is part of a dissertation study on Residential Learning Community Peer Mentors being conducted by Mimi Benjamin of the Department of Residence at Iowa State University.

I understand that I may be contacted for a follow-up individual interview if necessary. In Summer 2003, I will receive an electronic copy of the focus group transcript, which I will be asked to review for accuracy and to which I may provide corrections or additional information. I understand that I will receive an electronic copy of interpretations from the focus group data in Fall 2003, which I will be asked to review for accuracy and to which I may provide corrections or additional information.
APPENDIX C. CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUPS (CONTINUED)

I understand that my confidentiality will be preserved by the evaluator. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from participation without penalty. I may withdraw from participation in this study at any time with no adverse consequences to my status as a Residential Learning Community Peer Mentor.

I understand that the results of this study will be shared with the researcher’s dissertation committee, will be bound and a copy will be placed in the Iowa State University Parks Library. I also understand that the results of this study may eventually be shared at conferences or published.

________________________________________
Name (Print)                     Date

_____________________________________
Signature

_____________________________________
Email contact information for Summer and Fall 2003
APPENDIX D. RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY PEER MENTOR
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA SHEET AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Demographic Data Sheet
Name:
Classification:
Learning Community:
Number of semesters you have been a peer mentor:
Has your grade point average gone up, down, or stayed the same since you became a peer mentor?

Focus Group Questions

Introductions

• Please introduce yourself and tell us what your classification is, what learning community you work with, and how long you've been in your peer mentor position.

Peer Mentor Job

• Why did you decide to apply to be a peer mentor?
• What are your responsibilities as a peer mentor? What are you expected to do?
• When did you know what your responsibilities would be? How did you find that out?
• How did you know how to do your job? How did you learn how to do your job?
• Who, if anyone, helped you learn how to do your job?
• Give an example of a time when you received feedback about your performance as a peer mentor. Who gave you that feedback? Have you changed anything you're doing as a result of that feedback?

Learning Experiences

• What have you gained by being a peer mentor?
• How have you changed since you've been a peer mentor?
• What have you learned as a peer mentor - about yourself? About others?
• What do you know now that you didn't know before you were a mentor?
• How did you learn those things? What experiences resulted in that learning?
• Do you know more about your major/academic area after being a peer mentor? If so, how did that happen?
• Do you think your peer mentor role has had an impact on your academic success? If so, talk about that impact.
APPENDIX D. RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY PEER MENTOR
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA SHEET AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

Work

- Have you had other jobs on or off-campus? If so, what were they? And when?
- How were these jobs different from your peer mentor job?
APPENDIX E. FOLLOW-UP EMAIL QUESTIONS

Did you receive a written copy of the job description for your peer mentor position?

Did you use the Peer Mentor Handbook, and if so, what part(s)?

Did you have any training provided by your learning community coordinator/supervisor (training beyond the August training provided prior to school starting)?
APPENDIX F. PEER MENTOR AUGUST TRAINING SCHEDULE

**Monday, August 19**

8:20-8:55am  Breakfast

9-9:30am  Welcome  
- Introductions  
- Training Format  
- Teambuilding

9:30-10am  The Big Picture Remarks  
- Collaboration Demonstration  
- The Mentor Role

10-11am  The Peer Mentor Role – Nuts & Bolts  
- Why Would a Student Seek Out a Peer Mentor?  
- Qualities of a Good Peer Mentor (Group Exercise)  
- Self-Awareness Inventory

11-11:45am  Needs of First Year Students  
- W Curve  
- Programming Responses

12pm  Lunch

1-2pm  Living/Working in the Residence Hall  
*(for live-in peer mentors ONLY)*  
- Basic Residence Hall Policies  
- Working with Hall Staff  
- Panel of Returning Live-In Peer Mentors  
- Boundaries

1-2pm  Work Session for Live-out Mentors  
*(for live-out mentors ONLY)*  
- Challenges with Building Community  
- Getting to Know the Students When You Don’t Live with Them  
- Accessibility

2-2:30pm  Library Presentation

2:30-3:30pm  Communication – Helping Skills  
- Role Plays

3:30-3:45pm  Break
APPENDIX F. PEER MENTOR AUGUST TRAINING SCHEDULE (CONTINUED)

3:45-4:45 Academic Success Center
   -Study Skills
   -Resources
   -Forming Study Groups
   -Supplemental Instruction (SI)

4:45-5pm Processing Time

5:30pm Pizza Dinner

**Tuesday, August 20**

8:20-8:55am Breakfast

9-9:30am Resources
   -Campus
   -Departmental
   -Peer Mentor Network
   -Referrals

9:30-10:30am Cross Cultural Communication

10:30-10:45am Processing

11am Resource Fair

12pm Lunch

1-1:30 Academic Dishonesty

1:30-2pm Group Dynamics

2-2:45pm Community Building

2:45-3pm Break

3-3:45pm Assessment

3:45-4:30 Time Management

4:30-4:45 Wrap-Up

6pm Dinner with Hall Staff
## APPENDIX G. PEER MENTOR APPLICATION SUGGESTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JOB DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>SUGGESTIONS/OPTIONS</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Length of program (Semester; Year)</td>
<td>(<strong>) Learning Community is a Fall semester program. 25 first-year men and women from all majors in the College of (</strong>) may participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course / Residential based (Where it is located)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus / goal of the program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student make-up (men/women; minority; international)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of students in program Majors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>G.P.A. Communication skills Class standing Interpersonal skills Courses completed Knowledge of Language requirements university resources Computer skills Problem-solving skills Previous residence life experience Creativity Member of a student organization Creative Thinking Skills Ability to work well with others Member of specific student organization</td>
<td>Under preferred qualifications: a member of MANRRS -- AMES Learning Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>Flat Stipend Pay based on hourly work Room and board What is the hour / week commitment Accept additional employment?</td>
<td>Demands on a peer mentors time are many. After academics, the mentor position takes next priority; therefore, mentors are not to accept additional employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Balancing&quot;</td>
<td>Limits on extracurricular Statement on time commitment so that students can wisely choose other/external activities</td>
<td>All extracurricular activities must be approved. Requests for extracurricular activities should include the approximate amounts of time required each week. When conflicts arise in mentor duties and other activities, mentor responsibilities take priority. -- Design Exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>Previous hall experience Communication skills Interpersonal skills (i.e. &quot;strong desire to help others&quot;) Ability to work well with others Knowledge of university resources</td>
<td>Applicants must have lived in the residence halls for at least (__) semester(s) to be considered for this position.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX G. PEER MENTOR APPLICATION SUGGESTIONS (CONTINUED)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>JOB DESCRIPTION</strong></th>
<th><strong>SUGGESTIONS/OPTIONS</strong></th>
<th><strong>EXAMPLES</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Interview Process** | Who might be on the interview team  
Selection / Notification date  
How will they be contacted  
--Letter / phone call / e-mail  
Length of interview  
Interview specifics | Peer Mentor candidates will interview with the current Peer Mentor and the Learning Community Coordinator. One hour interviews will be conducted during the week of April 10th. All candidates will be notified by letter by April 19th. |
| **When to Return the Application** | How will students return their application?  
--E-mail / Mail  
Where  
By what time  
Application should be typed  
Submit current resume with application  
Late applications | Late applications cannot be considered but will be retained until the position is filled. |
| **Who to Contact** | Who to contact about program  
Who to contact about interview if different  
Phone number, email, office location  
If current PM is willing to be contacted (check with him/her first) | Questions about (___) Learning Community should be directed to xxx, the Learning Community Coordinator either by email (address) or phone (number). XXX, the current Peer Mentor, may also be contacted by email (address) or phone (number). |
| **RESPONSIBILITY** | **SUGGESTIONS/OPTIONS** | **EXAMPLES** |
| **Programming** | Coordinate social out-of-class activities / events  
Conduct weekly meetings  
Coordinate team members e-mail list  
Help students become familiar with university resources  
Facilitate team-building activities | Plan and execute informal meetings and outings—Agriculture Minorities Empowered for Success  
Advertise and refer residents to appropriate university resources, as the need arises—Casa Hispanica |
### APPENDIX G. PEER MENTOR APPLICATION SUGGESTIONS (CONTINUED)

| Individual Consultation | Maintain an e-mail list to keep students informed of upcoming events  
Call / meet with students  
Implement study groups as needed  
Serve as a communication link between Learning Community coordinators, faculty and students | Develop and maintain an e-mail list that offers weekly study tips—  
Agricultural Education and Studies Learning Community  
Note weaknesses in study habits and suggest corrective study strategies—  
Industrial and Manufacturing Systems Engineering Learning Community  
Intercede as a concerned student and staff member when there is a violation of Department of Residence or University rules. —  
Human Development and Family Studies Learning Community  
Submit regular reports to your supervisor on meetings with students—Design Exchange |
| Meetings with Supervisors and/or the Learning Community Team | Work with staff to facilitate learning experiences (classes / programs)  
Assist in the evaluation of the learning community  
Attend a weekly meeting with Learning Community | Attend weekly meeting with AgEdS and Greenlee School learning community coordinators—Ag.com Learning Community |
| Office Hours | Maintain consistent office hours | Arrange for "office hours" in residence hall room (1-2 hours / week)—Human Development and Family Studies Learning Community  
Arrange "office hours" in dorm room and be available during these times for assistance 1-2 hrs/week—LEAD Living / Learning Community |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESIDENTIAL</th>
<th>SUGGESTIONS/OPTIONS</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team Relationship</td>
<td>Establish relationships with RA/CA on house</td>
<td>Complement the work of the Resident Assistant by encouraging participation in house meetings and house activities and including interested residents in programs and activities planned by the Cross-Cultural Learning Community. – Cross-Cultural Learning Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meet regularly/weekly with RA/CA to share information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborate with DOR staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage LC involvement and attendance in house government, meetings, and activities; participate (PM)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attend regular/monthly meetings with DOR Liaison, LCC, RA, HD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attend staff meetings of Hall staff (periodically, when invited, request time)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Abide by all policies</td>
<td>Follow Department of Residence rules and guidelines. – LEAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenge negative behaviors</td>
<td>The Peer Mentor and the RA are key staff members who work together to develop a community conducive to student success by encouraging positive behaviors and addressing behaviors that are detrimental to the individual and/or community. Like all residents, the Peer Mentor must support the Department of Residence policies and has a responsibility as a citizen/house member to challenge negative behaviors. – preferred statement by the Department of Residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Counseling”</td>
<td>Refer as appropriate</td>
<td>Be available to members of the Learning Community to discuss personal, academic, cultural and other concerns... Refer students with serious concerns to the appropriate campus services. – Cross-Cultural Learning Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be available to discuss personal, academic, other concerns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Know resources for appropriate referral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Know your limits and know what you must share with LCC or HD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advise and refer residents to appropriate university resources, as the need arises. – Casa Hispanica</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G. PEER MENTOR APPLICATION SUGGESTIONS (CONTINUED)

| Visibility | Be available for formal and informal conversations in your room  
|           | Any "hours" expectations for availability  
|           | If "office hours" are considered as time available in room  
|           | Availability during Fall move-in to meet students  
|           | Active participation in LC functions | Post and maintain consistent office hours and be available to residents for informal and formal conversation in your room and in the studio space. – *Design Exchange*  
|           | Be visible and available during move-in and meet participants as soon as they move in. – *LEAD*  
|           | Be actively involved in Casa Hispanica activities. – *Casa Hispanica*  

| Communication | Provide information via bulletin board for LC  
|              | Maintain bulletin board | Update Learning Community bulletin board on a monthly basis. |
**Figure 1. Learning Community Program Types and Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students co-enroll in at least two classes</th>
<th>Students co-enroll in at least three classes</th>
<th>Students attend weekly seminar</th>
<th>Program incorporates a Master Learner</th>
<th>Team of faculty teach block of courses on central theme</th>
<th>Students live in same residence hall or residence area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linked, paired or clustered courses</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, &amp; Smith, 1990; Shapiro &amp; Levine, 1999)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Freshman interest groups (FIGS)</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, &amp; Smith, 1990; Shapiro &amp; Levine, 1999)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Federated learning communities (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, &amp; Smith, 1990; Shapiro &amp; Levine, 1999)</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, &amp; Smith, 1990; Shapiro &amp; Levine, 1999)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, &amp; Smith, 1990; Shapiro &amp; Levine, 1999)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coordinated studies programs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, &amp; Smith, 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residential learning community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Shapiro &amp; Levine, 1999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some types of learning communities listed may include other characteristics listed (i.e. – students in a residential learning community may also co-enroll in common courses.)
Figure 2. Comparison of Resident Assistant and Residential Learning Community Peer Mentor Responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model of effective student</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer helper</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information and referral agent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader and organizer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical worker</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit setter and conflict mediator</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster community development</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide system maintenance and control</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply leadership and governance</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act as a helper/facilitator</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute or assist with educational programming</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively participate in learning community activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold “office hours” in residence hall room</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2. Comparison of Resident Assistant and Residential Learning Community Peer Mentor Responsibilities (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer helper</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information and referral agent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializer</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader and organizer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical worker</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit setter and conflict mediator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster community development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide system maintenance and control</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply leadership and governance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act as a helper/facilitator</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute or assist with educational programming</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively participate in learning community activities</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold “office hours” in residence hall room</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3. Learning Community Categories and Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students Share at Least One Common Course</th>
<th>Students Share Common Living Environment with Learning Community Participants and Non-Learning Community Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course-based Learning Community</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Learning Community</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential and Course-based Learning Community</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4. Residential Learning Community Peer Mentor Common Characteristics from Peer Mentor Job Descriptions at the Research Site

Common to All Residential Learning Community Peer Mentors
- Are undergraduate students enrolled at the institution (within a particular major or college if applicable)
- Have achieved at least sophomore status
- Live on the floor with residential learning community participants
- Are supervised by a Learning Community Coordinator (faculty or staff member)
- Are financially compensated

Common to Many Residential Learning Community Peer Mentors
- Coordinate social activities for the learning community participants
- Coordinate academic programs for the learning community participants
- Assist in teaching a course in which learning community participants are enrolled
- Coordinate study groups or provide tutoring for learning community participants
- Have achieved a grade point average identified as “strong” by the Learning Community Coordinator.
Figure 5. Residential Learning Community Peer Mentor Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Residential Learning Communities Employing Peer Mentors in Each Category</th>
<th>Total Number of Peer Mentors in Each Category</th>
<th>Targeted Number for Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solo Mentors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Mentors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grouped Mentors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>A minimum of 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>A minimum of 24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 6. Solo Mentor Job Descriptions

**More Common ------------------- Less Common**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentor Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities Common to Both Job Descriptions in Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities Appearing in One Job Description in Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Solo Mentors (2 job descriptions) | Teambuilding  
Plan activities  
Acquaint students with/refer students to resources  
Discuss academic issues  
Assist with/coordinate Service Learning/Community Service activities | Meet with supervisors  
Work in conjunction with residence hall staff  
Specified number of hours per week spent on peer mentor duties  
Conduct regularly scheduled meetings with students  
Role model  
Attend/assist with learning community class  
Attend training |
Figure 7. Paired Mentor Job Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentor Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities Common to all Job Descriptions in Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities Common to Two Job Descriptions in Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities Appearing in One Job Description in Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paired Mentors (3 job descriptions)</td>
<td>Plan/attend activities</td>
<td>Meet with supervisor</td>
<td>Coordinate study groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assist with transition to college</td>
<td>Assist with course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Work in conjunction with residence hall staff</td>
<td>Hold office hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Make individual contacts with students</td>
<td>Be available during move-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Refer students to resources</td>
<td>Follow residence hall policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attend house meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Journal weekly observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attend training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spend most weekends on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide information on student life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Serve as communication link to academic department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Form study groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 8. Grouped Mentor Job Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentor Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities Common to Four Job Descriptions</th>
<th>Responsibilities Common to Three Job Descriptions in Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities Common to Two Job Descriptions in Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities Appearing in One Job Description in Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grouped Mentors (5 job descriptions)</td>
<td>Meet with students individually or in groups</td>
<td>Specified number of hours per week spent on peer mentor duties</td>
<td>Assist with transition to college</td>
<td>Assist with recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hold office hours</td>
<td>Assist with and/or attend learning community class</td>
<td>Work in conjunction with residence hall staff</td>
<td>Assist faculty mentor to know students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acquaint students with/refer students to resources</td>
<td>Maintain communication (publicize events, email team, provide information to department, contact team over summer)</td>
<td>Attend activities/surveys/solicit student input</td>
<td>Collect interest surveys/solicit student input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attend training</td>
<td>Submit reports/evaluations</td>
<td>Address academic support issues (refer or address issue)</td>
<td>Prepare calendars of upcoming events and communicate opportunities to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Complete administrative work</td>
<td>Regularly update supervisors about student issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meet with supervisor</td>
<td>Foster positive relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Check computer lab equipment</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other duties as assigned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attend other meetings as assigned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No responsibilities were common to all five job descriptions.