

**BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES TUTOR
ASSESSMENT**

by

Dr. Johnathan M. Bennett, Ed. D

Abstract

This project sought to identify steps a TRIO SSS program could take to help implement basic, foundational pieces of an assessment process for the program's tutoring service. Data was collected via structured, ten-question interviews with five TRIO program directors and staff. Interview transcripts were coded, and prevalent themes were identified. The researcher uses themes to encourage the implementation of three foundational tools that can help build an assessment practice for SSS programs that currently do not assess their student-tutors. These three tools are: an institutionally published policy on how the SSS tutor program will function to include a mission and purpose statement, a tutor assessment document that allows for tutor, tutee, and supervisor feedback, and a tutor professional development plan.

Keywords: tutor, assessment, evaluation, tutoring, assessment practices, student leadership, education, and academic performance

Introduction

This research began quite simply as an attempt to gather feedback on how to manage the tutoring program for for an SSS (Student Support Services) grant. The project quickly became a larger undertaking and ultimately found its purpose as my capstone project for which I eventually earned a Doctor of Education degree. Though I collected data from interviews, a focus group, and a document analysis, I am only sharing interview data here as it was found to my most applicable data set and lead to the greatest influence on recommendations.

Problem

The research setting is a public, regionally-accredited 4-year university located near the Arkansas-Oklahoma border. The university's fall 2019 enrollment was more than 6,000 students, including online and graduate students. The university offers more than 30 bachelor's degrees as well as many associate degrees, certifications, and two graduate degrees. The SSS program on the campus consists of a director, a retention advisor, an academic specialist, and an administrative assistant. The SSS program commonly employs one to three student-tutors who are primarily responsible for tutoring general education requirement classes. Algebra, Anatomy, and American History are among the subjects for which students most commonly request tutors. Other TRIO programs on campus include Upward Bound-Math/Science, Upward Bound-Class, and Student Support Services-STEM. These three programs also often employ student tutors for the same lower-level general education classes.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted on-site on an individual basis and consisted of 10 questions. The purpose of the interviews was to focus on the goals, resources, and role-players associated with designing and implementing an assessment practice. Question themes varied between establishing interviewee experience and identifying necessary resources. The interviews also touched on the topic of assessment goals and outcomes. Five candidates were asked to volunteer their time for these interviews. Each participant has at least five years of experience in at least one of the following roles: tutoring, supervising of tutor programming, assessment design, or supervising assessment practices. Prior to start of the interview, each participant was given a summary of the project and a description of the data collection methods. Interviews were conducted live in a single room and the interview length varied between forty-five minutes to one hour. Interviews were recorded using a speech-to-text transcription application for ease of access during the data analysis.

Interview Descriptions of Participants

The participants in the structured interviews included the directors of the following programs: Upward Bound-Math/Science, Upward Bound-Classic, Student Support Services, and Student Support Services-STEM programs. The last interviewee was a retention advisor for the SSS program. Participants were asked to volunteer for interviews due to their experience in managing tutoring programs or their experience in a TRIO program.

Participant One, at time of the interview works for the as the Director for an Upward Bound-Class (UB-C) program. Her job responsibilities include being tasked with overseeing the Upward Bound tutoring program, supervising a tutoring coordinator, and assessing the effectiveness of the tutoring programs. The UB-C program serves 60 high school students from surrounding high schools in the Fort Smith metro.

Participant Two is Upward Bound Math-Science's (UB-MS) Director. Her experience in assessment primarily comes from her time working developing ACT test assessment and hiring tutors in current role. Participant Two is in her second year in her current role where she fills a role identical to her UB-C counterpart. This involves assessing the tutoring program for her program's sixty high-school participants.

Participant Three serves as the Retention Advisor (RA) for the SSS-STEM program. She has served in multiple academic advising roles for the research institution throughout her academic career which spans more than ten years. More applicable is Participant Three's prior work for a medical school as a tutor coordinator where the participant worked for two years. Lastly, Participant Three has also worked in faculty role in teaching a freshmen-level Psychology class. Her insight included varying perspectives and over a decade of experience; both characteristics were invaluable to this project.

Participant Four is the current Director of the SSS STEM program. Prior to serving as the SSS-STEM Director, the participant served as the Assistant Director and Director in an International Student department for a neighboring university in Southern Arkansas. The

participant's role there included designing and implementing new programming meant to enhance academic performance as well as accompanying assessment of those same programs.

Participant Five has been the SSS Director for four years at the time of the interview. Part of the participants duties in their current role include the supervision of the SSS program's tutoring service to include hiring and training. Both the SSS-STEM and SSS Directors are responsible for their respective program's annual report to the Department of Education. This report is called the Annual Performance Report. This report affects the number of Quality Points the program receives when the program seeks to renew its grant. The report includes the number of advising, coaching, and tutoring session attended by the program's participants. This means that the number of tutoring sessions attended by participants has as direct relation to the continuity of the program.

Interview Results

Interviews were conducted with five TRIO program staff members to find themes related to tutor assessment practice and the implementation of such a practice. First, notes were taken during the interviews to better allow the researcher to organize main points and ideas stated by the participants. Transcripts were then coded using key terms and concepts. Codes were then grouped based on similarity to form themes. Key themes and codes are listed below in Table 1 along with accompanying supportive participants quotes.

The first major theme that presented itself in interview transcript was the importance of inclusivity. Topics such as accessibility, availability, and multiple tutoring delivery formats added to the theme of inclusivity. The SSS-STEM Director specifically highlighted the value of accessibility due to their student's need for tutoring in classes that have a high demand for tutors and in classes that are more challenging. The Upward Bound-Classic (UB-C) Director also raised a concern for implementing assessment by noting that their office has to replace staff members on a regular basis despite being an office of only four employees. This turnover makes the availability of an assessment practice a topic of concern.

A second prominent theme was the presence of goal-orientation as it relates to tutor assessment. Interview participants were outspoken on the topics of outcomes, purpose, and motivation surrounding assessment. The Retention Advisor (RA) was very helpful in mentioning the need for an assessment practice to start with a specific purpose and the need to know explicitly what role or quality is being assessed. The RA's perspective was informative and directly influenced the recommendation timelines which include multiple group discussions. The UB-MS offered insight that added to the theme of goal-orientation by describing how their program already uses baseline data to establish trends in their students' grades before and after tutoring sessions.

The interview participants also felt strongly about the clear understanding of accountability surrounding assessment and tutoring programs. The SSS Director was most vocal on this topic. The SSS Director spoke on the need for tutor assessment to be a high-priority responsibility but also for an employee to have the resources to make assessment such a priority. The SSS Director says they believe that time and compensation have been the two largest limiting factors in the past that prevented attempts to create and implement a tutor assessment practice. The SSS Director also

shared that an assessment practice would need to be overseen by staff, either singular or plural, that are capable of taking ownership over the practice and be able to make decisions autonomously.

Interview Findings

The first approach to data collection in this study was a series of structured interviews. Interviews were conducted on-site on an individual basis and consisted of 10 questions. The purpose of the interviews was to focus on the goals, resources, and role-players associated with designing and implementing an assessment practice. Question themes varied between establishing interviewee experience and identifying necessary resources. The interviews also touched on the topic of assessment goals and outcomes. Five candidates were asked to volunteer their time for these interviews. Each participant has at least five years of experience in at least one of the following roles: tutoring, supervising of tutor programming, assessment design, or supervising assessment practices. Prior to start of the interview, each participant was given a summary of the project and a description of the data collection methods. Interviews were conducted live in a single room and the interview length varied between forty-five minutes to one hour. Interviews were recorded using a speech-to-text transcription application for ease of access during the data analysis.

Interview Descriptions of Participants

The participants in the structured interviews included the directors of the following programs: Upward Bound-Math/Science, Upward Bound-Classic, Student Support Services, and Student Support Services-STEM programs. The last interviewee was a retention advisor for the SSS program. Participants were asked to volunteer for interviews due to their experience in managing tutoring programs or their experience in a TRIO program.

Participant One, at time of the interview works as the Director for an Upward Bound-Class (UB-C) program. Her job responsibilities include being tasked with overseeing the Upward Bound tutoring program, supervising a tutoring coordinator, and assessing the effectiveness of the tutoring programs. The UB-C program serves 60 high school students from surrounding high schools in the Fort Smith metro.

Participant Two is the Upward Bound Math-Science (UB-MS) Director. Her experience in assessment primarily comes from her time working developing ACT test assessment and hiring tutors in current role. Participant Two is in her second year in her current role where she fills a role identical to her UB-C counterpart. This involves assessing the tutoring program for her program's sixty high-school participants.

Participant Three serves as the Retention Advisor (RA) for the SSS-STEM program. She has served in multiple academic advising roles throughout her academic career which spans more than ten years. More applicable is Participant Three's prior work for a medical school as a tutor coordinator where the participant worked for two years. Lastly, Participant Three has also worked in faculty role in teaching a freshmen-level Psychology class. Her insight included varying perspectives and over a decade of experience; both characteristics were invaluable to this project.

Participant Four is the current Director of the SSS STEM program. Prior to serving as the SSS-STEM Director, the participant served as the Assistant Director and Director in an International Student department for a neighboring university in Southern Arkansas. The participant's role there included designing and implementing new programming meant to enhance academic performance as well as accompanying assessment of those same programs.

Participant Five has been the SSS Director for four years at the time of the interview. Part of the participants duties in their current role include the supervision of the SSS program's tutoring service to include hiring and training. Both the SSS-STEM and SSS Directors are responsible for their respective program's annual report to the Department of Education. This report is called the Annual Performance Report. This report affects the number of Quality Points the program receives when the program seeks to renew its grant. The report includes the number of advising, coaching, and tutoring session attended by the program's participants. This means that the number of tutoring sessions attended by participants has as direct relation to the continuity of the program.

Interview Results

Interviews were conducted with five staff members at a non-profit 4-year university to find themes related to tutor assessment practice and the implementation of such a practice. First, notes were taken during the interviews to better allow the researcher to organize main points and ideas stated by the participants. Transcripts were then coded using key terms and concepts. Codes were then grouped based on similarity to form themes. Key themes and codes are listed below in Table 1 along with accompanying supportive participants quotes.

The first major theme that presented itself in interview transcript was the importance of inclusivity. Topics such as accessibility, availability, and multiple tutoring delivery formats added to the theme of inclusivity. The SSS-STEM Director specifically highlighted the value of accessibility due to their student's need for tutoring in classes that have a high demand for tutors and in classes that are more challenging. The Upward Bound-Classic (UB-C) Director also raised a concern for implementing assessment by noting that their office has to replace staff members on a regular basis despite being an office of only four employees. This turnover makes the availability of an assessment practice a topic of concern.

A second prominent theme was the presence of goal-orientation as it relates to tutor assessment. Interview participants were outspoken on the topics of outcomes, purpose, and motivation surrounding assessment. The Retention Advisor (RA) was very helpful in mentioning the need for an assessment practice to start with a specific purpose and the need to know explicitly what role or quality is being assessed. The RA's perspective was informative and directly influenced the recommendation timelines which include multiple group discussions. The UB-MS offered insight that added to the theme of goal-orientation by describing how their program already uses baseline data to establish trends in their students' grades before and after tutoring sessions.

The interview participants also felt strongly about the clear understanding of accountability surrounding assessment and tutoring programs. The SSS Director was most vocal on this topic. The SSS Director spoke on the need for tutor assessment to be a high-priority responsibility but also for

an employee to have the resources to make assessment such a priority. The SSS Director says they believe that time and compensation have been the two largest limiting factors in the past that prevented attempts to create and implement a tutor assessment practice. The SSS Director also shared that an assessment practice would need to be overseen by staff, either singular or plural, that are capable of taking ownership over the practice and be able to make decisions autonomously.

Table 1*Codes and themes from Interview Data*

Theme	Codes	Participants Quotes
Inclusivity	Accessible	“It’s very hard to find peer-tutors if you’re online, non-traditional, or for the hard classes.” (SSS STEM Director)
	Available	“Part of the worry ... is how much time it takes to teach it to someone. The coordinators jobs are entry-level, so we don’t keep them for more than a couple years” (UB-C Director)
	Delivery Formats	“Even if we had a great plan to assess the tutors and I don’t know how it would work for Zoom or virtual sessions.” (SSS STEM Director)
Goal-oriented	Outcome	“we assess students when they begin the program to establish a baseline; we track their grades every two weeks” (UB-MS Director) “...one-hour sessions, you have to start with a purpose probably. What was the goal today?” (RA)
	Purpose	“We’ve been slow to create something larger for assessment without agreeing on what we are really assessing—the students or the tutors, or both” (RA)
	Motivation	“Sometimes, these grants can get caught up in their day-to-day and get complacent to where we just say that it’s good enough...” (RA)
Accountability	Self-efficacy	“...make sure that somebody owns it and is able to make changes needed without having to wait around or be hesitant.” (SSS Director)
	Responsibility	“Whomever might inherit the role of assessment would need to have the time and compensation to be able to prioritize it. If not, then it’ll just be another check in the box over time” (SSS Director)

Themes were identified, and a word search was conducted. The results of the word search can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Themes and Frequency Codes from Interview Data

Theme	Codes	Number of Occurrences
Inclusivity	Accessible / Accessibility	12
	Availability / Available	12
	Virtual / Online	10
Goal-oriented	Outcome	10
	Purpose	9
	Motivation	4
Accountability	Self-efficacy	6
	Responsibility	6

Discussion of the Findings

The findings from the interviews with TRIO program Directors and an SSS Retention Advisor suggest three themes that indicate an overall view of how tutor assessment should be practiced. Inclusivity rose to the surface of transcript analysis and accurately reflects a trend in higher education to be inclusive of all learners. An interview participant best summarized this point in saying, “Assessment should reflect all the student’s performance both the tutors and the students; whether they’re high school, college, non-traditional or not.” (Upward Bound-Classic Director) In this instance, the drive for inclusivity may stem from the nature of the participants’ roles as TRIO grant employees. These grants often serve students that are first-generation, from low-income homes, or receive ADA accommodations. This may result in the inclusivity, especially among ADA-accommodated students being a high-level priority for these professionals.

Interview participants each mentioned, in response to different questions, the need for an assessment process to begin with a purpose and goal in mind and for the responsibility of fulfilling that goal to be clearly established. This directly aids in forming the assessment recommendations. Particularly, the logic model for research and implementation is a guiding concept for this project and serves as a reference for the purpose-driven approach that the interview participants expressed.

The need for individual and program accountability was found amongst the interviews as well. A problem that can occur in TRIO programs is a lack of accountability in issues outside the necessary reporting metrics. TRIO programs complete annual reports that detail such data as retention rates, graduation rates, and overall enrollment numbers. With the bulk of a director’s time going then to retention efforts, academic coaching, and recruiting, the time and prioritization of assessment is an easy cast-aside. The interview participants feel there is a need for a higher prioritization of assessment of their tutoring programs. This thought was succinctly expressed by an interview participant who said “...you got to figure out if what you’re doing is worth doing.” (Retention Advisor)

Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this project was to solve the problem of a lack of assessment of the tutoring services offered by the Student Support Services (SSS) program and to develop a tutor assessment measure to include assessment of the tutor, tutee, and program itself. The problem is that the SSS program has no quantitative assessment procedure in place for the program’s tutoring service. The SSS program has no quantitative assessment procedure in place for the program’s tutoring service. This section describes the recommendations put forth by the researcher. The section closes with information pertaining to the resources needed for the recommendation and finishes with a proposed timeline of events for implementing the recommendation.

The central research question for this study was: How can the problem of a lack of assessment of tutoring in the SSS program be improved? Based on a review of scholarly literature and data collection and analysis, there are three recommendations to answer the central research question. The three recommendations are:

1. Design an assessment policy for the SSS tutoring program.
2. Design and implement a tutor assessment form for all the program tutors.
3. Design and implement a continuing professional development program for SSS tutors

SSS Tutor Policy

The first piece of the solution to the central research question is to draft a tutor assessment policy for the Student Support Services. This recommendation helps solve the problem of a lack of assessment by creating a well-informed policy as a source of reference for the tutors and tutor supervisor. Key components of the assessment policy would include first the mission and purpose of the SSS tutor program as well as the purpose of the assessment practice itself. This recommendation would result in the alignment of tutor program's mission with the university's mission for continuity and direction. Other important mentions in the recommended policy include hiring standards, disciplinary process, and actions upon assessment outcomes.

Given that the SSS program currently has no tutor assessment practice, the creation of a tutor assessment policy offers the opportunity for insight from other professionals and for the tutor program to be built around the SSS program's goals and purpose. This would also allow for transparency from the perspective of the tutors as well as the tutees. Clear mention of the tutors will be assessed, what metrics are sought after, and what the outcomes of their performance will be are all functions that can facilitate the accountability and accessibility that the focus group participants expressed a need for. Of particular note for creating an assessment policy is the description for a Tutor Assessment form and requirements for completing it and maintaining it.

SSS Tutor Assessment Form

To solve the problem of a lack of assessment practice for the SSS program, it is recommended that the program design and adopt a single, central evaluation form for tutors that tracks their outcomes with each student that they work with. The creation of this form would build a sense of accountability for the SSS Academic Specialist, tutor, and learner each. The recommendation suggests using a single form for each tutor session that is maintained on file, reviewed by the SSS Academic Specialist for data, and used to advise training, re-hiring, and discipline.

The form will need to include a beginning section with information about the delivery format, subject, learners' goals/purpose in the session, and any special preferences. The form should include an 'Exit' feedback section that includes measurable notes from the learner that state their level of satisfaction with the tutoring session. It is recommended to solicit further feedback from the SSS tutors to best develop the form with ease of use in mind. Accuracy in reporting is also a priority. The document uncovered the need for accountability in assessment as a theme which attests to the importance of accurate, reliable information to so that accountable parties can be well-informed.

SSS Tutor Professional development

The launching of outcome-based professional development for SSS tutors is recommended to implement an assessment practice that is fair and equitable. Multiple focus group participants also expressed the value of training and professional development to them as individuals and professionals. Their perspective came from the need for all tutors to be assessed equally in spite of their differing levels of development. A tutor program professional development plan that coaches a series of basic interpersonal skills and tutoring skills would fill the need for equality in the assessment practice by establishing a baseline of expected skills. The tutors could feel reasonably equal amongst each other if their professional development were equal, and each were held a standard equivalent with their level of professional development.

Discussion

TRIO program are forward-funded by five years. Some funding maneuverability exists in these programs, but they often have to wait until their grants are nearing expiration to make any major funding adjustments. This means that most SSS programs do not have the labor resources or funding to create new job descriptions, purchase expensive software or to implement new, complex processes. The aforementioned recommendations were suggested with these constrictions in mind. Implementing each recommendation would still certainly not be easy and a generous timeline for each should be considered if any SSS programs consider facilitating these recommendations. The potential benefits of having access to collected assessment data and a holistic view of their programs tutoring service performance is likely worth the minimal effort required to begin developing these assessment foundation tools.

Summary

The preceding section outlined the researcher's recommendations, the roles of key players within those recommendations and lastly, a timeline and list of resources needed to employ each of the recommendations. The specific recommendations include the need for a formal tutor assessment policy creation and adoption by the SSS program, a single evaluation form that allows for all three parties involved in the tutoring process to offer feedback, and campus-level professional development for SSS tutors.

REFERENCES

- Arhin, V., Ampofo, S. Y., Segbenya, M., Somauh, B. A., Minadzi, V. M., Dankyi, L. A., & Brown, P. (2021). Effect of Face-to-Face Tutoring on Academic Performance of Distance Learners: Implications for Educational Practice. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 9(3), 593-605.
- Claxton, B. L., & Michael, K. Y. (2020). *Conducting applied research in education*. Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.
- Hayton, J. W. (2019). Helping them to help themselves? An evaluation of student-led tutorials in a higher education setting. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(1), 12–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1349892>
- Huda, Kabir, & Siddiq, T. (2020). E-assessment in higher education: Students' perspective. *International Journal of Education and Development Using Information and Communication Technology*, 16(2), 250–258.
- Nieminen, J. H., & Tuohilampi, L. (2020). “Finally studying for myself” – examining student agency in summative and formative self-assessment models. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1720595>
- McIntosh, E. A., Thomas, L., Troxel, W. G., van den Wijngaard, O., & Grey, D. (2021). Academic advising and tutoring for student success in higher education: International approaches. In J. Doe, M. Johnson, & T. Smith (Eds.). *Frontiers in education: Vol. 6*. Frontiers.
- Sa, B., Ezenwaka, C., Singh, K., & Sehlule Vuma Anwarul, A. M. (2019). Tutor assessment of PBL process: Does tutor variability affect objectivity and reliability? *BMC Medical Education*, 19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s12909-019-1508-z>
- Smith, J.D., Li, D.H. & Rafferty, M.R. (2020) The Implementation Research Logic Model: a method for planning, executing, reporting, and synthesizing implementation projects. *Implementation Sci* 15, 84. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-020-01041-8>
- Taber, K. S. (2020). Mediated learning leading development—the social development theory of Lev Vygotsky. In *Science education in theory and practice* (pp. 277-291). Springer, Cham.
- Yale, A. T. (2019). The personal tutor–student relationship: Student expectations and experiences of personal tutoring in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(4), 533–544.

Yen, S., Lo, Y., Lee, A., & Enriquez, J. (2018). Learning online, offline, and in-between:

Comparing student academic outcomes and course satisfaction in face-to-face, online, and blended teaching modalities. *Education and Information Technologies*, 23(5), 2141–2153.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-018-9707-5>

Youde, A. (2018). Andragogy in blended learning contexts: Effective tutoring of adult learners

studying part-time, vocationally relevant degrees at a distance. *International Journal of*

Lifelong Education, 37(2), 255–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2018.1450303>

Youde, A. (2020). I don't need peer support: Effective tutoring in blended learning environments

for part-time, adult learners. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(5), 1040–1054.

Comments:

This project sought to identify steps a TRIO SSS program could take to help implement basic, foundational pieces of an assessment process for the program's tutoring service.

The suggestions are as follows:

1. More research background information, such as the research reason, can be added in "Introduction".
2. A specific section of "Literature review" regarding tutoring service and TRIO SSS program can be provided before "Problem".
3. Can the "Problem" be provided as a paragraph in "Data collection"?
4. For the "Data collection", please provide statistical samples.
5. At the end of "Interview Findings", please add a summary for the whole section.
6. What's the connection between "Discussion of the findings" and "Discussion" above "Summary"? Please reorganize them to be more clear and logic for the presentation of the research point.