Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities

Knack

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# How Peer Tutoring Can Enhance Student Transfer and Workforce Preparation


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Colleges and universities are facing stiff headwinds.  At many institutions, declining enrollment and concerns about college affordability have resulted in budget reductions and reallocations which often disproportionally affect student-facing staff and initiatives designed to enhance transfer success, persistence, and completion. At the same time, many Americans are questioning the value of a college degree and its relationship with workforce outcomes (Fry et al, 2024). The myriad challenges to enroll, retain, and graduate students while also ensuring they are well prepared for post-college employment in the current context of fiscal uncertainty has raised the stakes for university leaders.

Addressing two seemingly unrelated challenges is essential at this moment. The first is boosting completion rates to increase the number of students with credentials that accurately represent desired 21st-century knowledge, skills and dispositions. The second is to ensure that graduates are adequately prepared to apply what they have learned in college and further develop their talents in the workplace. In a cost-constrained environment, university leaders can only add so many interventions to move the needle on these twin challenges. Could both completion and workforce readiness be advanced simultaneously, and meaningfully, with a single intervention? One such prospect is cross-institutional peer tutoring, which has potential to benefit students, student tutors, and institutions simultaneously.

This paper shows how cross institutional peer tutoring at two-year and four-year schools can be a high-impact approach to help increase both students' academic outcomes and development of employable skills in a cost-efficient way. When done well, this form of educationally purposeful peer interaction can enhance the success of baccalaureate-seeking students who start at a four-year university or transfer to one from a community college while providing undergraduate peer tutors with experiences that augment a range of durable skills valued by employers.

## The Transfer and Mobility Challenge

Community colleges enroll about two-fifths of all undergraduates, many of whom are low-income, racially minoritized, and first in their family to attend postsecondary education (Rosenberg & Koch, 2021). Although roughly 80 percent of entering community college students intend to transfer and complete a four-year degree (CCRC, 2025) they often encounter multiple barriers to baccalaureate completion, such as opaque degree requirements and unfavorable policies related to the acceptance of prior coursework. For example, some transfer students discover (too late) that some courses accepted for credit at the four-year institution do not apply to their chosen major.



Indeed, about two-thirds of transfer students experience credit loss (~20% of prior coursework, on average) and accumulate more excess credits than their peers, delaying degree completion (Giani et al., 2026). Unrecovered credits represent a financial loss for students as well as uncompensated investment of their time (Douglas-Gabriel, 2016). Taken together, these problematic effects exacerbate equity gaps for those students already marginalized within the higher education system. As a result, only about half of the one-third of all community college students who transfer to a four-year institution ultimately earn a bachelor's degree within six years (CCRC, 2025).

The multiple issues that impact transfer student success cannot be fixed solely through better articulation agreements or academic advising. The more promising approaches are holistic, and help students learn about, understand and navigate institutional environments throughout their academic journeys. These approaches help students build social capital, or trusted relationships and networks, as well as cultural capital, or the knowledge of complex institutional processes and norms of "how things work here." This includes how majors differ across universities, which courses apply to specific degree requirements, and how curriculum changes at either institution affect transfer success and course credit (Grote et al., 2019; Reeping & Knight, 2021). This "hidden curriculum" often can be learned and understood through peer relationships. Unfortunately, the students who can benefit most from such relationships are often less likely to have them as they go through the transfer process.

## The Workforce Readiness Challenge

A college or university's responsibility to its students does not end at graduation. Most students pursue higher education, at least in part, to prepare for a meaningful career. Worryingly, unemployment rates for college graduates are the highest they've been in recent years (Federal Reserve Bank of New York). Employers have been vocal with concerns about career-readiness of graduates (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2025). Only 41% of employers strongly agree that graduates are prepared for an entry-level job (Finley, 2025, p. 18), and just over a third report graduates are very well prepared across a range of workforce skills (Finley, 2025, p. 19). Among employer worries is that while students generally know a good deal about the subjects they studied, they are not able to readily transfer what they know to the unstructured problems and circumstances they encounter on the job (Finley, 2021). All this fuels skepticism about whether students are developing their talents in ways that lead to post-college self-sufficiency in a rapidly changing, increasingly chaotic world.

As suggested earlier, cross-institutional peer tutoring done well is one educationally purposeful, economically feasible approach to addressing the challenges that institutions face in advancing student attainment, transfer success, and workforce development. What does cross-institutional peer tutoring entail, how does it work, and what are its benefits?

## Cross-Institutional Tutoring

With the advances in virtual meeting and scheduling technology accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now possible for students from around the world to meet virtually at any mutually agreeable time. This capability makes the physical boundaries of a two-year or a four-year college less salient, enabling the creation and support of peer tutoring networks that pair tutors and students needing tutoring from different institutions. In a cross-institutional peer tutoring arrangement, a student at a four-year institution tutors a community college student in a subject with high relevance for transfer, and in which the tutor has demonstrated success (e.g., college algebra, rhetorical writing, and other foundational gateway courses). Student tutors develop workforce-relevant skills such as explaining complex concepts, adapting communication styles, and mentoring others. Both tutors and tutees develop a one-on-one interpersonal relationship that centers around course content but often expands to include sharing implicit knowledge of systems and structures at the university. The development of these critical relationships is an antecedent to several other important change processes described below.

First, the peer tutoring arrangement helps build social capital by creating at least one significant interpersonal relationship for community college students at the four-year institution. The peer tutor provides community college students with a social anchor for their transition to a new institution and connections to new relationships that will support them when they arrive (social capital). This is particularly important at large research institutions, where transfer students struggle to connect with faculty due to the typical university's decentralized nature (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Second, the experience adds to the transfer student's institutional knowledge (cultural capital). Well-trained peer tutors serve as translators or guides for first-generation students with little exposure to college, conveying informal knowledge of the transfer institution's environment, policies, and procedures (Jabbar et al, 2021) - the way we do things around here.

Third, peer tutors help students improve their self-efficacy through developing learning and study skills (self-efficacy), which in turn boosts students' confidence in their academic abilities (Cepeda et al., 2021; Laanan et al., 2010). As students experience academic success with the support of a peer tutor, they are more likely to view themselves as capable of succeeding at a four-year institution. This increased confidence can strengthen students' motivation and commitment to degree completion.

Finally, peer tutoring is a bridge toward fostering the tutee's sense of belonging during their transfer journey. Sense of belonging – feeling valued and accepted by one's peers – is positively linked to student persistence and academic success, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2016). Peer tutoring strengthens belonging through academic and interpersonal validation (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011), which is a virtuous cycle, building students' self-confidence in their academic abilities, leading to tangible academic successes, and even greater confidence.

## Highlight from the Field: University of South Florida (USF) and Hillsborough Community College (HCC)

The cross-institutional partnership between the University of South Florida (USF) and Hillsborough Community College (HCC) offers an example of how institutions can strengthen transfer pathways through shared academic support. The FUSE program is a guaranteed transfer and degree completion program between USF and several regional colleges, including HCC. In addition to guaranteed admission into a program, students receive personalized advising and academic support, including peer tutoring through Knack. Through this model, HCC students accessed peer tutoring provided by successful USF students, extending academic support across institutional boundaries and creating meaningful connections between students at two points along a potential transfer pathway. By connecting community college students with university peers, the model provided more than course-specific academic assistance; it also offered HCC students exposure to USF students and the university community. In many cases, HCC students who transfer successfully to USF go on to become tutors themselves, providing them with an opportunity to share their experience and help others become successful. The USF-HCC model illustrates the potential for technology-enabled, cross-institutional peer tutoring to complement formal transfer pathways by strengthening academic preparation, building familiarity with the four-year institution, and creating greater continuity in the student experience across institutions.

A word of caution. Peer tutoring will not automatically transmit the forms of social and cultural capital that two-year students often need for successful transfer. Effective support initiatives are a function of intentional design, including clear role definition, coordination with existing student services, consistent communication, and structured institutional planning (Wilson et al., 2020). With regard to cross-institutional tutoring, this means that tutors must be prepared both in course content and in referral practices, role boundaries, inclusive communication, and strategies for making tacit institutional expectations tangible and meaningful to tutees. Without such preparation, peer tutoring may improve immediate academic performance while leaving unequal access to insider knowledge and insightful action largely unchanged (Wilson et al., 2020).



> ***"I chose [my tutor] because it seemed like that could be a little more personal because she had the same professor that I did at HCC. It was great because she's on the same path that I'm on. It made it seem more attainable for me to ask her questions, not just about math, but also about transferring from HCC to USF."***
>
> – HCC FUSE Student

## Peer Tutoring as Workforce Development

While cross-institutional peer tutoring confers multiple benefits for both tutees and institutions, it's important to recognize and capitalize on the fact that tutoring is a job, whether paid or not. The work puts peer tutors in situations where they can apply what they are learning from their studies and related experiences inside and outside the classroom. Similar to an internship or co-op, tutoring allows students to demonstrate – for better or worse – how well they deal with messy, unstructured situations, explain sometimes difficult, complicated concepts in understandable ways, and interact with others from different backgrounds. Simply put, the same relational activities that support transfer students' success and completion enable development of workforce competencies for both tutors and those being tutored.

This is to say that peer tutoring confers benefits on tutors as well as those who are tutored, whether at a community college or four-year institution. Many of these benefits are also highly valued in the workplace. Peer tutors doing academic support work get sustained practice in communication, problem solving, mentoring, and leadership (Arendale, 2014). Tutors do more than reiterate course content; they translate disciplinary knowledge for students from different backgrounds and abilities, identify misconceptions, adjust explanations in real time, and maintain supportive relationships with peers. Peer tutors engage in explanation, questioning, and metacognitive regulation, all of which are associated with gains in transferable skills such as interpersonal and intrapersonal communication and adaptive problem solving (Topping, 2005).

Structured reflection and guided dialogue are central to helping students translate the tutoring experience into professional identity, particularly in roles that involve mentoring and facilitation (Clayton & Ash, 2010). Within peer-assisted learning environments, tutors are not only performing tasks but also making sense of those experiences as they further develop their communication, collaboration, and emerging professional skills (Keeling, 2013). Thus, tutoring contributes to career readiness not simply through skill acquisition, but through students' ability to name, reflect on, and apply those skills within a broader professional framework. This framing aligns with student engagement and human capital perspectives, which position educationally purposeful work as a mechanism through which students translate academic experiences into durable skills, professional identity, and long-term economic mobility. When done well, peer tutoring qualifies as a high-impact practice (Cole et al, 2024), which is known to be associated with many desired college outcomes, some of which are described above (Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al, 2017).

> ***"Tutoring has also helped me refine my own skills. As I teach, I continue learning, adapting to course changes, and improving my understanding. The combination of coursework and tutoring has boosted my confidence, and I'm proud to include it on my resume as a valuable learning experience."***
>
> – Knack Peer Tutor

## Implications for Institutional Strategy

University leaders faced with the challenges of improving student academic outcomes and career readiness might consider peer tutoring as a multi-purpose intervention. By improving students' success in coursework, peer tutoring drives improvements to retention and completion. In a cost-constrained environment, anything that moves the needle on undergraduate student retention and completion will be a revenue driver for the university.

Attracting more transfer students and supporting their post-transfer success is an imperative for universities that are facing enrollment declines. Cross-institutional tutoring can additionally support enrollment stability through increasing the pipeline of transfer students. A positive experience with a peer tutor is a more persuasive advertisement for the four-year university as a destination than any printed marketing materials. The compelling strategic inference is that cross-institutional tutoring enables the receiving university to make its support culture visible before matriculation, positioning tutoring not only as academic assistance but also as a relational form of outreach and institutional signaling. In this way, peer tutoring can relieve course-level and transition-related pressures simultaneously while communicating that the four-year institution is transfer-receptive, student-centered, and willing to invest in students from nearby two-year colleges (Wilson et al., 2020).

Once enrolled, transfer students benefit most from support services accessible at the point of need and embedded within a broader student success ecosystem rather than treated as isolated add-ons (Wilson, 2020). For first-generation students who lack generationally transferred knowledge of "what to do" in college, the informal peer mentoring support of the tutor can help ease their acclimation to the institution. Lastly, it is not only the cross-institutional effects of peer tutoring that are beneficial: students enrolled at community colleges who tutor their peers are key contributors to community college student success. In addition to cross-institutional programs, two-year institutions should be encouraged to develop their own tutoring workforce.



As noted earlier, peer tutoring contributes to workforce readiness through development of students' durable skills (communication, interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, time management). Technology-enabled tutoring networks remove traditional geographic and scheduling constraints, allowing institutions to serve more learners while creating meaningful paid work opportunities for a broader and more diverse population of students (Westera, 2007). It is important to note that these workforce-ready skills are developed on both sides of the relationship, among tutors and those being tutored.

By investing in peer tutoring, institutions expand equitable access to career-building employment opportunities (Cole et al, 2024; Leyk et al., 2017). These experiences and related student outcomes strengthen the institution's role in local and regional workforce development.

For Vice Provosts of Undergraduate Education (or their counterparts) at R1/R2 institutions, developing cross-institutional peer tutoring programs promise to strengthen connections between administrative peers at the participating schools including local high schools, thereby fostering greater collaboration and sharing that help serve students better. Research university admission can be competitive, and students want to understand their pathways into the institution. Close partnership between two-year and four-year institutions can illuminate those pathways more effectively. In addition, the process of establishing and implementing a peer tutoring program itself may be beneficial professional development for Vice Provosts of Undergraduate Education (or their counterparts, often referred to as UVPs) as they seek to build out their own relationship networks.

## Call to Action

While tutoring is best known for facilitating the acquisition of content knowledge, its additional and too often unrecognized value lies in the quality of the personal relationships that generate social and cultural capital for both parties. Peer tutoring is one intervention that can help transfer students gain essential actionable knowledge about how the institution works, and build meaningful relationships, self-efficacy, and belonging before they matriculate to the university.

Colleges and universities would do well to recognize, maintain and expand peer tutoring both as academic support and as strategic infrastructure linking workforce development, academic success, and transfer mobility. Peer tutoring work is most valuable when it is an intentionally designed developmental pathway rather than just an hourly campus job. Research on student employment consistently finds that desired outcomes depend on the degree to which roles are structured, supervised, and connected to the institution's learning goals (Cole, et al., 2024; Perna, 2010). Framed in these terms, peer tutoring can strengthen academic support for learners while also providing tutors with a structured, institutionally recognized pathway for workforce development. It's hard to imagine a more budget-friendly, sustainable, and educationally purposeful student success intervention.

## About UERU

The Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU, pronounced “You-Roo”) is dedicated to excellence and access in undergraduate education by sharing and developing expertise across member institutions and other higher education organizations. The UERU membership is comprised of 141 research universities across the U.S., which collectively serve nearly 3 million undergraduate students. UERU helps its members stay current and forward-thinking, fosters connections across academic units, and enlists leaders in common projects to meet the challenges and opportunities facing undergraduate programs. Learn more at ueru.org.

## About Knack

As a complete student success partner, Knack unifies academic support, career readiness, and community building into one seamless offering where students learn, earn, and belong. By modernizing peer-to-peer learning, Knack connects students with course-specific peer tutors who excelled in those exact classes while managing every operational detail from onboarding to compensation, Knack removes the administrative burden from campuses while delivering real-time data on outcomes. Discover how to expand access to academic support and strengthen student outcomes on your campus by visiting joinknack.com.




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