

# Exploring University Student Experiences with Community Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Michele Tyson and Bright Mleta

## Abstract

This study examined the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students who served as elementary school-level tutors through a grant-funded community-engaged partnership between a private institution of higher education and a public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this work is to explore the impact of this single-case community-engaged experience on the tutors' individual educational trajectories and their own learning. This study uses principles of narrative data collection to understand the collective experience as a singular case. Specific results include individual influence, personal fulfillment, a shared sense of community, and the importance of belonging to a group as outcomes of program participation in the community-engaged work. The findings also highlight the value of community-engaged work in understanding a sense of belonging in a time of crisis and provide insight on how future higher education and K-12 partnerships could address supplemental learning in the form of tutoring.

*Keywords: community engagement, tutoring, involvement, belonging, community*



**I**mproving the college experience for undergraduate students has been a goal of institutions of higher education for well over 40 years. The social and environmental impacts on an individual's college experience (Museus, 2014; Renn & Patton, 2011; Strange & Banning, 2015), as well as the ability of an institution to retain students (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1982; Pascarella, 1980; Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1988), have been thoroughly researched. In recent years, student community engagement has emerged as a crucial aspect of higher education, surpassing the boundaries of traditional classroom learning. Defined as the active involvement of students in mutually beneficial partnerships with local communities, community engagement provides a transformative learning experience that empowers students to develop essential skills, cultivate empathy, and contribute meaningfully to society (Furco, 2010). The

concept of community engagement aligns with the fundamental mission of educational institutions to produce responsible and socially conscious citizens capable of addressing real-world challenges. Universities and colleges have a unique opportunity to harness the collective potential of their students in creating a positive social impact by connecting their academic knowledge and personal experiences with community needs. Students' community engagement can be a powerful tool for promoting civic engagement and social responsibility among students when designed and executed with care (Boyd & Brackmann, 2012; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Huda et al., 2018).

## Role and Impact of Community Engagement

The literature identifies several benefits of student community engagement, which extend beyond the acquisition of

practical skills. Empirical evidence suggests that students who actively participate in community-based initiatives experience personal growth and enhanced self-awareness (Astin & Sax, 1998; Conner & Erickson, 2017; Hannibal & Robertson, 2023; Jung, 2011). Such experiences not only strengthen academic performance but also positively influence career decisions and long-term life goals (Lerner, 2005). Boyd and Martin (2022) extended what is already known about community engagement and introduced additional factors for consideration to include the student's sense of community (SOC) as well as the student's sense of community responsibility (SOC-R) to examine and understand the impact of community involvement while in college. Student community engagement refers to student involvement in local projects within a community setting. It normally involves a period during which students work for a community-based organization in ways that enable them to benefit the community and to learn from the experience (Millican & Bourner, 2011).

Millican and Bourner (2011) continued to illustrate that the involvement of students in community engagement is a form of development of students' capacity for and disposition toward social responsibility. Schiff et al. (2024) concurred that increasing community engagement predicts growth in social responsibility attitudes among undergraduates. They further highlighted that discipline-based community engagement fosters professional aspects of social responsibility, given the student's future professional obligation to society. Thomas et al. (2021) described the outcomes of community engagement, including strengthened democratic values and civic responsibility, advancement on critical societal issues, and important contributions to the public good. In addition to improving students' ability to apply what they have learned in real life, the involvement of students' programs of learning from community engagement reflects the enrichment of the institution's educational offerings.

### **Context of COVID-19 Pandemic**

Although the complete effect of the COVID-19 pandemic remains to be seen, it was immediately clear that education was impacted, and many believe those impacts are with us for the long term (Daniel, 2020). Many would say that the pandemic was both a health crisis and an educational crisis, as it

disrupted instruction and learning modalities, created anxiety, and forced everyone into isolation. The context of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the entire educational experience for college students. Residence halls shut down, classes were moved online, and students were sent away from their campuses. This response to the pandemic meant leaving behind friends and communities, which led to isolation, and many have attributed a growing mental health crisis to the effects of these conditions (Ganesan et al., 2021; Ramírez-Ortiz et al., 2020; Salimi et al., 2023). Although this period of complete isolation was short in the grand scheme of things, the return to campuses proved challenging. College students returned to find their campuses in political turmoil, amid a renewed racial reckoning, adjusting to new hybrid and hybrid learning environments, and still contending with confusion about how to stay safe. All these factors impacted the way students were able to engage with their peers. At the same time, new opportunities for community engagement emerged as the needs within every community across the world grew (Cristofolletti & Pinheiro, 2022). For some students, engaging with the community provided an opportunity to have greater interaction with peers as well as contribute to the community in new and meaningful ways.

### **Tutoring**

Although this study was not centered on the concept of tutoring, it is still important to understand the practice of tutoring to better understand the college students' experiences with the community engagement opportunity and the elementary children. Tutoring is defined as a formal process that involves a relationship between a more experienced and knowledgeable person who plays a supportive role and a less experienced and knowledgeable person, so as to facilitate that person's development (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Guerra-Martín et al., 2015; Guerra-Martín et al., 2017). Guerra-Martín et al. (2017) further described tutoring as coaching, assessing, facilitating, sponsoring, supporting, guiding, and role modeling. Nickow et al. (2020) explained that tutoring can be one-on-one or small-group instructional programming by teachers, paraprofessionals, volunteers, or parents. Further, Topping (2000) recognized that tutoring can occur when people who are not professional teachers help and support

the learning of others in an interactive, purposeful, and systematic way. Nickow et al. (2020) described the concept of tutoring as one of the most versatile and potentially transformative educational tools within education. The value of mass tutoring efforts in the aftermath of COVID-19 remains untested (Gamoran & Murnane, 2023; Wong, 2020). In the K-12 educational sector, prior to 2020, families in the United States spent more than \$630 million in private online tutoring for primary and secondary education (Wong, 2020). This spending occurred primarily among affluent families looking for additional academic support as the competition for college admission grew. During the COVID-19 pandemic years, demand for tutors increased as families scrambled to compensate for perceived deficits created by inconsistent school structures as the educational system responded to dynamic health and safety protocols (wearing masks, limited face-to-face school hours, online classes, etc.). The convergence of community needs along with the financial support of a funding agency allowed for the creation of the project for this current study. The college students wanted community engagement, the school district wanted academic support for their elementary school, and a grant funder wanted to address learning loss by providing the resources to create impact in the community.

### **Belonging, Retention, and Persistence**

It is also important to understand the role of community engagement and involvement in retention and persistence. Retention in higher education is defined as the continued enrollment of students from the first to the second year, while persistence is more often described as the continued enrollment from Year 2 to graduation (Burke, 2019). Sense of belonging, the feeling of being valued and integral to a group, significantly influences student motivation, effort, and academic achievement (Mahar et al., 2013). Students' sense of belonging can also predict institutional commitment and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2009; Soria et al., 2003). Additional research indicates that students from marginalized backgrounds can be positively impacted through meaningful community service participation, increasing their desire to persist (Museus, 2014; Soria et al., 2003). Community engagement presents one way for students to get involved.

Sense of belonging is a personal feeling or perception of an individual as they relate

to or interact with others, a group, or a system that is separate from an individual's actions, behavior, or social participation (Strayhorn, 2018). Feeling needed, important, integral, valued, respected, creates a sense of belonging (Mahar et al., 2013). In addition, students' sense of belonging on their campuses is related to motivation, student effort, and academic achievement. Students' interaction with their peers—for example, by participating in campus activities and student organizations—is the most important contributor to becoming engaged (Styron, 2010). Furthermore, campuswide community programs help in promoting students' sense of belonging and retention on campus (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). It's important for students to know that they do matter and that they belong to a specific community, a community that values their participation. Students who see themselves as belonging to the campus community are more likely to persevere, as this sense of belonging enhances not only motivation but also a willingness to engage others in ways that further persistence (Tinto, 2017).

During the COVID-19 years, students lost the engagement and interaction that can support a sense of belonging. When students do not feel a sense of fitting in, it leads to feeling they do not matter. One impact on students that this study explored was the effect of this community engagement on sense of belonging, and in turn its effect on retention and persistence.

### **Community Experience Framework**

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of this single-case community-engaged experience on the tutors' individual educational trajectories and their own learning. This study leaned on several existing theories from both higher education and social psychology literature to situate the understanding of the tutors' experience. The research team first looked at theories of student involvement, which focus on the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the college experience. Student involvement theory states that the amount of learning and personal growth associated with any educational program is directly proportionate to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program (Astin, 1984). This study looked at community engagement as a form of involvement. We also drew upon the community experience framework, described by Nowell and Boyd (2014). They first used

the community experience framework to assess whether employees of an organization felt a SOC within their organization and if that SOC also contributed to a sense of responsibility to and within that community (SOC-R). Findings of a subsequent study indicated that both SOC and SOC-R were predictive of key outcomes, including retention, in a workplace setting (Boyd et al., 2018). Although the tutors within the current study were voluntarily participating in the community engagement experience, they were compensated for their time by the institution using resources provided by the grant funder. The students working as tutors were hired by the institution. As paid employees of the organization (institution of higher education), they worked in the organizational environment of the elementary school, and often saw themselves as employees. Given this connection to the organization, our analysis incorporated this model, specifically the sense of community (SOC) designation, which describes four core elements: membership, influence, integration, and shared emotional connection (Nowell & Boyd, 2014), to further understand these dynamics. Looking at the theories of student involvement and sense of community helped us understand why students got involved with this program and what they took away from the experience. Boyd and Martin (2022) also used this framework to understand community and responsibility in times of crisis. They indicated that individuals enter a community context with individual values and beliefs about responsibility toward others and will also look for ways to fulfill the need to influence or have an impact on people and communities, while also seeking emotional connections. The tutors' roles as engaged students on campus as well as paid employees in the organization during the COVID-19 crisis suggest that the community experience framework was a credible framework in which to examine this study.

### **Project Description**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students serving as elementary school tutors in a university-supported community engagement program in the 2021–2022 academic year, right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. As in other programs across the country (Biag et al., 2021), the opportunity for partnership emerged as a grant-funding organization

approached the university with an idea and funding to support learning-loss recovery efforts. The organization had an interest in entering this education/tutoring work and was looking for a university and elementary or middle school to pilot this initiative. The funding organization administered a variety of assessment tools to measure the impact of the educational recovery efforts for the children; however, this study explores tutors' individual experiences, with a focus on their educational trajectory and their own learning.

The study took place at a mid-sized research private university in the Rocky Mountain West. Tutors ranged from 18 to 29 years old, spanning from freshmen through seniors pursuing a bachelor's degree as well as some pursuing a master's degree. The site for the community engagement was an elementary school located about 5 miles from the college campus. Tutors traveled to the site by car or mass transit. Twenty-four undergraduate and graduate students were hired and trained as elementary school tutors in fall 2021. The tutoring program began in January 2022 and ran for 4 months, ending in May 2022, the end of the school year for the district. The program enrolled 96 elementary school students, though not every child attended tutoring sessions each day. Elementary students' families self-selected the children into this elective extracurricular experience.

Sessions were offered two times per week for 2 hours. The tutors were trained for one or two specific grade levels and worked with small groups of children. The first half hour was intended to give the children a break in the day after completing their school day. Tutors provided snacks and an outdoor recess time for the first 30 minutes of each session. The following 60 minutes were intended to be either a literacy or mathematical lesson (depending on grade level), and the final 30 minutes of the session were spent wrapping up, which included cleaning up the space, connecting children with their parents, and debriefing with program leaders and one another. On average, each tutor spent about 40 hours with the children.

IRB approval for this study was received and data collection began immediately following the completion of the tutoring program in two separate phases. The first phase of the study was focused on program assessment. Of the 24 tutors, 20 participated in the initial round of survey data, which was collected

via a Qualtrics survey to gather their perspectives on strengths and challenges of the program. This initial data point provided useful and timely information for the grant funder about what worked and did not work as they went into immediate planning for future iterations of the program. One specific element of that survey was extracted to inform the next phase of the study, which focused on the impact of the engagement work on the tutors' college experience. Eight of the tutors chose to continue their participation into this phase of the study, with individual interviews conducted in summer 2022. The second phase of the study was intended to better understand how community engagement, specifically tutoring children, affected the educational experience and retention of the tutors.

### Measuring the Impact

A qualitative research design was used in this study. The study involved collecting student tutors' reflections on their personal experience and their involvement in community engagement through the tutoring program. The interviews were audio and video recorded via Zoom and transcribed, and the transcripts were used as the primary documents. The interviews were set for a 30-minute to 1-hour time slot. The transcripts were precoded in 12 ways using Nvivo to identify the main stressors and word frequency. The stressors were ranked according to the frequency of quotes during analysis. This qualitative study acts as a bridge from Step 1 (thematic and contextual analysis) to Step 2 (identification of possible ways to improve the program). Data was coded and analyzed using the four elements of the theory of sense of community (Boyd & Martin, 2022): membership, influence, integration, and shared emotional connection.

Two research questions guided the study:

1. What were the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students participating in a designated community engagement program?
2. How did participation in this designated community engagement program impact education trajectory and career choices?

### Findings

Topics emerged organically from the data and were coded by themes by the researchers using the sense of community (SOC) theoretical framework (Boyd & Martin,

2022): individual influence, fulfillment and integration, significance of group membership, and shared emotional connection. The themes are described below, with specific examples of how they were present in the tutoring space.

#### Theme 1: Individual Influence

Undergraduate and graduate students serving as tutors had varying levels of interest in the field of education prior to working in the elementary school. Their prior interest, along with surprises they encountered with the children, interactions with parents and family members, and the challenges they faced, all contributed to the overall sense of influence they felt they had as individuals on the children. Although several tutors had experience working with children in this age group in other settings (summer camp, child care, their own siblings), only a small handful had intended to become early childhood, elementary, or secondary educators in the future. For these individuals, the experience supported that decision. As a male tutor reported, "It was an eye-opening, and really made me very resolute in my decision to be a teacher."

**Thoughts on Education.** When asked about their thoughts on education, tutors explained that the field of education is more complicated than what occurs inside a classroom each day, recognizing the influence of the government and stakeholders. One female tutor reported,

Being part of the [tutoring program] was just exciting to me. I had not worked with elementary school before, so it was a new light. It was a new perspective and I appreciated elementary school teachers so much more because they are doing a lot of work which is not appreciated enough.

Most had not considered a career in elementary education, though two had indicated they considered teaching at the secondary level at some point. They felt that even though they were in the school for only "a couple hours" each week, the experiences gave them a practical view of what teaching elementary school might be like. They felt teachers should be receiving special accolades to honor the effort that it takes to help a young child learn a new concept and understand its meaning. The exposure to elementary-aged children and the physical

school building where they participated in the community engagement program had them thinking and reflecting on what it really takes to be an early childhood and elementary school teacher. Some expressed the pressure they felt in their responsibility to capture the prescribed lessons and ensure the time spent after school really did meet the goals of improving learning for the children. Most tutors described the community engagement program as an important opportunity both for the children who got to participate and for the tutors, who enhanced their own thoughts and beliefs in regard to education.

**Surprise Moments.** Tutors expressed how they were surprised by the students themselves. Some discussed their initial assumption that the children were more mature and described their surprise at how immature they ended up being. Others shared that they anticipated all the children would be struggling academically, when in reality some of them actually learned very quickly. One tutor was surprised by how the children enjoyed challenging assignments rather than simple ones; the children even expressed how they were more energized by assignments that the tutor designed rather than the prescribed lessons that the tutors were instructed to facilitate. A female tutor reported,

[One] surprise I can think of is that there were a couple of kids who, at the beginning of our program, did not seem super engaged, and it took probably two weeks to get those kids on board. Some lessons did not require much effort for every kid to catch up.

Overall, the variations in how children learned seemed to surprise the tutors over the course of the community engagement program.

**Parental Involvement.** Although not a required aspect of the programming, some tutors engaged with parents during the pickup portion of the day. Study participants noted that the parents who talked with them during pickup seemed to have a “specific influence” on their children’s performance in the program. One tutor specifically noted interacting with one mother who was in regular contact since she was aware of her child’s behavior issue in school and was always following

up with the tutor when she picked up her son to determine if behavior was also a concern in that setting. “So, she was just very communicative, and very sweet,” the tutor noted. Having parents and teachers engage in open and regular communication forms an effective collaborative partnership focused on supporting the child’s education and well-being. Sharing information about a student’s progress, challenges, and successes promotes a sense of community. This communication cultivates a sense of shared responsibility, because parent and teacher both play critical roles in students’ development.

Recognizing these contributions that bridge the gap between school and home strengthens appreciation of community effort. Parent-tutor effective communication highlights an individual child’s unique needs and strengths.

**Challenges Experienced.** Each of the tutors participating in this study described encountering challenges that they would want others to be aware of when working in a community-engaged environment with children. Some challenges were resolved right away, and others were left unresolved even after the program had completed. First, some elementary students had disabilities or specific behavioral issues that were difficult to handle. One male tutor reported, “Obviously us tutors are not trained teachers, so we don’t know the best ways to deal with kids behaviorally.” Second, sometimes students did not know how to communicate their problems. Third, tutors expressed concerns with overall communication from the program leaders. Fourth, being a tutor for elementary grades required considerable knowledge about taking care of the children at different levels, such as reminding them to use the bathroom. One female tutor reported, “It was a lot more babysitter energy than it was teaching.” Another tutor echoed this sentiment: “It is hard to make sure children are safe while having fun, and hopefully learning along the way as well.” A final challenge discussed was handling conflict among the children themselves. One specific example centered on the bullying between children from different religious groups. The tutor described an argument among the children belonging to either Christianity or Islam during the month of Ramadan. Children who were observing Ramadan were being teased by their peers, and the tutor was unsure how

to address the conflict with the children.

Throughout the program, the tutors had various experiences. Some tutors came to realize their passion for children or community, some gained important skills for their future careers, and others learned about the many efforts that need to be applied to teach a child.

### **Theme 2: Fulfillment and Integration**

Public engagement is complex, and always has been. The literature consists of a variety of confused terms, each with its own best practices and implicit assumptions. This complexity cannot be solved, but it can be recognized. Recognizing this complexity can help manage expectations around community engagement. For example, if an engagement effort is being conceptualized as a collaboration but is more like a stakeholder engagement, then the practices and values recommended in the collaboration literature will not fit well with the reality of the effort. This incongruity may seem trivial, but setting expectations can help guide conversations with administrators and public partners, and set realistic goals for deliverables and resource commitments.

**Favorite Lesson.** Many of the tutors reflected on their students enjoying the lessons that would allow them to work in groups assisting one another or working together to solve some problems. They did not seem to care for or like individual assignments. These lessons also became favorites for tutors because the students seemed to enjoy the learning process, which made them enjoy teaching as well, producing a vibrant class environment. One tutor specifically recalled several lessons where the younger children drew pictures to tell their own story, which they seemed to love doing.

**Change of Interest in Education.** The program increased the general interest in the field of education for many of the tutors. A number of tutors reported an increased passion for teaching. Having gained experience through this tutoring program, they felt they had a better understanding of what a career in teaching is all about and what it might take for students to understand the subject or topic being instructed. They admitted that teaching is not simple: It requires commitment, connection with students, and flexibility when presenting the lessons. One female tutor who thought she had an interest in teaching reported,

This program showed me that, I don't want to work with kids, I would be comfortable handling high school students, elementary students require patience and dedication of another level.

### **Theme 3: Significance of Group Membership**

Most of the tutors had not participated in an organized community-engaged learning opportunity in their time as a college student, though some had experience from their time in high school. However, we also found from the data that their definition of community engagement or understanding of community engagement was unclear and perhaps confusing. In the context of this experience, this lack of clarity was likely due, in part, to some organizational challenges in getting this program up and running. Some of this confusion was around the tutors' role and the level of interaction with the elementary school staff that was expected. We found that some of the ambiguity contributed to the tutors' feeling of community membership. The confusion that each of the tutors was experiencing in this program seemed to have created a shared sense of camaraderie while at the school for tutoring hours or in training sessions.

**Previous Community Engagement Experience.** When asked about prior community engagement experiences, a number of the tutors indicated they had some, but they were unable to provide much description or detail that separated an independent service activity from an engaged learning experience. "We would go paint schools and things of that nature, or like I work at a horse ranch or a summer which, of course, is not really working with students but it was part of community engagement programs," one of the tutors described. One of the male tutors who had connections to the geographical community from growing up in the area discussed his experience: "I have had experience with community engagement before. In high school and in my early college experience, I was working with programs similar to this and with community engagement initiatives."

Another tutor reported this as a first in college, but she described her time before that:

When I was in high school, I was working in a couple of different capacities, working like a grant officer, writing programs for my high

school, and working with the community on a couple of fundraising initiatives like girls' education and things like that.

These comments indicated that having had some connection to the community in the past drove the interest in being a part of this program.

I previously worked with community services and I was pretty heavily involved with the community serving. But not like the same thing. I worked for a food bank for a while, and at undergraduate level we did a lot of community engagement programs there. . . .

One of the tutors even connected her work in the community to the opportunity to attend college, saying, "I have been involved in a number of community service projects, sort of like community organizations. I got a scholarship because of my community service."

**Interaction With Parents.** "I noticed that kids were improving, and I heard directly from parents—something that motivated me to do more." As described above, the level of interaction with parents and guardians was significant to the tutors' overall experience. However, there was minimal time to interact with parents, as contact occurred only during the pickup at the conclusion of the session. Tutors described the benefit of these interactions as being one way to gain further understanding about a specific child and their needs. One tutor indicated they enjoyed being able to talk with a parent about the child's performance in the tutoring sessions and connect that experience to the child's other experiences outside the school environment. Although the engagement was minimal, it did have an impact on the way tutors would work with the children in future tutoring sessions. For example, one tutor described their interactions with a parent: "We talked about how it helped with their reading and how they felt like their kids were becoming better at understanding and reading sentences, and comprehension."

Tutors indicated they felt as though having contact with parents and guardians allowed them to feel more like they were contributing to the child's overall educational experience. "Parents gave us the confidence to

continue doing what we were doing because they were providing feedback that their kids were improving in many areas including behavior," one tutor proudly described.

#### **Theme 4: Shared Emotional Connection**

Sense of community describes a concept of personal connection with the community and the importance of having a shared emotional connection. SOC is a strong predictor of satisfaction with an experience and leads to retention of college students, more so than academic achievement (Boyd et al., 2022). It is not surprising that one of the findings of this study was that meaningful interaction with the children and getting feedback from those children were the most impactful and enjoyable parts of the community-engaged tutoring experience.

**Interaction With Children.** Many of the tutors were overjoyed to talk about the interesting and meaningful interactions with the children they worked with. One common experience was that they each felt they helped at least one student overcome a certain academic or social challenge. For example, a fourth-grade student had difficulties in understanding math, and the tutor guided the student to the point that they became a master. One of the tutors for the younger children indicated, "Some kids could not pronounce certain letters. They didn't know how to differentiate s and t. So I think that that was done, and it was exciting to see them improving." One of the second-grade tutors felt that some of the children had specific challenges and difficulties getting along with their peers. Even though the children were together in the school environment for many hours before the tutoring session, this tutor felt it was her "responsibility of a tutor to teach them good behavior" in the time she had with them, in addition to the academic instruction she was providing. A different tutor reported, "I appreciate our involvement in the program, I saw students who knew nothing at the beginning, they became creative, grammar improved greatly, and this encouraged me." Another went on to describe,

There were a couple of students that just didn't really want to be there, and were kind of there because their parents wanted them there. So it was hard to deal with them but through the process, they started enjoying everything.

Personal interaction with children also helped improve the understanding of the purpose of the program. One tutor commented, “It was wonderful getting to be able to connect with the students and figure out what it was they really wanted out of the program itself.”

One of the tutors spoke at length about what she was learning from being with the children. She described a situation:

We had a little girl named Miriam. It was during Ramadan, and her family was observing Ramadan, so she often had to miss the afternoon snack. I was complaining one afternoon, like Oh, it is so hot outside and I’m so hungry. This is like such a long day and she and a couple of little girls were running by and playing, and she stops and looks at me, and she says, “You’re not as hungry as I am.” I said, Oh, my goodness, okay! So humbled very quickly.

**Feedback From Children.** Unsurprisingly, the children were always ready to provide feedback about the lessons they were receiving. When they enjoyed a lesson, they would tell the tutor right away, and when they were not enjoying the lesson, they would express themselves right away. Some of this feedback was needed for formal assessment of the program or of the children’s academic progress on specific skills. However, it was the informal feedback offered by the children in the moment that was most meaningful to the tutors. The children were clear about what they wanted and what they liked about what they were learning and the ways in which they were learning it.

**Interaction Among the Tutors.** Interpersonal connections contribute to a sense of community, as individuals recognize and appreciate the diverse perspectives and contributions of their peers. Most of the tutors did not know one another prior to the launch of this program. Prior to entering the school in February, they had several months to complete asynchronous training modules that focused on both the fundamentals of community engagement (provided by the institution of higher education) and tutoring strategies (provided by the grant funder). Throughout the time the tutors were in the school, the program administrator also offered synchronous training opportunities to

learn more about curriculum development, classroom management, and social-emotional behavior in children. These trainings provided tutors the opportunity not only to develop a shared sense of understanding about the logistics and expectations of the program, but also to talk about the challenges they experienced with certain children or the dynamics they were witnessing among children. Additionally, the crew of tutors had about 20 minutes before each session as they arrived at the school to talk informally and were guided through a 10-minute formal debrief session at the conclusion of each tutoring session. Both formal and informal time provided allowed for the tutors to interact with one another.

Additionally, a formal discussion board for tutors was available on Canvas, and a number of text threads and individual chats were created informally as tutors got to know one another. Because the tutors had different prior experiences with children and educational settings, they were able to serve as a resource for each other. Serving as a mutual resource in this way proved to be a critical aspect of the program as tutors sought advice on handling certain situations and how to manage lesson plans. One key benefit for tutors was learning tips and developing skills on how to approach classroom management, as one tutor described:

On my first day, I made a mistake by allowing a student to go to a different side of the school which I was not supposed to allow. One of the colleagues I worked with who majored in social work had a lot of training as far as working with different groups of people prior to this experience. She came up with an activity where the students could write their own stories, and they were going to merge them into one story, and then act, which, of course, third graders were entertained and exposed their creativity.

Working collaboratively with colleagues enabled the refinement of prescribed lesson plans and allowed tutors to develop their own lesson plans.

I learned how to talk to little kids for a long time and keep them engaged. I learned how to engage with the younger audience. It requires a different kind of patience, and you

don't have to get into the program if you don't want to. I have appreciated this program a lot more because it was elementary and also because it just taught me many things, I didn't know a few things like problem-solving in many different ways. And just through my colleagues, I learned how to solve problems for certain situations.

The themes identified and described above (individual influence, fulfillment and integration, significance of group membership, and shared emotional connection) highlight the elements of the sense of community theory that describe the connections tutors developed and fostered as participants of the community-engaged experience. Specifically noted by two of the tutors was the importance of being aware and attentive to creating an inclusive learning environment for the children, where they could feel valued and supported. Acknowledging and being respectful of religious observances, holidays, and dietary restrictions was noted as one way to ensure that the children's educational experience is inclusive, at least during the tutoring time. As with Miriam and her tutor, most of the tutors indicated that developing relationships required communication, asking questions, sharing ideas, and openness to learning from one another.

Through shared planning sessions, discussions, and feedback, tutors aligned their teaching approaches, integrated interdisciplinary connections, and ensured a coherent and comprehensive educational experience. This curriculum development collaboration has helped create a unified vision and ensures that the classroom's academic goals are met.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Each of the members of this community partnership learned from this pilot program and collaborated on a final year-end assessment provided to the grant-funding organization. Results and recommendations from this specific study on the tutors' experiences were included in that final report and are discussed in this section. All of the 24 tutors either graduated or reenrolled at the university in the following year, which resulted in a 100% retention rate. This high rate of retention is likely not a direct result of participation in the program; however, it certainly speaks to the importance of

community-engaged partnerships as an experience to enable students to engage. More clearly, the results of the program overall and this specific study indicated that undergraduate tutors were likely to apply to graduate school; in fact, some of them chose to pursue a program of study that was adjacent to the field of education. To date, four of the tutors have communicated their intention to continue in education-related fields. The tutors who were already graduate students indicated that participating in the program made them feel more connected to the city they were living in for school.

We learned that additional training was needed to set the tutors up for success. From the program administrators' point of view, this training should have been about the elementary school building itself, such as safety protocols for an emergency; the tutors, however, indicated a desire for more intense development related to behavior management, understanding group dynamics among young children, and providing social-emotional support.

Program leaders, in consultation with tutors, agreed on the following top three lessons learned: (1) Children needed additional adult attention outside the typical school day with teachers, regardless of whether this attention was academically focused. (2) Tutoring created connections among the individual tutors both inside the school setting and on the college campus. (3) The level of school leadership in the tutoring program should be adjusted to either be "all in" on the experience, or not included in the experience at all. Expanding on these lessons learned has led to these corresponding broad recommendations that go beyond the goals of the specific study at hand:

1. More adults in the school system. Whether these adults be college students in a tutoring capacity, additional teachers in the school day, more paraprofessional student support personnel, or additional staffing in nonacademic positions, the need for children to have more opportunities for attention from adults was very clear to the tutors, as they spoke about the children just wanting to hang out and tell their tutors about their day and the things on their mind. Often tutors spoke about not getting to all of the content on their agenda simply because the children just wanted to visit with them. This additional social-emotional support must be established and in place in order for

the children to be open to more academic support and instruction. The tutors reported children being more excited and engaged when learning about nonacademic topics—bullying, how to be a good friend, how to interact with others—than they were for the math and literacy programming.

2. Tutoring created connections. The college students (both undergraduate and graduate) who served as tutors connected with one another through the time of the experience. Most did not know one another in advance yet became close throughout. Examples of this included a portion of the group going to a baseball game together, sharing meals together, creating text threads, and participating in group chats on social media. There was one specific instance of a graduate student taking on one of the undergraduate students in a mentoring capacity. These connections were very important, as the college students themselves were also coming out of a second year of COVID-related isolation, virtual classes, and masked faces.
3. School leadership “all in” or not. The tutoring site for this project was a public elementary school. Tutoring took place after school in the school building. During that afterschool time, a number of school administrators, teachers, and staff were still finishing their workday when tutors came into the building. We used their classrooms, teachers’ lounge, and library for tutoring groups. When a behavior issue arose, sometimes it was the school community that knew how to best defuse the situation, and the staff would step in, although doing so was outside the scope of their workday. For a similar partnership, expectations must be made clear at the beginning whether school personnel should be involved. Too much ambiguity and confusion existed without those agreements in advance.

Overall, the program administrators agreed that an opportunity exists to maximize partnerships between the university and the community to share resources. They also agreed that the university is seeing a steady stream of young adults who are interested in the field of education (though they may not want to be classroom teachers) who could participate in such university–community partnerships. The national teacher shortage is real (Nguyen et al., 2022; Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022), and utilizing a program such

as the one described here to get young adults into school systems may help with that need in schools. However, the program did not continue after the completion of the pilot (2021–2022) academic year, for reasons outside the university’s control.

### Lessons Learned

Community engagement among undergraduate and graduate students has clear benefits (Boyd & Brackmann, 2012; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Huda et al., 2018). One such engagement experience, an afterschool tutoring program, exposed students to issues of social justice and educational equity, the application of their academic learning to the elementary school children enrolled in the program, and the development of skills and tools for contributing to change in partnership with communities. This study involved collecting undergraduate and graduate student tutors’ reflections on their personal experience with community engagement as they tutored children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants in the study indicated having a better idea about the profession of teaching as a result of serving as a tutor, as the opportunity developed personal skills in engaging with elementary–school-aged learners. For some, tutoring contributed to career decisions. For others, tutoring provided a greater understanding for challenges in the educational system as the community emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. These lessons would indicate that there is value in offering opportunities to engage in the public school system in roles beyond that of a classroom teacher. Institutions with colleges of education may want to pursue similar opportunities for engagement to expose undergraduate and graduate students to education-adjacent careers.

This specific community-engaged partnership was created to serve as a pilot program, with the intention of expanding or revising the program. This study helped to inform the program funders regarding what worked well and where the program would need improvement. For the purposes of this study, it was determined that the program had many benefits for the student tutors and the elementary learners. Some of the lessons learned from this pilot initiative were provided to the grant-funding organization as they considered how the program might advance. One such lesson

was the need to schedule specific times or days for tutors to have direct engagement with parents and school staff. Tutors would have an opportunity to learn from other staff experiences, and the feedback from parents would help them understand students' behavior. Student community engagement is the social or normative glue that holds student college experiences together. The more support colleges and universities provide in addressing student community experiences, the more likely change will come in our educational institutions. Learning can happen anywhere, and whether in or outside

the classroom, learning happens through the relationships that students build among themselves and with the world around them (Paguyo et al., 2022).

Finally, regarding the specific context of COVID-19, program partners learned it was essential to be flexible. Illness of both the tutors and the elementary students was inevitable, causing the individual sessions and tutors themselves to pivot on a moment's notice. This need for flexibility and mutual support showed us how important community was during this time of crisis, for everyone involved.



### About the Authors

*Michele Tyson is clinical associate professor in the Higher Education program at the University of Denver. Her professional and research interests encompass preparation and development of student affairs and higher education leaders, as well as understanding institutions as organizations and environments in which students make humanizing decisions about engagement. She earned her EdD in higher education administration from the University of Denver.*

*Bright Mleta is a graduate of the MA program in Higher Education at the University of Denver with a focus on student affairs and DEI. He works in Student Affairs and Inclusive Excellence at the University of Denver. His research interests focus on student retention, campus environment, and experiences, specifically programs that are designed to retain students and their effectiveness.*

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