

Meeting the Needs of Students Through Academic Support Programs

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore student perceptions of the qualities they look for when seeking academic support programs. There are multiple reasons students participate in academic support programs and it is important to know the initial reason for seeking out the assistance. In addition, the quality of the assistance is essential as well to ensure students return to continue to get the support needed for academic success. This study is a mixed-method approach with quantitative and qualitative survey data. The students surveyed are cohort members in Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's Title V grant Project GRAD. Students in Project GRAD are considered not college ready based on the Texas Success Initiative Assessment.

Keywords: student perceptions, academic support programs, academic success

Meeting the Needs of Students Through Academic Support Programs

College is not just the moment a student is accepted, but it is the journey to degree attainment. Students enter college at different levels and with different variables that impact their academic, social, and professional success. Without adequate support, students will not thrive in college as needed in order to complete the journey successfully. According to Tinto (2012), “students’ perceptions of the degree to which institution was supportive of their academic, personal, and social needs were the most powerful predictor, among a wide range of variables, of increased academic competence during the first year” (Tinto, 2012, p. 24). Higher education institutions know the research and have reviewed the data related to student retention and success, developed academic support initiatives, written and been awarded U.S. Department of Education grants; and still, the most important piece of information needed is the student perception.

Currently, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC) offers multiple methods of academic support: institutional support, federally-funded support, faculty office hours, and teacher’s assistance (T.A.). The Center for Academic Student Achievement (CASA) houses the intuitional support programs such as the Writing Center, tutoring center, Islanders First Scholars Academy (for first-generation college students), Learning Community Mentors, Islander Success Advocates, and Supplemental Instruction. Programs for Academic Student Support (PASS) includes all of the U.S. Department of Education federally-funded programs including three Trio Student Support Services, the McNair Scholars Program, Upward Bound, and a Title V, Project GRAD, to name a few. Students have access to faculty office hours provided on the syllabus and access to teacher’s assistants for certain courses. Taking into consideration the multitude of academic support programs offered at TAMUCC and retention numbers, providing insight into student perceptions of the academic support programs is essential. A true measure of the impact of academic support programs

comes directly from student perceptions regarding the qualities they look for when seeking academic support programs.

Research Questions

The research questions are important to the study because the responses must align with the initial purpose of the study. The main purpose of the study is to explore student perceptions of qualities of student support programs; therefore, the questions must be related specifically to student support programs. In order to keep the study manageable, the research was conducted with Project GRAD cohort members with invested time in a current academic support program. One limitation of this is that participants answer the questions with the academic support of Project GRAD in mind instead of thinking on a broad scale of University academic support programs. Research identifies peer mentoring programs, tutoring, and supplemental instruction as main academic support programs. As previously mentioned, TAMUCC offers several of these programs for students so the research question is:

1. What qualities do students look for when choosing to participate in academic support (i.e. professor office hours, tutoring, supplemental instruction, Writing Center, Student Support Services, Islanders First Scholars Academy)?

Review of Relevant Literature

The academic environment consists of individuals from multiple generations so it is important that programs consider that. Articles related to student support programs, academic success initiatives, and retention efforts were key terms when browsing for literature. Tinto and Kuh have gathered extensive research related to student success, but there are other leaders in higher education contributing research related to academic success through academic support programs.

With research comes limitations in the process. Reason, Terezini and Domingo (2007) found that a major limitation related to the study of social and personal competence in first-year college students was “the influences affecting first-year students are many and complexly interrelated” (Reason, Terezini, and Domingo, 2007, p. 283). The first year for students is critical because students learn at a high level in the class and out of the class. The way students learn is important and the environments they are engaged in help to develop effective academic skills that impacts their learning.

Additionally, “students’ perceptions of the supportiveness of their institution’s environment was most strongly related to increases in social and personal competence...” (Reason et al, 2007, p. 294). A supportive environment contributes to competence and college success is not just academic. Social and personal factors impact the ability to complete college successfully. With peer mentor programs, the social aspect is met when students meet with peers who are going through college with them, other students taking classes and balancing their personal life. Interestingly, through all the literature on peer mentoring in higher education there are over 50 definitions of mentoring (Gunn, Lee, & Steed, 2017). Psychological and emotion support (PES) are key factors for mentees. Qualitative methods were utilized to collect student perceptions. This research study provides great insight as a foundation of items to include when surveying students on their perception and experience with their assigned peer mentor. The results concluded students feel it is important to have knowledge of how to succeed, but it also challenging to acquire the information (Gunn et al, 2017).

A study on multigenerational perceptions was conducted in 2015 and published in *Higher Education* and one key finding is a closer look at generational diversity is essential not only in the workplace but in higher education as it impacts productivity and retention (Kleinhans, Chakradhar,

Muller & Waddill, 2015). The study covered various higher education positions such as administrators, faculty and staff. When looking at the data, the decision makers, Administrators, were predominately Traditionalist and Boomer while faculty and staff were mainly Boomers and Generation X (Kleinhans et al, 2015). Some generations have a “pull yourself up by the bootstrap” mentality while other generations need more nurturing. With varying viewpoints, it is easy to see how the perception of key qualities of an academic support program needs additional attention.

Target Research Methodology and Data Collection

The study was geared toward student support programs as conversations at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi continue to increase related directly to student retention rates. Within the overall conversation of retention, the discussion has been related to the persistence, fall to spring, for first-time in college (FTIC) students. “Perception, which is mediated through the interconnectedness of mind and body, is an individual’s access to experience and interpretation in the world” (Givens, 2008, p. 2). A mixed-method approach will explain and interpret the data collected. Sequential explanatory design method will allow for quantitative data to be collected and qualitative data to be collected as a follow up to explain the findings from the quantitative data.

The quantitative data questions were constructed utilizing knowledge from attendance at national education conferences and the literature related to student support programs. An evaluation of the current academic support programs at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi was the main platform. The quantitative survey included Likert scales to rate the frequency of visits to TAMUCC academic support programs and likelihood to return. The qualitative research questions were developed to gain an understanding of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi students using their own words.

Qualtrics was used to create the quantitative survey and the qualitative survey. The surveys were anonymous and distributed to Project GRAD students only. The quantitative survey was distributed first to students in Project GRAD through email and a link in a closed Facebook Group. Within a week, the qualitative survey was developed using data responses from the quantitative survey and distributed. The qualitative questions were a tool to get additional information about the specific qualities students look for when they decide to participate in student support programs. The qualitative survey questions asked open-ended questions such as *Research Question 29*, “what qualities do you look for when choosing academic support services?” Comparatively, the quantitative survey asked questions like *Research Question 13*, “rate the level of importance of each item listed” and various academic support program qualities were listed.

At the conclusion of two and a half weeks, Qualtrics was used to analyze the data collected and key findings in responses. Since the surveys were anonymous, it is not known if the same students who completed the first survey completed the second survey. Comparing frequency with likelihood to return identified very clearly the academic support programs that are utilized and underutilized.

Findings: Data Presentation

Quantitative Data

Participants of the research study provided insight into the reason they initially sought out academic assistance and the likelihood students would return for additional academic assistance. The data collected for the quantitative survey had 20 anonymous responses. Of the responses, 62% were freshman, 24% sophomores, 10% juniors, and 5% senior. Additionally, 80% of the students were Hispanic and 75% were first-generation college students.

Table 1. Demographics from quantitative responses.

Project GRAD Demographics	n	%
Classification		
Freshman	13	62
Sophomore	5	24
Junior	2	10
Senior	1	5
Hispanic		
Yes	16	80
No	4	20
First-Generation College Student		
Yes	15	75
No	5	25

In order to get an accurate indication of students' perceptions of academic support programs, the first question following demographics asked about the frequency students participated with various academic support programs at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Figure 1 represents the responses students selected regarding each academic support program.

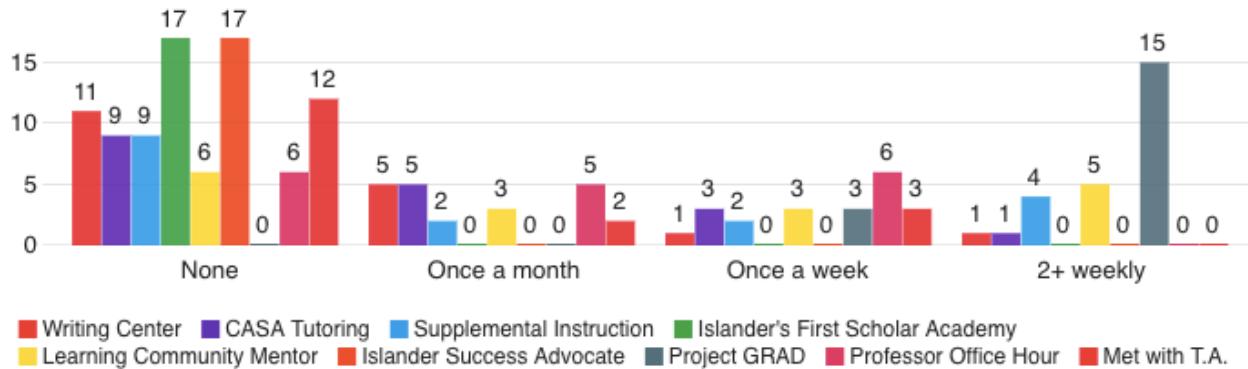


Figure 1. Bar graph illustrating the frequency students participated with specific academic support programs at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

Based on the data, students do not attend the Islanders Scholar Academy, a program specific for first-generation college students, and they do not meet with CASA Islander Success Advocates. The graph illustrates students do not use the Writing Center, CASA, Supplemental Instruction, or meet with the T.A. It is important to know which academic support programs students utilize, but it is even more essential to identify the likelihood that students would return to receive additional

assistance. Figure 2 provides insight into student responses on the likelihood they would return to the academic support program to receive additional assistance. According to the data, students are very likely to return to Project GRAD or attend professor office hours before they visit the Writing Center, CASA tutoring or Supplemental Instruction.



Figure 2. Bar graph illustrating the likelihood students would return to the academic support program after their first visit.

In addition to knowing the frequency of participation in academic support programs and likelihood to return, student perspective on important qualities of the academic support program was also a key interest. Based on the data collected, a peer mentor program and subject-specific tutoring are the two of the most important qualities students look for in an academic support program. Along with these qualities are a computer lab, a quiet study area, and instant messaging assistance. Figure 3 provides the data to show a clear distinction that students do care about specific qualities of academic support programs.

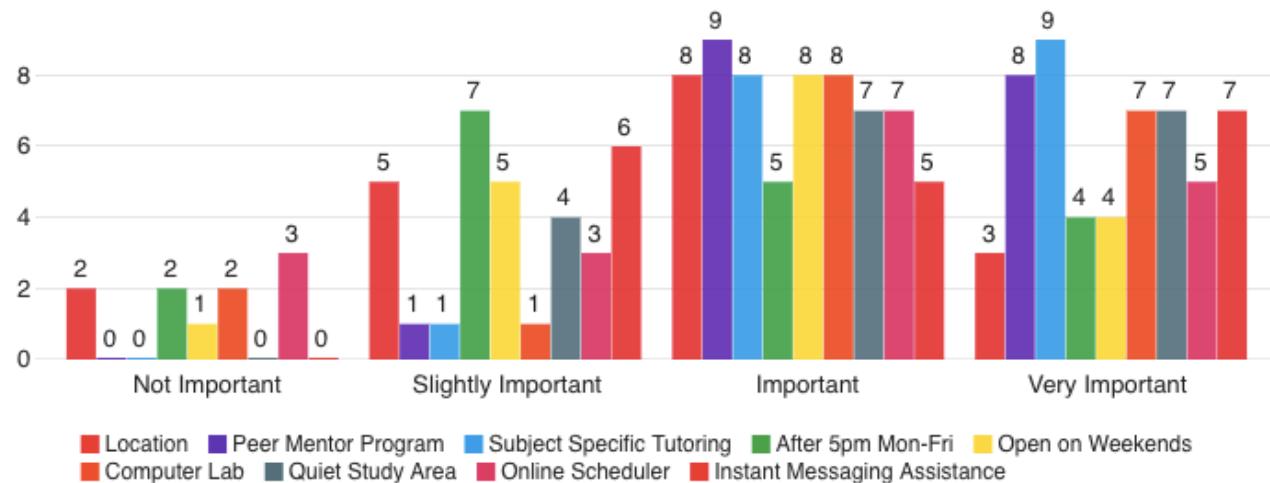


Figure 3. Bar graph illustrating the level of importance for specific qualities of academic support programs.

Qualitative Data

After collecting the quantitative data, a second survey to collect qualitative data was distributed through the Facebook Group. Since the responses were anonymous, there is no way to know if the same students who completed the first survey completed the second. Of the 14 responses, 71% were freshman, 14% sophomores, and 14% juniors. Additionally, 86% were Hispanic and 64% first-generation college students.

Table 2. Demographics from qualitative responses.

Project GRAD Demographics	n	%
Classification		
Freshman	10	71
Sophomore	2	14
Junior	2	14
Senior	0	0
Hispanic		
Yes	12	86
No	2	14
First-Generation College Student		
Yes	9	64
No	5	36

In response to *Research Question 29*: What qualities do you look for when choosing academic support services, one student stated:

Tutoring and mentoring services. Educational and instructional methods that are fun and engaging. The lending library (I have to say Project GRAD is the first academic service that has offered this type of support to me so that is a must and plus for me!)

To gain a deeper understanding of the quality's students look for when getting academic support, *Research Question 31* asks: Tell me about a positive encounter you had during an academic support session. One student responded, "when the person who is helping me isn't addressing strictly the content, I came in to get assistance with, but they actually show concern for my well-being as well." This indicates that students want to work with someone who shows compassion for them as a person, not just works through the course content without establishing rapport. Project GRAD Mentors establish rapport with the students in the cohort; therefore, referring back to the quantitative data on the likelihood students would return for additional assistance aligns with the statement from the student regarding a positive encounter.

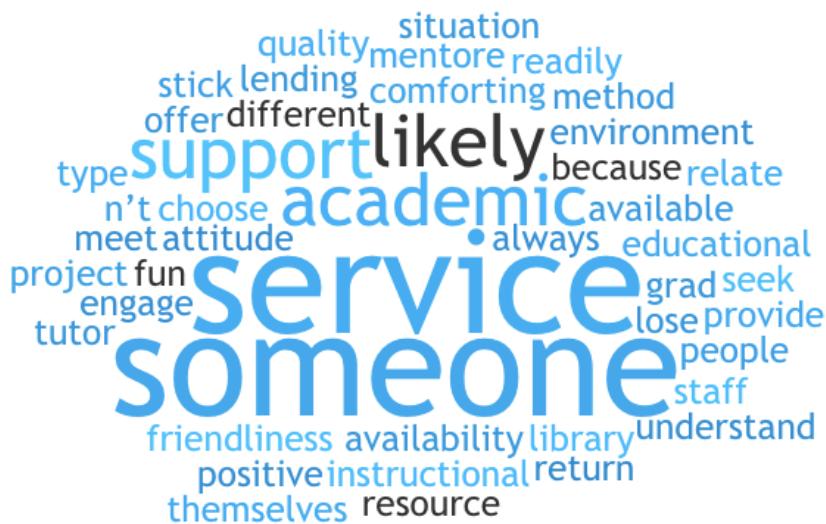


Figure 4. Word cloud illustrating the frequency of words used when describing Research Question 29 qualities students look for when choosing an academic support service.

Discussion

The findings in the study indicate TAMUCC does have the important qualities students look for in academic support programs, as indicated by *Figure 3*; however, the frequency of visits and likelihood for returning are concerning. Ultimately, the data reveals a larger scale survey must be conducted to identify reasons why students are not frequently utilizing the current academic support programs. The qualitative data collected did not produce the findings necessary to address specific concerns since over 70% of students did not answer *Research Question 31*: Tell me about a positive encounter you had during an academic support session and what made the encounter positive and *Research Question 33*: Tell me about a negative encounter you had during an academic support session and what made the encounter negative. Using student experiences, the staff from the academic support programs can be provided with the findings to develop additional training and modify the program as needed to meet the needs of students.

When the Qualtrics surveys were created, a forced response was not selected within the survey to ensure that participants answered all questions. With a couple of modifications to the surveys, both the quantitative and qualitative surveys can be redistributed to a larger group of students at TAMUCC to get a larger representation of the student body. With the information received along with the addition of focus groups, the current academic support programs can revise how they deliver academic support to better suit student needs.

Conclusion

In summary, the new generation of college students requires universities to adopt a new approach to academic student support. Universities can no longer follow, “what worked before will

work again" as students come to college with a multitude of variables that impact their academic journey. The findings show key qualities currently exist, the delivery of those programs must change. Instead of shutting down programs and taking away what is already provided, the University can investigate the most effective approach to adopt based on the data. Key stakeholders within the University such as the Provost, Associate Vice President of Student Success, and the Dean of the College of Undergraduate Studies must meet together to review the data and identify the best approach to implement new changes.

Universities rely on student enrollment for income but the government continues to state they will change the previous approach to provide monetary resources based on enrollment to a model of college completion. It is no longer acceptable for universities to enroll students, they will be held accountable for ensuring completion and degree attainment. This research is foundational in a long process of cultural change at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

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Tables

Table 1.

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Figures

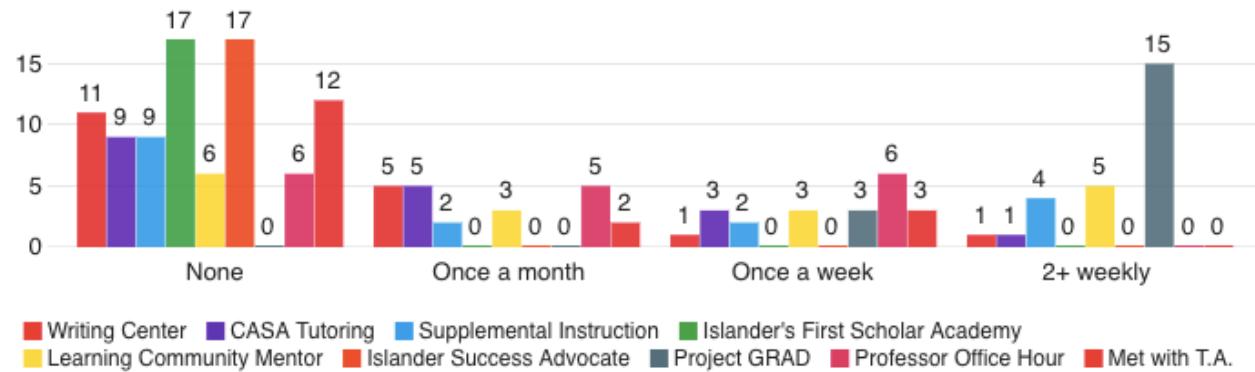


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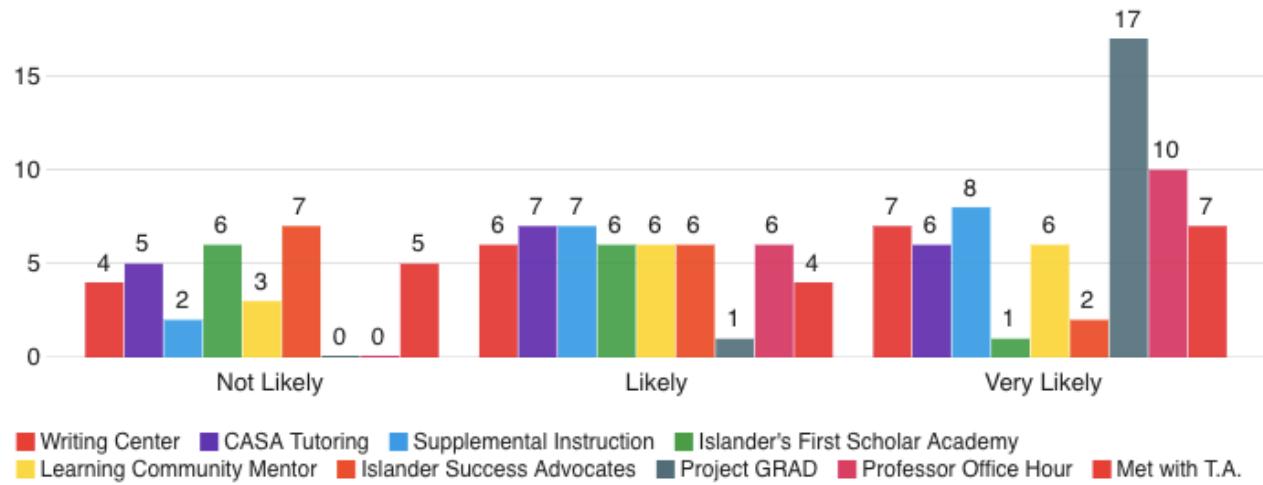


Figure 2. Bar graph illustrating the likelihood students would return to the academic support program after their first visit.

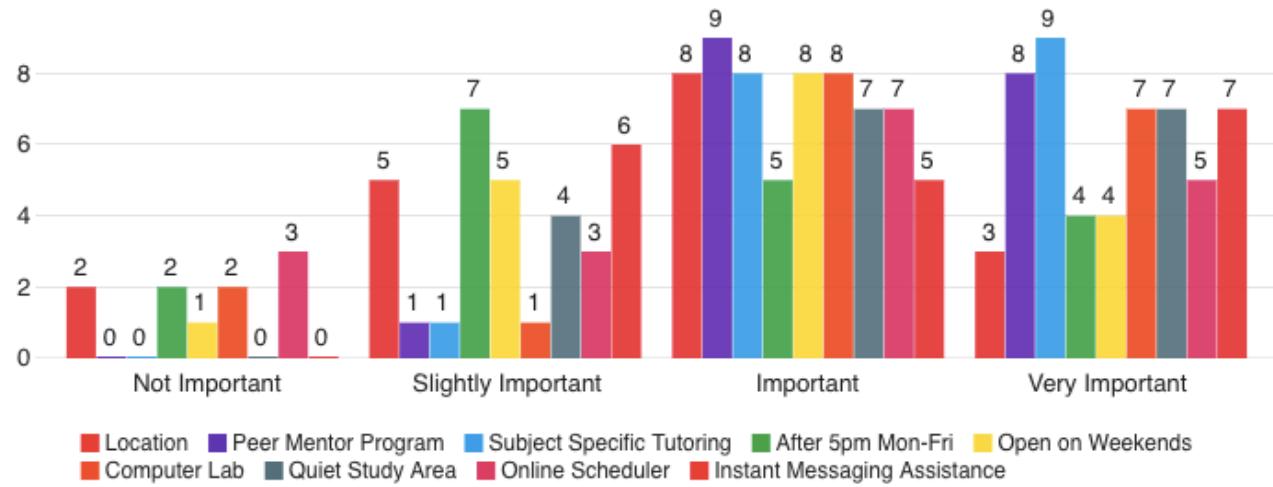


Figure 3. Bar graph illustrating the level of importance for specific qualities of academic support programs.

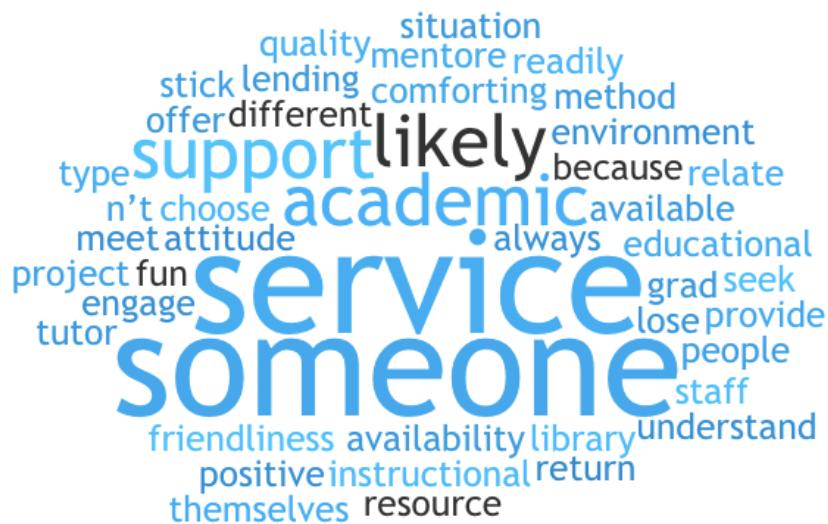


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