



**PennState**  
Undergraduate Education

PENN STATE  
**LEARNING**



Annual Report  
2023-24



# Peer-to-peer academic support for student success

Penn State Learning supports undergraduates in math, writing, languages, and the sciences. It is the largest student-led academic support center at Penn State with 185 undergraduate students employed this past year as tutors, guided study group leaders, workshop facilitators, and receptionists. These skilled student workers are supported by seven professional staff and two faculty members.

Over 14,000 students accessed our services and resources in 2023–24, and the number of contacts with these students exceeded 100,000. In-person contacts and student views of recorded study group and exam review sessions have been rising steadily since COVID course delivery ended.

## Program Highlights

Over 12,000 students attended and/or accessed recordings of Guided Study Group sessions for two dozen gateway-to-major and general education courses. Program assessment was consistently positive with high student satisfaction rates well over 95 percent and participation generally correlated with higher course grades and fewer late drops.

Brendaly Drayton's research on Guided Study Groups supports hypotheses that study group participation gives students a strong sense of community, learning, and connectedness.

Math tutor coordinator Brandon Schadle surveyed peer tutors in fall and spring semesters to assess the work climate and share results with tutors.

A new outreach team of writing tutors worked with Writing Center coordinator Tabitha Fisher to design workshops at the request of writing instructors across disciplines. Last year they offered 89 workshops to classes in 21 academic departments increasing workshop participation to over 30 percent of total Writing Center contacts.

Working with scholar-in-residence for writing and communication and associate teaching professor of English Beth Parfitt, peer writing tutors redesigned and relaunched the online peer writing journal, *The Dangling Modifier*.

In collaboration with the School of Global Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, program coordinator Andrew Davidson expanded language tutoring to students learning German and Portuguese. For the second year, he worked with a graduate student language instructor to strengthen partnerships with professors in charge of beginning and intermediate language learning. Last year, 866 students took advantage of language tutoring and exam reviews.

To help with their transition to college and awareness of effective study strategies, 542 students participated in evidence-based Study Smarter workshops, 27 percent of whom were first-generation students, 41 percent were non-white, and 63 percent were women. Teresa Burkhart updates the workshop regularly, and 86 percent of participants rated it very or extremely helpful.

## New This Year

New to our staff this year is Annette Threeton, program coordinator for math Guided Study Groups. We welcomed Annette in August 2023 from Bald Eagle Area High School, where she taught mathematics and was an assistant principal.

Lisa Melanson, assistant director of undergraduate education and associate teaching professor of mathematics, joined our staff in May 2024 as scholar-in-residence for mathematics, succeeding Jim Hager who had faithfully served in that role for 14 years. Lisa serves as an academic adviser for math majors and leads the departmental training and mentorship program for new graduate teaching assistants.

The lab in 7 Sparks Building that houses the Math Center and the Undergraduate Speaking Center was recarpeted and

# Our Mission

Penn State Learning develops and assesses peer-led, undergraduate learning communities in math, natural sciences, writing, languages, economics, and statistics through tutoring, workshops, and guided study groups.

# Our Vision

With the help of Penn State Learning and other advocates for academic excellence, all undergraduates admitted to the University Park campus will meet or exceed the skill standards required to succeed as scholars in their chosen programs and will thrive as engaged citizens and peer educators within a global society.

refurnished in the summer of 2023 and has become a popular study destination for students between classes or waiting to see a tutor or mentor. (Pictured, bottom right.) Over 1,000 students visited 7 Sparks between September and May.

## Future Initiatives

We anticipate a productive 2024–25 with plans for streamlining student support while increasing the learning experiences of our tutors. For example, writing tutors who work in the Search Bar in Pattee and Paterno Library will be cross trained as University Libraries peer research consultants to provide multi-layered direct support to students who are writing research plans, conducting literature reviews, and requesting help documenting sources.

With the support of an Equal Opportunity Planning Committee seed grant, we will also be working with the Student Success Center, Student Disability Resources, Adult Learner Programs and Services, Division of Undergraduate Studies, Office of Veteran Programs, the Sokolov-Miller Family Financial and Life Skills Center, and Student Care and Advocacy to pilot a professional, integrated Academic Life Coaching program that will measure the impact of coaching on 60 to 75 University Park students referred by learning specialists and advisers.

Our students and staff will continue to be active conducting research, making conference presentations, submitting papers related to their experiences and their learning interventions, and offering peer reviews of others' work. I look forward to reading drafts of these scholarly contributions.



R. Neill Johnson, Ph.D.  
Director

## Administrative Staff

**Dawn Bowersox** – Administrative Coordinator/Office Manager

**Teresa Burkhart, M. Ed.** – Starfish Tenant Administrator

**Andrew Davidson, M.A.** – Student Success Specialist

## 2023–24 by the numbers

**185**  
undergraduates employed

**14,000+**  
students served

**100,000+**  
contacts with students



# Guided Study Group Program

**Brendaly Drayton, Ph.D.** – Student Success Manager, Scholar in Residence for Learning Communities

**John Correll, M.S.** – Student Success Specialist, Guided Study Groups Coordinator

**Annette Threeton, M.S.** – Student Success Specialist, Guided Study Groups Math Coordinator

Penn State Learning's Guided Study Group (GSG) program is based on the internationally recognized Supplemental Instruction model of academic support that includes core components of peer leaders embedded in courses, collaborative learning, and weekly sessions. Our program supports 24 foundational courses in chemistry, economics, mathematics, physics, and statistics with an average of 25 leaders. Consequently, our target population is primarily first- and second-year students. In fall 2023, we piloted Kinesiology 350. Our goal is to partner with course instructors and students to provide out-of-class academic support that fosters critical thinking, deeper understanding of course content, and increased likelihood of successful course completion. Program accomplishments include increased attendance, expanded partnership and outreach, research initiatives, and program impact.

For the 2023–24 academic year, the GSG program provided academic support for 12,717 students with 82,391 contacts. This is a 56 percent increase in contacts and a 5.7 percent increase in unique students over 2022–23 as well as 115 percent increase in contacts and 45 percent increase in unique students over 2021–22.

The post-COVID decision to maintain a hybrid model of service (e.g., in-person, online, and face-to-face) with the inclusion of recorded sessions and exam reviews increased access to support and on-time learning. In particular, the Zoom recordings have become a valued resource because they are available when students are ready to study and at the pace that works best for them. Off-campus and nonresident students as well as non-native speakers of English have found this resource especially useful.

An end-of-semester survey is distributed each semester to GSG participants. Student responses indicate that GSG support is effective in helping them study. On average, over 90 percent rated GSG support from moderate to a great deal of help. The rating of a lot of help to a great deal of help increased from 68 percent in fall 2022 to 86 percent in spring 2024.

In fall 2023, we piloted contacting the 235 students in GSG-supported courses who received Starfish to-dos or referrals for tutoring support by sending them the session schedule. Ninety-seven or 41 percent responded by attending GSG sessions/exam reviews. In spring 2024, 1,267 students received referrals. Subsequently, 737 of these students or 58 percent attended GSG session/exam reviews.

## 2023–24 Starfish Referral Outreach

**24**

foundational courses supported by GSG each semester in **chemistry, economics, mathematics, physics, and statistics**

**25**

GSG leaders each semester (on average)

**97 of 235**

students attend GSG sessions after being referred (fall 2023 pilot)

**737 of 1,267**

students attend GSG sessions after being referred (spring 2024)

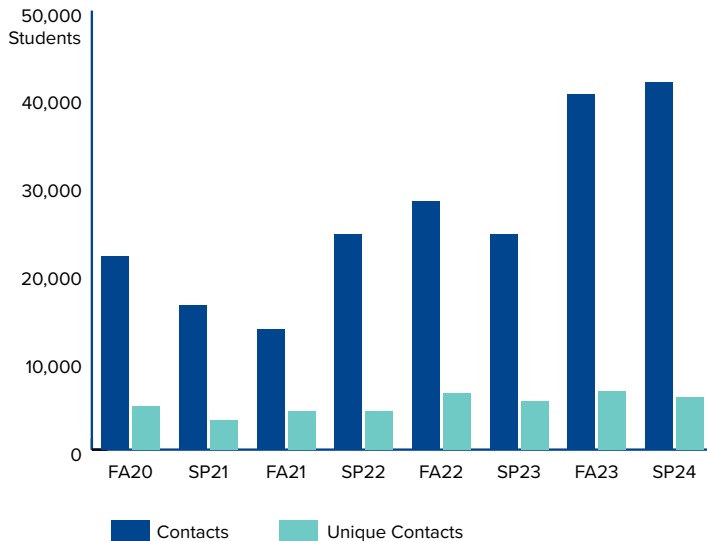


## 2023–24 GSG Support

**12,717**  
students supported

**82,391**  
contacts with students

## GSG Support Yearly Comparison



## 2023–24 Session Recordings

**5,102**  
students referenced session recordings

**28,765**  
times in fall 2023



On average, over **90% of students** rated GSG support from **“moderate” to “a great deal”** of help.

“I am able to learn concepts in GSG that were hard to learn in class. I like that GSG is smaller and much better explained.”

—GSG session attendee

“Raised my grade a lot after starting to go, went from 50s on the test to a 60 with only one session, then a 90 on the last.”

—GSG session attendee

“The weekly study slides were integral to my success in studying for exams.”

—GSG session attendee

“I loved how GSG sessions were recorded and allowed me to go back and watch them whenever I needed.”

—GSG session attendee



# Math Center

**Brandon Schadle, M.S.** – Math Center Coordinator  
**Lisa Melanson, M.S.** – Scholar in Residence for Mathematics

The Math Center @ Penn State Learning served over 3,400 students during the 2023–24 academic year with tutoring services and conducted exam reviews that were attended by over 900 students and watched as recordings over 4,500 times. During that time, we employed undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds who were able to collaborate with their fellow undergraduate peers. As part of a new outreach initiative and with support from the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, we provided on-site tutoring during the spring 2024 semester.

Each semester, we ask the math peer tutor community to provide its feedback on how the members view themselves and their supervisor. We use the results for discussion during our tutor leadership meetings and in our whole group meetings to help ensure a safe and inclusive environment.

Responding to an annual climate survey given by Math Center coordinator Brandon Schadle, over 80% of math tutors reported that they experience a sense of safety and belonging in their work. Over 90% reported that they were confident engaging students in tutoring and felt well-supported by their supervisor.

## Plans for Next Year

- Enhancing our relationship with the Department of Mathematics learning assistant program for better recruitment and providing students with benefits that both programs offer
- Increasing outreach to marginalized and underrepresented students
- Increasing availability of online tutoring to reach students who may not otherwise be able to attend in-person tutoring

## Courses Supported with Tutoring

Math 4, 21, 22, 26, 34, 38, 41, 110, 140, 140B, 140G, 141, 141B, 141G

Math 200, 201, 220, 230, 231, 232, 250, 251, 252

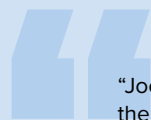
## Courses Supported with Exam Reviews

Math 21, 22, 26, 41, 220, 230, 251



“Joshua was great, kind of like a parent when you’re riding a bike. Starting out with loads of help, while slowly taking it away so I could understand the ideas by myself.”

—Math session participant



“Joel was very patient and did his best to help me understand the problems and explained them thoroughly.”

—Math session participant



## 2023–24 Math Tutoring and Exam Reviews

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**3,957**

tutorials conducted for  
Math 4–141

**931**

live Exam Review attendees

**396**

tutorials conducted for  
Math 200–252

**4,514**

Exam Review  
recording views

**77**

online tutorials conducted



## 2023–24 Online Math Guided Study Groups

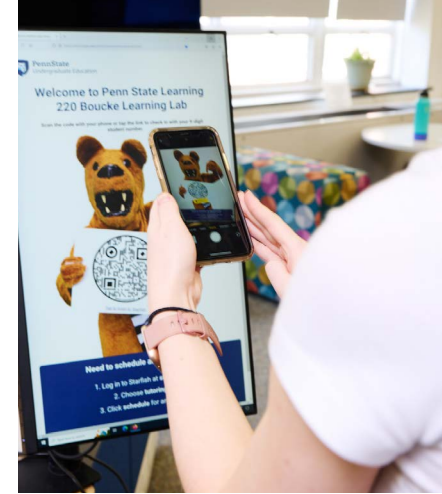
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**140**

World Campus students  
attended live

Over **90% of math tutors** feel **confident** engaging with students in tutoring and feel **well-supported** by their supervisor.

Over **80% of math tutors** feel a sense of **safety and belonging** in their work.



# Study Smarter Program

**Teresa Burkhart, M. Ed.** — Education Program Specialist

Penn State Learning’s Study Smarter Workshop offers an interactive experience centered on the concept of metacognition, understanding how you learn and the consequences of your learning decisions. This workshop aims to aid students in successfully adapting to the challenges of college-level courses. Participants explore how the brain processes and stores information, along with discovering effective learning strategies. Practical examples are provided to illustrate these strategies’ applications.

The Study Smarter Workshop draws from materials sourced from Stephan Chew’s video series and in-person workshops, as well as resources from The Learning Scientists website. Penn State Learning introduced this workshop in the fall of 2017, and since then, its content has been refreshed annually. In the fall of 2022, eleven Study Smarter workshops were conducted, with 438 attendees. In comparison, during the fall of 2023, eight Study Smarter workshops were held, with 439 participants. Attendance

at these workshops is open to students, faculty, and staff from across the university.

### Ongoing Initiatives

- Examination of study skills workshops at peer institutions
- Stay updated on contemporary study skills trends through platforms like The Learning Scientists and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*
- Evaluation of pertinent literature such as *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion* by Sara Rose Cavanaugh

### Plans for Next Year

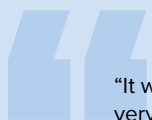
- Participate in the National Organization for Student Success (NOSS) conference to enhance professional development in study skill strategies, presenter training, and workshop delivery
- Revise the Study Smarter workshop with newly acquired strategies or other pertinent materials
- Recruit and provide training for new peer presenters

## 2023–24 Study Smarter Workshops

**22**  
workshops held

**542**  
student attendees

**86%**  
rated the workshop “very” or “extremely” helpful



“It was a really good presentation and made me very mindful to my own study patterns that need to improve.”

—Study Smarter Workshop participant



“All my questions were answered during the workshop. I thought this workshop was awesome and wished I did this workshop as a freshman.”

—Study Smarter Workshop participant



# World Languages Program

**Andrew Davidson, M.A.** – World Languages Coordinator

Penn State Learning’s World Languages Program employs a group of 12–15 language tutors who have performed well in language courses up to the 300-level or beyond. Our tutors meet with small groups and individuals on a drop-in or appointment basis to address grammar and composition questions and provide tools for success in world language coursework.

The 2023–24 academic year represented a period of transition and growth for the World Languages Program, strengthening its partnership with the School of Global Languages, Literatures, and Cultures (SGLLC) and expanding its support to include two new languages, German and Portuguese, along with previously offered languages: Spanish, French, Italian, and Russian. The World Languages Program employs a graduate assistant from SGLLC who is instrumental in this partnership. The GA works directly to mediate language departments’ needs by communicating with faculty liaisons and advising tutors. The GA applies their familiarity with University-level teaching practices to advise tutors on appropriate pedagogical methods to best serve the departments they represent.

**6**

world languages supported, including **Spanish, French, Italian, Russian, German, and Portuguese**

**2**

new languages added in 2023–24 (German and Portuguese)

**12–15**

language tutors employed each semester

“The tutoring is very welcoming and a great way to prepare for exams or enhance your knowledge.”

—Language tutoring session participant

“[Xavier] was understanding, patient, and super helpful! Loved the energy! :)”

—Language tutoring session participant

“Jasmine was very welcoming and helpful and really helped explain the hard subjects. I will definitely come back for her help again!”

—Language tutoring session participant

“I am getting more comfortable with reading and speaking the Russian Language each time I have been so far. My instructor has also noticed improvement in my reading after just 2 sessions with [Demetrius] along with one session with her.”

—Language tutoring session participant

# Writing Center

**Tabitha Fisher, M.A.** – Writing Center Coordinator

**Elizabeth Parfitt, M.F.A.** – Scholar in Residence for Writing and Communication

The Writing Center @ Penn State Learning serves as a hub for dynamic exchanges about writing through its one-to-one peer writing tutorials and writing across the curriculum course outreach. Our strength in collaboration contributes to the 50+ peer tutor staff who frequently present at national conferences and help research and design new programming. A robust tutor training course (ENGL 250) combined with paid professional development, establishes the Writing Center as an ethical and engaged workplace for undergraduate student employees to gain valuable skills in communication, leadership, and community advocacy.

Writing Center tutors create opportunities for all students to elevate their writing and engage more deeply with the writing process. We believe in the power of peer-to-peer learning and see our tutors not only as students, but also leaders and peer advocates who come from academic colleges across the University. Peer tutors are involved in every aspect of the Writing Center from program assessment to mentoring new employees.

Through our partnerships with academic disciplines like English and Applied Linguistics, alongside the Search Bar—our collaborative tutoring space in Pattee Library—the Writing Center encourages students to consider themselves as not only scholars and researchers, but also writers and academic citizens. Our programs advance research on language diversity and identity, illustrating the idea that student writing is integral to inclusivity and belonging.

## Community Engagement and Publishing

The Writing Center relaunched *The Dangling Modifier* at the 2023 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. The redesigned online publication “for peer tutors, by peer tutors,” invites undergraduates to engage in community conversations, research, and storytelling.

The Public Writing Initiative (PWI) is a project of the Writing Center that aims to provide opportunities for instructors to bring public writing into the classroom, and for students to consider the impact of writing for audiences beyond the classroom.

In 2024, the Public Writing Initiative launched The Undergraduate Student Publishing Project to provide students with one-to-one consultations and resources for taking their writing “public.” Of the four students PWI assistants worked with, two writers published their work by summer 2024.

The newly-formed Outreach Team works to design programming for in-class workshops across campus. The team includes Outreach Specialists completing a Master’s degree in Creative Writing in Penn State’s English Department.

## Research

Writing tutors were awarded travel grants to present research projects at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing in Pittsburgh, PA.

The Writing Center Coordinator and Scholar in Residence for Writing and Communication were both accepted and published in *Another Word*, a Writing Center publication at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

**2,179**

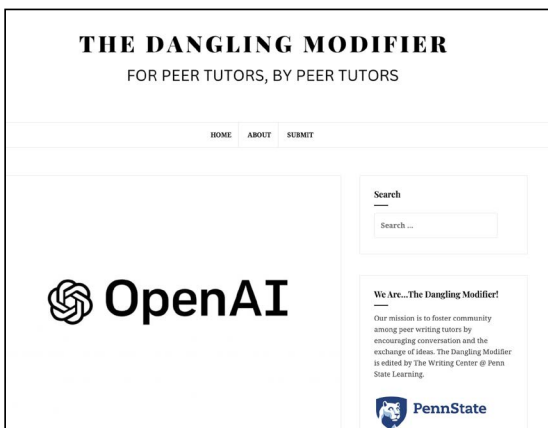
students supported by tutors across in-person, asynchronous, and online modes to assist with course writing, graduate school applications, employment documents, and personal writing projects

**89**

personalized workshops conducted for courses across academic departments

**188**

undergraduate writers served through weekly tutorials in the 1-credit ENGL 005 Tutoring Program



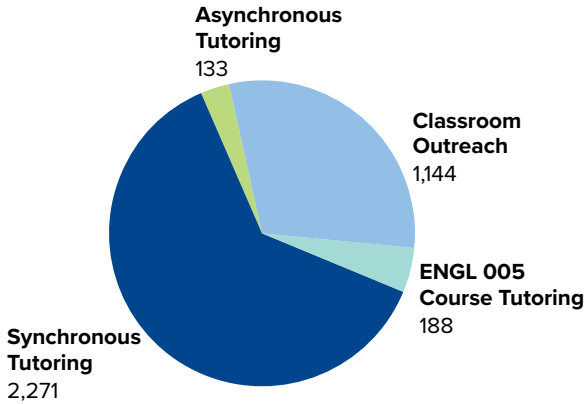
27

new peer tutors  
hired

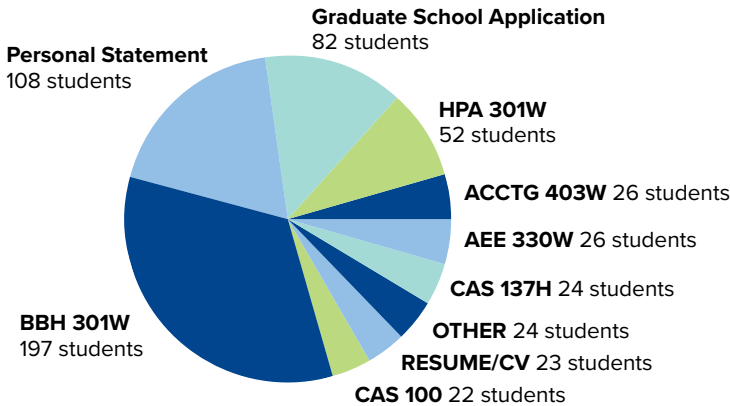
10 of 16

academic colleges  
represented by tutors

## Students Supported by Program



## Top Non-English/ESL Course Contacts



“I think it’s really important for undergraduates to publish their writing. It empowers students to feel involved in their community, and it also gives them an opportunity and a segue into publishing in the future.”

—Writing Center peer tutor

“I was able to present at a conference and really connect with people. I was able to make connections for my future job, for future potential internships, and I also got to talk to so many people about what publishing means to them and what writing means to them.”

—Writing Center peer tutor

“My essay was quite long and still the tutor took full interest in reading it again and again to help me better my work. She was fully devoted and helped me a lot. She did her part with utmost perfection and sincerity. We worked on the grammar, MLA formatting, vocabulary, sentences, etc. of my essay to make it better. I think my grade will be going up for my English class now.”

—Writing Center tutoring participant

“...They helped me dive deeper into my writing so that it could be more personal which made it better and more impactful. By asking questions about myself and where the writing was coming from it made me reflect more on my writing which improved it.”

—Writing Center tutoring participant

“While the world of AI has changed the way we work and think – using the Writing Center is now more critical than ever. I hope every student at Penn State realizes the valuable resource that is here and takes full advantage of it during their time as a student.”

—Mitchell Smith, Assistant Teaching Professor and Internship Coordinator, Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management





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