INTRODUCTION
Supplemental instruction—peer-facilitated learning opportunities often tied to competitive gateway courses—and tutoring are a common practice in higher education institutions. While supplemental instruction approaches vary in practice and capacity, they have been linked to the academic success of students who utilize these resources (Malm et al., 2012; Dawson et al., 2014; Topping, 1996). For example, participation in supplemental instruction is associated with retention and improved GPA among diverse populations of students, including Latinx and White students (Lemoine et al., 2019; Balzer Carr & London 2019; Arendale, 2002). Moreover, the skills and tools gained from supplemental instruction in one course can transfer to other courses (Malm et al., 2012), including supporting the learning of course concepts and other relevant material (Ning & Downing, 2010).

Such benefits have been observed at UC Santa Cruz. Survey data on Learning Support Services (LSS) revealed that students who participated in Modified Supplemental Instruction (MSI) and tutoring earned higher course grades compared with students who did not participate (Balzer Carr & London, 2015, 2019). Moreover, small group tutoring was associated with improvements to retention. To build on prior findings, which have relied mostly on quantitative approaches, the present study utilized qualitative focus groups to explore the experiences of students who use LSS, with particular attention to the experiences of Latinx students. Understanding student experiences at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) adds to current literature focused primarily on students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

THE CURRENT RESEARCH
Community-engaged Research Approach. The research team drew on three tenets of community-engaged approaches (Merenstein, 2015) to examine 1) the experiences of students in LSS, 2) challenges around help-seeking and program belonging, and 3) effectiveness of practices implemented to foster inclusion. The tenets included engaging in a collaborative process between researchers, campus members, and students; disseminating findings beyond academic journals; and committing to a focus on social justice, including the implementation of practices which serve to promote positive and sustainable social change.

Research Site. LSS is a university tutoring service that provides course-specific academic support services for undergraduate students in one of four formats: MSI, Small Group Tutoring (SGT), Writing Tutoring, and Drop-In Math and Writing Tutoring. Facilitated by trained peer Learning Assistants, MSI provides weekly meeting times where students can...
practice material from the course collaboratively with peers. SGT is a small study space for students to engage in critical thinking around key themes of the course with their undergraduate tutor. Each session is led by a current UCSC undergraduate student who has taken the course. SGT sessions tend to last one hour with up to six students participating.

Research Team. Aligned with the tenet of collaboration, the research team included two SSERC undergraduate researchers, one SSERC graduate student researcher, and three LSS staff members. The team developed the research question, identified and executed the methodological approach, and analyzed and interpreted the findings.

Participants and Procedure. Participants were recruited via email and grouped based on their low or high attendance in MSI or SGT. A total of 18 students participated in 5 focus groups that on average lasted an hour. The demographic background included 7 students who identified as Mexican/Latinx, 4 as Asian American, 4 as White, and 1 as Ethiopian. Eleven identified as women and 6 identified as men. SSERC undergraduate researchers transcribed the audio recordings and coded them for emerging themes.

Coding Procedure. The SSERC research team coded initial focus group transcripts using an inductive approach, meaning that codes were constructed from the data rather than from theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, a codebook was created that includes codes like “negative racial climate”, “sense of belonging”, and “barriers to LSS”, to name a few. Once the team constructed initial themes, SSERC undergraduate researchers used a deductive approach to coding—where they then looked to theory and published research to make sense of the codes, while remaining attuned to emerging themes.

FINDINGS
Summary of Findings. In this report, we focus on three salient themes: racial climate, faculty buy-in, and supportive mentors. The first theme highlights students’ perceptions and experiences with the racial climate during MSI and SGT. The second and third themes identify practices or features that promote positive experiences with MSI or SGT. While not discussed here, other themes in the student experience included: the impact of workloads on involvement with LSS services, the lack of awareness of what LSS provides, the challenge of accessing LSS because of current software systems, and student perceptions about level of preparation of MSI instructors.

Racial Climates. Latinx students were more likely than other racial groups to discuss experiences with negative racial climate during MSI or SGT sessions.

One Latina undergraduate shared:
I just felt really uncomfortable in one of my sessions because I was the only person of color... and I just didn’t go back to that session. I just went to a different one, ‘cuz... as a person of color I just get really nervous if I’m the only person of color in the room and there’s just mostly white people. I just feel like I can’t share my voice.

The numerical representation of students during sessions, or the lack of, has implications for sense of belonging and engagement of students. This finding has been supported in much of the campus racial climate literature (Serrano, 2020; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016).

In some instances, students described how positive racial climate in MSI or SGT sessions fostered a welcoming environment. For example, one Asian American student shared that a diverse group of students and MSI/SGT instructors “does help to make you feel a little bit more comfortable. Especially... if everyone’s a little different then... you get to learn from other peoples’ experiences too and I think that makes it a little bit more fun.”

Faculty Buy-in. Students also identified practices that promote or discourage involvement in MSI or SGT. As one Latina student shared, when faculty make time to explain the importance of MSI and SGT, “it paints it as not necessarily asking for help but as just a thing that you should do to do well in courses and to set your own self up for success.” In other words, when faculty were informed about LSS services and integrated them into classroom culture, students were more encouraged to seek services.

Further, students identified the first day as a pivotal moment in their engagement with LSS services. As
students shared, when faculty only allow MSI Learning Assistants to introduce themselves and list times on the board it becomes a “little routine.” An encouraging experience students shared includes buy-in from faculty and Learning Assistants having enough time to introduce themselves, the services available at LSS, and the purpose of MSI and SGT.

**Supportive Mentors.** Students that attend MSI or SGT often have the opportunity to build and strengthen relationships with mentors. This was especially true for students in their first and second year at UC Santa Cruz. As one student shared, “I’ve had tutors that took a mentorship role. Like I said before, they give you tips and tricks to like pass the course, what worked for them in the past...I found that a really useful resource.” Beyond course-related content, students shared that Learning Assistants often provide them with tools to navigate their majors and the campus more broadly.

Learning Assistants, who have often mastered course content, also provided students with tools to explore their future aspirations, including applying to graduate school. For example, one student reflected on discussions with a Learning Assistant who shared tips about applying to graduate school, “we were all... stressing [in] our different ways and got to talk with him about that process for a good amount...” As the focus group continued, other students begin to share similar experiences with Learning Assistants that demystified the graduate school application process.

**IMPLICATIONS**

This report highlighted three key experiences of students in MSI or SGT. First, we observed how racial climate shapes how students experience and perceive MSI or SGT. Second, students identified faculty buy-in, or lack-of, during the first week and through the quarter as a practice that promotes or discourages involvement in MSI or SGT. Third, we found that students who attended SGT or MSI were likely to build and strengthen relationships with peer mentors. While these findings demonstrate that LSS is promoting academic success, there are opportunities for growth.

We offer three recommendations for improving the learning climate of students at UC Santa Cruz, especially for those who offer near-peer programming or tutoring services.

1. Despite students of color comprising the majority of those who attend MSI and SGT, the majority of Learning Assistants identify as White. Prior research has found that a lack access to faculty, instructors, and mentors of color creates a blockade for the academic success of students of color (Solórzano 1993; Solórzano, Allen, and Carrol 2002). As such, LSS staff and faculty should work to identify and encourage students of color who can serve as potential Learning Assistants. As participants shared, a diversity in LSS student mentors and MSI instructors fosters a welcoming environment for the growing number of Latinx students at UC Santa Cruz.

2. The campus community, especially those whose courses are supplemented with MSI and SGT, should support and be informed about LSS programming. In practice, a demonstration of support for LSS programming can include allowing LSS student staff adequate time during the first week of instruction to introduce themselves, MSI and/or SGT, and other LSS resources. Moreover, faculty can add a section on their syllabi that provides students information about LSS, their services, and how to find and contact them.

3. It is important to adequately train and compensate Learning Assistants. As this study suggests, in addition to providing supplemental instruction that supports the learning of course content and other relevant material, they are often serving as mentors to students who are often first-generation students and/or student of color. Providing appropriate training and compensation for their work is important for ensuring their success as they support the academic success of UC Santa Cruz students more broadly.

HSIs serve some of the most diverse student bodies. Often, these students are low-income first-generation students of color with limited access to or understanding of the hidden curriculum of college. These research findings point towards the importance of examining how HSIs are honoring their serving identities at all levels of the institution (Garcia, 2017).
REFERENCES


