

TIPS FOR SELECTING TUTORS AND LEARNING ASSISTANTS

The Chabot College Tutorial Program is a *peer* tutor program. One of the goals of the program is to provide the students in our classrooms with the opportunity to become tutors, in order to develop their own knowledge, skills, and confidence, and to gain work experience that can benefit them when they transfer to other institutions or seek employment. Thus, we recruit tutors from classes throughout the discipline, and we do not out source in our search for tutors. Though there are many students attending classes at Chabot who have relevant experience, and even academic degrees, that could recommend them as tutors, and of course there are individuals at local colleges and in our communities who could feasibly qualify as tutors, they are not recruited unless they are taking classes at Chabot in disciplines for which they could tutor. (Thus, a student with a degree or work experience in a science would not be recruited as a tutor unless identified as a student in one of our science instructors' classes.)

In its first years of operation, the new tutorial program has taught us a great deal about desirable characteristics in a tutor. The list below of characteristics reflects those discoveries. For instance, we have learned from practice that the highest scoring students in a class do not necessarily become good tutors. Tutoring is primarily about *working well with others* and *being a good communicator*. Thus, it is crucial that instructors who are recommending students as tutors look for these qualities.

Desirable Characteristics for a Tutor:

- **English fluency** • Includes listening and speaking.

Speaking: A tutee working with a tutor should not have to struggle to understand the speech of the tutor. It is understood that many of our tutees have difficulty listening to spoken English, so there is no guarantee that a tutee will be able to understand easily the speech even of a professional newscaster in English. But this should be the only origin of this problem. A tutor's own characteristics as a speaker of English should not be a significant obstacle to a tutee's comprehension.

Listening: Students seeking tutorials are an extremely heterogeneous group, in knowledge and skill levels, and in language fluencies. Many of them are non-native speakers of English, whose accents are strong enough to require much attention to understand. Ideally, tutors will be able to understand easily not only standard spoken English, but English spoken in a wide variety of accents. Someone with a low tolerance of accent—that is, who struggles to understand English spoken by a non-native—is not well suited to be a tutor.

- **Receptive skills** •

Tutors are advised in the training that they receive to assess how their tutees are succeeding in their tutorials. If a tutor's approach is not working, the tutor should a) be alert to notice this, and b) adjust his or her approach to find something that more successfully assists the tutee.

- a) One of the basic skills for doing this is the ability (better yet, inclination) to observe others' behaviors. Not all students are well suited to this: even many of our best performing students in our classes are not always good at observing others. Some of our "A" students have been successful academically because of their having learned a particular set of successful behaviors and sticking to them persistently, which has led them to develop personal work habits that do not allow for much flexibility. This recommendation refers to the tutor's ability, not mastery, of the skill. Much of the training that tutors receive address this skill.
- b) In training sessions, the tutors discuss different learning styles, so they are aware that not all students learn the same. Not all tutors are required to apply learning skill knowledge to assess the needs of their tutees, but they are required to understand that not all tutees will respond successfully to any one approach to tutoring. When a tutoring approach is not working, tutors are advised to try other approaches. This is another skill that is not present in all outstanding students: many of the "A" students in our classes are not inclined in tutorial situations to be so flexible—they are more inclined to show tutees how they do things, and might become impatient when tutees do not benefit from it.

• **Comfort working closely with others** •

This seems obvious enough, but is not as common a personality trait as we might like to think. Again, many great students in our classes have become successful through their focus and individual determination, but not necessarily through their enjoyment of working with others. The best tutors are visibly comfortable as they sit in a tutorial session, relaxed and confident working closely with a struggling student whom they do not know. As much as anything else, tutoring is a social activity.

• **Patience** •

Students who seek tutorial assistance often have a history of struggling with their studies, and they can have developed unproductive study and work habits. They are not always as focused as they should be, and it is not always easy to perceive progress they are making. That is at the core of our work: occasionally we assist students who are ready to work constructively with tutors and who demonstrate progress within a few sessions of tutoring. More often we do not. Tutors have to be comfortable with this, and patient with a wide variety of study and work behaviors that they personally do not understand.

• **General job skills** •

Our tutors work in the classroom and various learning support centers, where it is necessary for them to be punctual, focused in their work, productive, courteous, honest, and eager to work cooperatively with others. Tutors are expected to contribute to a supportive, positive learning environment, whether they are working in a center, in a classroom, or any other venue.