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Recalibrating the Hiring Line: One Center's Changing Practices

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That's just the way it is
Some things will never change
That's just the way it is
Ah, but don't you believe them

      -Bruce Hornsby

One of the most important responsibilities for writing center administrators is the hiring of peer tutors. The tutors are the heart of any center, conducting a majority of the sessions and engaging in the one-to-one conversations with writers that can be so valuable to their individual essays and to their development as writers. Yet that hiring process, like many activities, can sometimes become rote—we hire in a particular manner (and we hire particular people) because "that's just the way it is." That's the way we've always done it. At least that was true for our writing center: we had developed and maintained a hiring process that we believed successful, and we had not raised many questions about it. In the last couple of years, however, we began to ask ourselves if we were doing all that we could to ensure that we hired a diverse, qualified set of tutors who represented and could work with the writers who came through our door. We discovered that we could do more.

This essay describes how we in the Wittenberg Writing Center revised our hiring materials and process in search of a more diverse applicant pool. In addition, the piece also gives an overview of the literature on hiring practices for writing centers in general, as our center closely followed the same practices through the decades and made many of the same assumptions. This is a chance, then, to examine our hiring practices as a field and in particular at one writing center.

A Look Back

In 1980, Leonard Podis wrote that most of the writing tutors at his school were "junior or senior English majors who write well themselves and have good intuitive knowledge of grammar, mechanics, and essay technique" (70). These students, for the most part, were nominated by faculty, and many of them were "planning careers in teaching" (70). As part of the hiring process, Podis asked the candidates to "correct a sheet of ten sentences" and then respond to some sample student writing that contains both "major and minor problems" (71). The prospective tutors were expected to respond to the writing in two ways: analyze it for its "strengths and weaknesses" and offer comments to the writer of the piece "as a first step towards revision and improvement" (71).

Though Podis was not looking for "expertise" in this hiring process so much as "promise," his approach has been a fairly common one in writing centers through the years. Tutor candidates are discovered through faculty recommendations, and they usually are asked to display some facility with language, grammar, and/or essay construction. In addition, they are often asked about, or asked to display, certain personality traits. For

example, Deborah Arfken suggested in 1982 that applicants should be informed that they need "certain academic and personal qualities to work effectively as a tutor" (111). In addition to a high score on a grammar test, a recommendation from an English faculty member, and a "lucid writing sample," Arfken's candidates should also exhibit "diplomacy and self-control," "patience and sensitivity," and "reliability and perseverance," among other qualities (112). Or, as Nancy Wood put it, "Tutors should be pleasant, unabrasive people who will make students comfortable" (qtd. in Arfken 112). It's not just a question of what applicants can do, but who they are.

Though these descriptions of hiring practices are nearly forty years old, there are echoes of their approaches in more recent work, such as Paula Gillespie and Harvey Kail's 2006 piece, "Crossing Thresholds: Starting a Peer Tutoring Program." They argue that "you might look for tutors who do well in composition courses," but they avoid limiting that pool to English majors (325). They also suggest that "it helps to find students who enjoy the collaborative process in their classes, who are good listeners and good communicators." Also, "it helps to find tutors who are outgoing" (325). The main way to find such students, according to the authors, is through faculty recommendations. Not only does asking faculty for candidates lead to a strong pool of applicants, but it also "builds good connections with faculty" and gives them "a stake in [the center's] success" (326). That advice aligns with what Loretta Cobb and Elaine Kilgore Elledge argued in 1984, that one of the most important parts of the hiring process is the faculty recommendation because if "faculty are encouraged to assist in selecting and training the staff in a center, they will naturally feel that the writing center is theirs" (125). The idea of faculty buy-in

has been important for decades.

Another more recent example is Kristen Komara's approach, described in 2008, of a "rigorous but even-handed hiring process," one that can "build the reputation of the writing center" with both students and administrators (1). For this process, students need a GPA of 3.0 or above, must submit a writing sample and application letter, and must sit for an interview. In the interview, the applicant's answers should "show thoughtfulness, good general communication skills, a positive attitude about writing and learning more about writing, and a positive attitude about helping other people" (3).[1] This is not far removed from what both Arfken and Wood wanted in their candidates.

It should not be surprising, really, that writing centers have an overlap in their hiring practices and desires. Writing center administrators might even paraphrase Quintilian as to their ideal tutor: a good student speaking (and writing) well. They want committed, compassionate, collaborative writers in their centers. And, most likely, they do want faculty support for those tutors and their work. At the same time, the field's hiring approach has been called into question on occasion. Given the described approach(es) and criteria, which students are brought into the centers—or, more

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[1]For one extreme approach to hiring, consult Vincent Puma's 1989 piece, "The Write Staff: Identifying and Training Tutor-Candidates," which describes a "thorough, systematic and cost-effective method for identifying, selecting, screening, and training tutors" (2). Quite simply, the students in this approach were identified before they arrived at school, utilizing test scores and high school CPA's. In addition, their social skills were measured by "each student's extracurricular activities and recommendation letters" (2). Then, in rather frightening terms, "students who have demonstrated the ability to move in and interact within and among peer group are retained, the others deleted" (2).

precisely, which students are not?

For example, to counter Podis's point about a majority of English majors in his center, Henry Luce in 1986 advocated for heterogeneity in his hiring process and sought out "prospective peer tutors from majors all across the curriculum" (3). Yes, there was still a requirement for a 3.0 GPA and applicants needed to be "mature and responsible" with a "good sense of humor," but the goal was to represent as many majors as possible. The result, Luce claimed, was that "the Writing Center is imbued with a special, richer atmosphere, one that tutors find particularly rewarding both academically and personally" (4). They share ideas from their varied disciplines and writing experiences, and they show other students that "a concern for good writing, and the need for good writing, exists in all departments" (4). Nowadays, such a blending of disciplines in a writing center is fairly standard.

Then, in 1995, Lisa Birnbaum raised concerns about the predominance of women in the writing center, arguing that we "need to suggest that supporting others as they write is the work of admirable women and men, evenly represented on the writing center staff" (6). Toward that end, Birnbaum made some changes to her call for recommendations, adding in benefits such as "coaching skills for management majors" and "communication skills for pre-med," though she did not explicitly ask for male candidates (7). A few years later, in 1998, Michael Pemberton raised a similar question, given that a majority of writing centers had more female tutors than male. As he said, "writing center directors must think about the ethics of gender representation in their centers" (14). To jump back to Birnbaum, the point is that "[g]ender should matter to writing center directors—so that it

doesn't matter to students when it is not relevant" (7).

For Pemberton, though, gender was not the only concern. He did raise the point about academic majors, as did Luce, and he suggested a balance between new and veteran tutors; but then he also asked "Are minorities adequately represented in the writing center?" and "How can minority recruitment be enhanced if they are not?" (14). For his center, at that time, minority representation of tutors was less than he wished, but there did not seem to be many avenues for changing that situation: "Competition for qualified minority TA's is pretty tough" (14). The essay did not delve into ways to increase diversity of the staff and instead turned towards training suggestions for those who were employed. Pemberton's concern, however, has been picked up by others over the past couple of decades, mostly notably (at least for our center) Nancy Grimm and Ann Green.

Grimm, in her 1999 book Good Intentions, makes an eloquent appeal for reconsidering our hiring narrative:

> Learning to see one's perspective as perspective is more likely to happen if writing centers are staffed by people from diverse majors and diverse backgrounds. The common practice of hiring English and education majors is not likely to produce this mix. Nor is the practice of screening applicants for their high GPAs. Learning to take risks in recruitment is essential to forming a writing center staff that not only looks like a place that students from different backgrounds can trust but also accustoms students from mainstream backgrounds to working with

> people whose cultural, class, and racial histories are different from their own. (114)

In addition to avoiding a reliance on GPAs, Grimm also cautions against "screening out applicants whose language is marked by these different histories" (114). Much of the previous hiring criteria can be called into question with Grimm's work.[2]

So too does Green, in 2004, ask the field to reconsider how it approaches recruitment and hiring. She documents how she and her tutors have attempted to build a "multicultural, multilingual" writing center that creates "democratic opportunities for language" and "space for writing in multiple genres" (102). To do so, she recruits "peer tutors according to their ability to negotiate a variety of discourses, their willingness to challenge their own thinking and question their own subject positions, and their interest in writing as activism" (103). This seems a far step from Podis's collection of English majors with "intuitive knowledge" of essay technique.

Our Story

At this point I want to bring our own center into the conversation, for we exemplify, in many ways, the arc of the above history. The Wittenberg Writer's Workshop[3] first opened its doors in

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[2]*In thinking about hiring practices, I'm also struck by J.D. Vance's recent work, Hillbilly Elegy, especially the section where he describes his initial ignorance about the hiring process: what to wear, how to act, how to respond (182), and one where he discusses "social capital" and how "not knowing things that many others do often has serious economic consequences" (222). How many writing centers assume a certain knowledge of and familiarity with a process that includes an application, a cover letter, an interview?*

1980, the same year that Podis's article came out, and our hiring practices were much in line with those he described. We solicited recommendations from faculty members, and many of our tutors were English majors (and female). Over the next few years, as we added a tutor training course ("Peer Editing") and a WAC program, we did expand the call for recommendations to other departments, and we have had for many years a strong representation of students from many majors. Yet we also proceeded in a manner that limited the number of students we considered for the position of tutor. Based on recommendations, the director would interview students (and read a writing sample) and enroll them as they were accepted. It was a rolling process, and the class was filled one by one.

In 2010, we decided to change the process (due in large part to a change in directorship), and we opened up the application process to all students. We did still solicit recommendations from faculty members—and we sent invitations to apply to any students named by faculty—but we also advertised on campus email and through posted fliers; students could nominate themselves. And the current tutors were also encouraged to make their own recommendations. What students did they know who they thought would be strong additions to the staff? This way we created an application pool from which we needed to select an incoming group of tutors rather than just filling up the course. We had more than forty applicants the first year for twelve positions.

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[3]*For context, Wittenberg is a residential, liberal arts college of approximately 1800 students in southwest Ohio. A majority of the students identify as Caucasian, and a majority of students are from Ohio. The Writing Center (renamed in 2000) employs about twenty-five advisors, and we conduct close to 3,000 one-to-one sessions each year.*

As for our decision-making process, it morphed to resemble the one described by Matthew Capdevielle for the writing center at Notre Dame. Recruiting and hiring is the "largest-scale collaborative project" in their center, as it is in ours. We have a hiring committee, as we believe that "tutor involvement in the process is an essential component of our identity formation as a center." One difference is that Notre Dame conducts group interviews, whereas we ask applicants to interview with a member of the hiring committee and then with the director, but we both hold a "final round-up," where all members of the hiring committee get together to decide on the next group of tutors. Capdevielle calls this "the most important piece of the process," where the "real magic happens, because here is where we give full voice to our commitments and articulate our values as a group, collaborating to bring into focus a communal vision of what the Writing Center is and should be." I agree. It is a wonderful opportunity to share with the tutors and create not only a vision of the center but also invite in the people who will carry that vision forward.

All this was, we thought, a positive change. We wanted to be fair and open in our hiring process. And the system led to some productive conversations. For example, how closely should we follow our standard expectation of a 3.0 GPA, or at least good grades in English or writing-intensive classes? What of a student who has struggled to write an essay but has made liberal use of the Writing Center and can speak enthusiastically and clearly about its benefits—and has shown improvement on their papers? Are they a stronger candidate than someone who aced their essay with a strong first draft and has not been given much to revising their work? The hiring committee has made it a point to value

how much applicants know about their writing/revising process, and we also strongly recommend that applicants have a session or two in the Center before they apply.

As the hiring process changed, the training course also underwent a shift in approach, as well as a name change, to "Writing Center Theory and Practice." One of the works that was eventually incorporated into the class was Green's "Notes Toward a Multicultural Writing Center: The Problems of Language in a Democratic State." This essay was usually assigned somewhere just after the midpoint of the semester, and it might be accompanied by a work like Barbara Mellix's "From Outside, In" or Nancy Baron and Nancy Grimm's "Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center." Granted, the approach was one that is deftly critiqued by Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan as a "pedagogy of coverage" (127). The course was giving students a "disembodied set of writing conventions/processes, tutoring methods, or best practices" rather than helping them "develop a critical lens through which to interrogate the implications of different choices" (126). We did have provocative discussions around the articles, but those discussions did not seem to move beyond that particular week. Did we cover racism and diversity in the writing center? Check.

In 2015, however, after we read Green's article, one of the students in the course asked if we couldn't do more with our discussions about diversity—and she did extend Green's and Barron and Grimm's arguments about race out to gender and sexual identity. In particular, she wanted to conduct a workshop for the current tutors about gender issues, and she wanted us to be more deliberate about our hiring practices. Without having read

their article, she was asking us to follow Kathryn Valentine and Mónica F. Torres's call to "be assertive when it comes to hiring" (205). Directors, they argue, need to "take care to recruit, hire, and support a diverse population of tutors." Or consider Geller et al.'s call for us to "challenge our assumptions about hiring … [to] actively recruit students who reflect the racial and ethnic make-up of our student population" (102). Our staff did not reflect the whole of our student population—it was likely that many students did not see themselves when they looked through the door of our center.

Throughout our hiring history, we had not made it a point to be deliberate about creating a diverse staff, at least not one that extended beyond a diversity of majors. Even with our "open" policy, our advising staff did not change a great deal—white women, many English majors, who came from relatively similar backgrounds. They "wrote well" and had an "intuitive knowledge" of essay techniques and grammar. Some of our faculty also noticed this, and when we did ask for recommendations, they made a point to nominate students who did not fit that particular mold:

> STARRED ENTRY: S_____ is a really bright biracial student who has improved from a B- on her first essay to an out-of-the-park A on her second essay—one of the biggest improvements overall in the class. She had one of the strongest thesis statements in the class on this second essay—one that really went beyond what we've discussed in class in key ways; it seriously took my breath away. I point out her ethnic background because it's fairly rare that there are non-white writing tutors, and I believe it is

> critical that non-white students see role models in positions
> of authority, and have at least one person whom they
> can be more sure will not make assumptions about their
> abilities based on their race. I hope you will make an extra
> special effort to recruit her.

We did, and she joined our center, but a note such as this was a rarity—no doubt many faculty also made assumptions about the type of students who could, and should, work in a writing center.[4]

Thus, we decided to be more assertive.

With our 2016 hiring process, we looked to be more deliberate in finding applicants, both in terms of our application itself and our recruitment procedures. For example, here is the change in wording on our application, a copy of which was available on our website and through a campus-wide email:

> From our 2015 application:

> The Writing Center does not discriminate in its hiring practices
> on the basis of race, gender, religious affiliation, or sexual
> orientation. Please be aware that all application materials are
> reviewed by Writing Center advisors as well as the director and
> are kept confidential.

> From our 2016 application:

> The Writing Center does not discriminate in its hiring practices

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[4]*Even in Capdevielle's article, he mentions that his hiring group tackles difficult questions about candidates—"How might he contribute to the diversity of the staff? What do we mean by 'diversity' anyway?"—but there are no details on how those questions are answered.*

on the basis of race, gender, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation. We are actively looking to expand perspectives and bring in both advisors and writers with diverse backgrounds. For example, many of Wittenberg's ELL students have sessions at the Writing Center. If you have experience with different languages and dialects, please consider mentioning such skills when answering the "contributions" question. Additionally, if you feel comfortable doing so, please feel free to write about your identity w/r/t to race, sexuality, gender expression, or religion, and in particular what you feel your personal perspective can bring to our center.[5]

In addition, the tutor who originally broached this idea wrote to the faculty advisors for the Diversity House, the Concerned Black Students (CBS) organization, and the Gay Straight Diversity Alliance (GSDA), asking for their advice.[6] Here is what she sent to the advisor for CBS:

I was wondering if I could ask for your perspective on how best the center can encourage students from diverse backgrounds to apply to work as advisors. While the center has always done its best to showcase itself as an accepting work space, we are a

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[5]*To note just how difficult it is to catch every assumption, one of the reviewers for this article asked what "background literacy" was assumed for an application to know "w/r/t." An excellent point, so we shall change the application for next time.*

[6]*One glaring oversight on our part was not doing more with the American International Association (AIA), a group that promotes "cultural diversity" and is made up of American and international students, and which was led in 2016 by one of the tutors. She pointed out to the hiring committee that we do more outreach with them, and we will work with AIA in the coming years on our recruitment and hiring process.*

predominantly white one - much whiter than the campus as a whole. I wanted to know if you had any advice for ensuring black students that the center does not discriminate, and that we are in fact interested in seeking such students out.

I've attached a draft of the WC application for this year - if you have any thoughts/suggestions to offer on how the Center is accomplishing the above goals, I would be very grateful. Additionally, if CBS has any ideas for working with the Center to publicize such interest, please let me know …. Finally, if possible, it would be great if you had contact information for any other groups at Witt that advocate for non-white students. CBS is a great resource I've known about since freshman year - I'd be happy to have insights from other groups as well.

The responses she received were valuable, with each advisor willingly offering up some advice and suggestions on recruitment or at least agreeing to help us advertise the positions. For example, the advisor from the GSDA suggested that we might want to "include 'gender expression' among the list of categories that do pose road blocks in the hiring process" because it does more than "gender" to connote the transgender experience. He also said the term can have a ripple effect, sending "a message of inclusion to other minority experiences." When, say, international students see the term, it might showcase the Writing Center as more accepting of their experiences also. And the advisor advocated for a question during the interview process that allowed a candidate to express their preferred pronouns as "there is a need out there for some students to be able to claim a gendered identity." We incorporated both of those suggestions.[7]

The results have been promising. We had thirty-four applicants for the fall of 2016, and, given a large graduating class in spring of 2017, we accepted seventeen students into the tutoring course. Two of those were students of color, and we had one non-native speaker, along with eight men. This was a different class than we have had previously. And then, in the fall of 2017, we brought in another advisor of color as well as a non-traditional student and a high school student (we have a growing number of high school students in our general education courses). We seem closer to achieving something near to Judith Kilborn's idea of "cultural diversity," one that "includes minority, non-western, and western—Caucasian as well as African American, Hispanic, and Native American; rural as well as urban; southern as well as northern; non-traditional as well as traditional, and so on" (393). Her definition, she says, "is inclusive rather than exclusive." We are looking to make our course, and our Writing Center, the same.

Our hiring meeting also led to some fascinating discussions about other areas of diversity. One applicant, for example, was thought to be not the best fit for the Writing Center because he was quiet. We need people who can talk with others and bring energy to the table, said some of the veteran tutors. But another tutor suggested that some students might appreciate a less enthusiastic welcome to the Center. Could being overly social and welcoming put some students off? Another student, during this exchange, said that we should look for neurodiversity in our hiring. That's

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[7] *The suggestion about preferred pronouns has also been incorporated into our online registration process, as has been the case in other centers. Pronoun use has been a topic on the WCenter listserv, too; for example, see the thread on "gender-inclusive pronouns" begun by Rachel Robinson.*

a valid point, and it raises several more questions about how we recruit, hire, educate, and support writing tutors. Works like Susanne Antonetta's A Mind Apart and Margaret Price's Mad at School would be valuable starting points for that conversation. In the case of this applicant, I think it might be less a question of neurodiversity and more a matter of a quiet student, like the kind described by Mary Reda in Between Speaking and Silence. (I also knew from previous experience that he produced excellent written feedback to his peers' writing. With our asynchronous email sessions, he would be a strong advisor. And fortunately he accepted our invitation to join the Center.)

Looking Ahead

Yet as much as I want to shout out numbers and claim success, describing the class in this way makes me nervous because it sounds much like what Stephanie Kerschbaum has called "the language of the global market," which can "commodify individuals' racial and ethnic backgrounds" (36). How many African-Americans do you have? How many Hispanics? How many women of Asian descent? Diversity becomes a numbers game, and it divides categories that students might rather share and also suggests identity is static. Better, Kerschbaum argues, to think of difference "as dynamic, relational, and emergent." With students, we are "always coming-to-know" them, and "coming-to-know is a never-ending process, not a fixed destination" (57). That is true in our classrooms and in our writing centers, both with tutor-to-writer relationships and tutor-to-administrator ones.

So where does that leave us?

Quite simply, I think our work has put us further along than

where we were but nowhere close to done. In recent years, our center has tried to diversify its hiring practices and its staff—we wanted to go farther and wider in terms of representation of our student population. These past two hiring cycles represented our most successful yet in terms of those goals: more students on campus can now see themselves in the Writing Center. That's important. We are, however, not close to being finished (if that's ever possible). Making the small changes we did has led us to understand that our desire to diversify and fairly represent all students must be an ongoing one. Nor can it be done without constant reflection on what we're doing and why we're doing it. For me, Margaret Weaver's reminder about responsibility stands out: "We do have a responsibility as White writing center practitioners to manage diversity, but we need to be honest about how and why we do it" (89). That is true not only for calculating numbers and percentages about writing center use but also about writing center hiring.

And for tutor education. This article did not focus on the tutoring course we have, but what we have learned about our hiring extends to our approach to that realm. What Kerschbaum says about teachers is the same for tutors: they "never arrive at a place where they know a student … they situate what they know from personal experience and professional training alongside interpersonal interaction that enrich, complicate, and challenge those forms of knowing" (57). What we are hoping to do in our writing center is to expand the personal experiences that incoming advisors bring with them and that they work to recognize such experiences in others. Again, that means we should be open to as many possibilities as we can, and we should hesitate to think we have created change just by checking off boxes based on race

or language or gender or because we read an article during the twelfth week of class. In fact, in the class in spring of 2017, we had a reading from Claire O'Leary on gender in the writing center that examines how males and females interact in sessions—the "conversational accommodations" that tutors make "for student gender behaviors" (484). This year, though, we noted that the article does establish a gender binary—masculine and feminine— that might not represent all writers and tutors. I do not think we would have made that observation had we not been so deliberate about our hiring practices the last few semesters.

To close this essay, I want to return to the epigraph from Bruce Hornsby. His song, "The Way It Is," was written in reference to the Civil Rights Movement, and it asks the listener to refuse the idea that things cannot change. Interestingly, that song was sampled by Tupac Shakur for his song "Changes," and a line was changed:

That's just the way it is

Things will never be the same

That's just the way it is

Our hiring process has changed—and will keep changing. And that change will influence other areas, from our tutoring course to our sessions with writers. We hope, in our Center, "things will never be the same." We don't want the same staff, the same status quo, the same expectations. To borrow from Harry Denny, we understand that "[b]y helping anyone become aware of difference, the hegemonic status of the same, the standard, is challenged" (28).

For us, that's now the way it is.

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