

Back to the Center

The Margaret H. Ordoubadian University Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University

James Hamby

Services

At MTSU's Margaret H. Ordoubadian University Writing Center (UWC), we pride ourselves on being a dynamic, multifaceted writing center. Our university has a diverse population with varied needs, and we strive to help our students grow as writers not only with one-on-one tutoring but also with a number of different services that promote community and literacy.

Since our new director, Dr. Erica Cirillo-McCarthy took over in August of 2018, we have expanded in our training and technological capability to more readily accommodate multimodal needs in our tutoring. We have secured funds for some new, much-needed computers as well as for a smart screen. We have established a close working relationship with MTSU's Makerspace—a hands-on technology lab where students may use 3-D printers, vinyl cutters, laser etchers, virtual reality equipment, and many other types of equipment—just located one floor down from our location in the James Walker Library, and in Spring of 2019 we cohosted an “open house” event with them in which we discussed with students how to write multimodally, embed images in their writing, and enhance their ePortfolios. Our staff also spent a training session in the Makerspace to better understand the intersections between writing and other kinds of creativity. Many of our tutors have since registered for trainings in video production and other technologies.

The UWC has offered online tutoring for a number of years through our on-line scheduling software, but consultants and students have found the chatbox function to be outdated and clumsy. We now have audio/visual capabilities in our tutoring, and most of our tutors agree that it has substantially enhanced the quality of our online sessions. However, there was more pushback from our consultants than we (the administrators) had anticipated. Some consultants, while perfectly at ease in face-to-face sessions, were very apprehensive about appearing on screen. Admittedly, this was puzzling to us, but this was a good lesson about cultivating staff buy-in before making any major changes, especially in technology. Another issue that has occurred is that students themselves do not always have A/V technology available on their computers or devices, or they just prefer the chatbox function. Nevertheless, the A/V option has allowed us to offer on-line sessions that are more closely in line with face-to-face sessions that value open-ended questions and higher-order concerns rather than the focus on proofreading for grammar that all too often seems to mark online sessions confined to the chatbox.

The Writing Center also plays a crucial role in the university's QEP, "MT Engage," which encourages faculty to utilize ePortfolios in their classes in the hopes that students will reflect on what they have learned and find connections between their courses. MT Engage has funded a graduate assistantship in the writing center, currently held by Michael McDermott, who develops resources and training sessions for students and faculty.

In addition to traditional tutoring, the UWC offers several discussion and writing groups designed to enrich student experience in writing and literacy. Our most popular is our Culture and Conversation discussion group where English language learners can practice their conversational English in a relaxed atmosphere. MTSU in recent years has increased its number of international students, particularly from Southwestern Asia, East Asia, and Africa, and many of them frequent the writing center on a regular basis. The Culture and Conversation group helps support this population by giving them an opportunity outside of the classroom setting to work on their spoken English. We also offer a creative writing group and a graduate writing group.

One service we offer that is very popular amongst students working on long projects, English language learners, and other students who come to the UWC frequently is our Writing Partnership program. In a writing

partnership, students have standing appointments with consultants at the same time every week. This helps the writers to stay focused throughout the semester, and it helps the consultants to know the strengths, needs, and goals of the writers before the session even begins. Several students have found this program to be so beneficial that they have had writing partnerships for multiple semesters.

One of the initiatives of the past few years that we are most proud is the launching of our literary magazine, *Off Center* (<https://www.mtsu.edu/offcenter/>). Our founding editors, Hillary Yeager and Amy Harris-Aber, along with our current editors, Sidney Blaylock, Brielle Campos, and Jordan Russ have done an outstanding job in creating a publication that is visually stunning and that offers excellent poetry and prose. Production for the fourth edition of *Off Center* is now underway.

Staff

The UWC has three full time administrators: a director (tenure/tenure track), an associate director, and an assistant director (both non-tenure track). Our current director is Dr. Erica Cirillo-McCarthy and our assistant director is Keri Carter. Each year we have two to three graduate student Program Coordinators, and for the first time ever we have named an undergraduate, Kelsey Talbott, to this position. The graduate students are on ten- or twenty-hours per week assistantships, and undergraduates are employed on an hourly basis. The staff receives training through a week-long orientation in the fall, a two-day orientation in the spring, and weekly meetings throughout the fall and spring semesters.

In Fall 2017, we made a significant change to the structure of our staff meetings. Previously, we would have one topic per week and the staff would either sit through a presentation or be assigned a writing center article to read for discussion. While this approach has some benefits, we felt that it did not allow consultants an opportunity to think about a topic with a great amount of depth. We instead now have three-week blocks devoted to one topic. In the first week of a block, a particular topic is presented to the staff. This is sometimes done by the administration and program coordinators and sometimes by a guest speaker. After the presentation, the staff breaks into groups of three to five consultants who then begin brainstorming about a product they can produce. This product can be a PowerPoint presentation, an annotated bibliography, a handout or other resource to use during tutoring, or anything else that may help

them think more deeply about a topic and share their findings with others.

The second week of the block is reserved for workshopping and planning their presentations. On the meeting day of the third week the groups make their presentations to the rest of the staff, and we have a discussion about what they have learned about the topic to cap off the block. In Spring 2019, the topics for our blocks included: developing a tutoring philosophy, perceptions of writing centers, growth mindsets, and tutoring with technology. We feel that this structure for staff meetings encourages consultants to take ownership of their own training and to achieve a better understanding of important writing center topics that can only be gained with contemplation over time.

Space

We are very fortunate to have a wonderful space located on the third floor of MTSU's James Walker Library. Prior to 2011, our writing center was located in a classroom in the humanities building that was 562ft² and had five tutoring tables. After moving to our current space, the writing center is now 2,283 ft² and has eight tutoring tables, two other larger tables, six computer stations, and three pairs of arm chairs with small tables. Also in contrast to our previous space, there is ample natural light. We feel that our space is warm and inviting and that it creates an ideal place for learning.

Future Plans

For the future, we would like to continue our growth in multimodal tutoring, form more partnerships with departments and campus groups for giving workshops, and offer more discussion and writing groups. We have recently increased our presence at various orientations and group meetings across campus, and have found that this is a good way of increasing traffic into our center. Our goal is to always be a dynamic center that offers something for everyone in our campus community.

Profile

Middle Tennessee State University has 19,523 undergraduates and 2,390 graduate students for a total of 21,913 students. The Writing Center sponsors *Off Center* (a journal of student writing), hosts writing groups, presents campus-wide workshops, supports groups for conversational English and graduate and creative writing, and helps to spearhead the university's QEP.

Sessions:

Summer 2018—258 appointments, 106 students

Fall 2019—2,665 appointments, 1,080 students

Spring 2019—2,615 appointments, 950 students

Total: 5,538 appointments

- Staff (Spring 2019): 1 Faculty Director, 1 Associate Director, 1 Assistant Director, 3 graduate program coordinators, 1 undergraduate program coordinator, 1 web assistant, 3 *Off Center* staff members 19 graduate consultants, 9 undergraduate consultants, 2 undergraduate student-worker receptionists
- Open 47 hours, Sunday through Friday, for a total of ca. 360 potential tutoring hours per week. There are 4-11 consultants available at a time.
- Most consultants are graduate students on assistantships. Undergraduate consultants apply for hourly positions.
- Consultants attend 3-4 days of orientation before the Fall semester and 2-3 days of orientation before the spring semester. Weekly staff meetings and special projects constitute our continued training.
- The Writing Center is 2,283 ft².

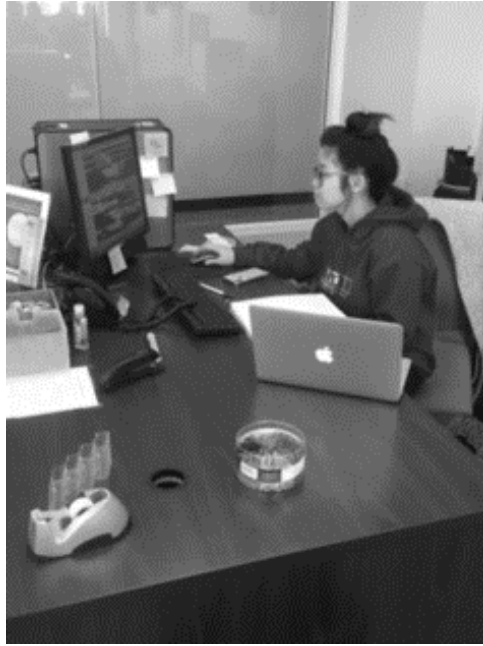
Pictures



1. The MTSU writing center has a large space with different types of tutoring stations.



2. Graduate student assistant Heather Listhartke tutoring a student with a writing partnership.



3. Undergraduate Sophia Luangrath working at the front desk.



4. Our space has lots of room, ample natural light, and a wonderful view of campus from the third floor of the James Walker Library.