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Hosting a Conference: The Ultimate Team-Building Activity

Jaclyn Wells

I am lucky. My writing center has such a strong sense of community that students, faculty, and staff regularly comment on our team's obvious camaraderie. Our end-of-semester potlucks evoke jealousy among passersby, and not just because of the massive cheeseball that always forms the centerpiece. Our contributions to homecoming decoration contests are the stuff of legends (at least in my mind). Our breakroom—physical under normal circumstances, virtual in our new reality—routinely buzzes with tutors cheering each other up after difficult sessions and cheering each other on after good ones.

Because we were already such a tight group, I was surprised at the bonding that happened while planning and hosting the SWCA conference. The experience proved that even a close community can be further strengthened when collaborating on a new experience. One day shortly before the conference, I felt proud to see several of our tutors practicing their presentations in the classroom next to our center. They were nervous because none of them were old hats at conference presenting, but they shared with me that they felt extra pressure as the conference hosts. In one of my favorite moments from the conference, I watched this group present for an audience filled with several other staff members. They turned the pressure they felt into a positive by preparing together and showing up for each other. I was reminded of the nerves leading up to tutoring, when new tutors share coffee and worries in the breakroom and come out stronger for it.

Reflecting now, I realize that building a community is more than a nice by-product of sharing a new experience like hosting a conference,

presenting research for the first time, or starting a tutoring job. Rather, developing a community is central to sharing a new experience. When we do something new together, we learn together, fail together, and try again together. We rely on one another's skills and knowledge, and we work together to solve problems. We develop our own abilities while we help others develop theirs. We play different roles, acting during the collaboration as learners, experts, coaches, commentators, counselors, and allies (Ryan and Zimmerelli 4-7). In other words, we do what writing center people do every day.

The SWCA conference also gave me a chance to develop a skill I traditionally lack: the skill of delegating. I feel guilty asking for help, and I feel like I should know everything, even while I constantly remind tutors they need not have all the answers in order to help our students. While planning and hosting the SWCA conference, I delegated out of necessity, as I simply did not have the time or knowledge to host the conference all on my own. In perhaps my favorite example, I needed major help planning the graduate student mixer. After spending a solid hour Googling "Birmingham entertainment" alone in my office, I walked into the writing center's breakroom and blurted out, "Where do...where do the youngsters hang out?" After they finished laughing at me, the three tutors eating lunch offered dozens of suggestions, including one spot they agreed would be perfect for the graduate student mixer. (And it was.) Once I asked for help, the decision I had been struggling to make alone became infinitely easier. We see this play out time and again during tutoring sessions in the writing center, but the conference reminded me that collaboration matters for writing center tutors and directors as well.

The writing center team offered far more than ideas for the graduate student mixer, valuable as that was. They also helped me see the conference through the eyes of tutors who would be attending SWCA, which for many of them would be their first conference. For their part, planning SWCA helped tutors understand what a conference really is: an event where people in a disciplinary community come together to talk, listen, and share. The work helped them more easily envision a conference in community terms. Our small writing center community

was inviting in the broader writing center community or, as one tutor put it, “we’re hosting Thanksgiving dinner this year.” Further, putting the conference in community terms helped the tutors feel less intimidated by academic conferences in general. It is harder to feel intimidated once you know the “real deal,” that behind what could seem like a scary professional event are many folks who are also learning and feeling overwhelmed by all that goes into planning the experience. (Perhaps more to the point, can you really feel threatened by conferences once you know how much time organizers spend worrying about whether there will be enough cheese cubes at the opening reception or if we ordered the right size of those little plastic nametag holders?)

Additionally, writing centers embrace the personal and academic, as well as the ever-shifting nature of the roles we all play, in a way that allows for real community. Another favorite memory from SWCA was bringing my eight-month-old daughter, Vivian, for a couple of hours on the conference’s second day when childcare fell through. First-time mom worries and first-time conference chair worries collided, and I felt concerned that people would find me unprofessional or distracted for toting around my baby. I should not have worried: I will tell my daughter for years to come that during her first academic conference, she was enthusiastically held by every writing center director from the Southeastern United States, as well as the keynote speaker and the organization’s president. The writing center community allowed me to comfortably occupy the roles of mother *and* conference chair, rather than forcing me to remain in one or the other. But this was more than a meaningful experience just for me, I think. Ultimately, I am glad that I brought my daughter, and not just because she’s really cute (though she *really* is). I am proud that newcomers to our field, including many of my writing center’s tutors, saw someone being a person and a professional at once and saw others in our community responding so kindly.

I handed Vivi off to her dad shortly before the keynote lunch, which brings me to a final favorite memory: introducing the keynote speaker, Dana Driscoll. I invited Dr. Driscoll to speak at the conference months before I had even drafted the proposal to host. Dana is one of our field’s outstanding scholars, but she is also a dear friend of mine from graduate

school. Dana and I worked together in Linda Bergmann's Writing Lab, where we produced content for the Purdue OWL, tutored students, and learned to become writing center researchers and directors. Introducing Dana at a conference I had organized and then listening to her share her research felt like coming full circle, especially while looking out at the audience filled with graduate students learning with and from each other in the ways that Dana and I did in our graduate school's writing center. During my brief introduction, I let myself reminisce a bit on those graduate school days, hoping to underscore for students in the audience that the communities they developed while learning and teaching together in the writing center would last long after graduation. Years after graduation, Dana and I and other members of our cohort still learn from and with each other. We are still a team, and that began in our writing center.

Hosting the Southeastern Writing Center Association conference was a totally new experience for me and my center. I am thrilled that we had the opportunity, anxieties and all, because collaborating on the new experience strengthened our community in ways I could not have imagined. Hosting the SWCA conference left me thinking about the importance of sharing new experiences to build our local writing center teams and our broader team of writing centers in the Southeast. While a writing center cannot host a conference every year, we can all incorporate new experiences into our tutor training to strengthen our communities of co-learners and co-teachers and to reframe new challenges as opportunities to build community. As many writing centers have undoubtedly experienced, the Covid-19 pandemic has offered one such opportunity, as my team has learned together how to continue our work in this new reality. Likewise, while the SWCA organization may not be able to create a wholly new conference model every year, we can continue to offer new experiences that allow members to build teams through shared learning. The upcoming SWCA virtual conference certainly offers one such experience. As we gather virtually, we will figure out together how to meet and share in this new format, and we may find that this opportunity for co-learning provides an even greater team-building experience than the conference does under usual circumstances. I, for one, can't wait.

Works Cited

Ryan, Leigh and Lisa Zimmerelli. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. 6th ed., Bedford, 2016.

About the Author



Jaclyn Wells is an Associate Professor of English and writing center director at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. With Allen Brizee, she is author of *Partners in Literacy: A Writing Center Model for Civic Engagement* (2016). Her work has also appeared in edited collections and journals including *College Composition and Communication*, *The Writing Center Journal*, the *Community Literacy Journal*, and *Pedagogy*. Aside from writing a book, hosting the SWCA conference in 2019 was the most challenging and most rewarding experience of Jaclyn's academic career.