

# Southern Discourse in the Center

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## **Course-Embedded Consulting and Writing Centers: Collaboration, Creativity, and Sustaining Community in a Time of Crisis<sup>1</sup>**

Scott Whiddon and Russell Carpenter

**SCOTT:** As Jennifer noted, my name is Scott Whiddon. I serve as Writing Center director as well as Program Director for our Writing, Rhetoric, and Communication major at Transylvania University in Lexington, KY. We're a traditional and mostly residential liberal arts college with about 1,000 students. I've been collaborating with Rusty for over a decade now—mostly via our work in the Southeastern Writing Center Association, and often via our interests in initiatives such as Course-Embedded Tutoring. Rusty serves as Assistant Provost and Professor of English at Eastern Kentucky University, a regional comprehensive university with about 14,000 students, located in Richmond, KY.

In the time we have today, we'll be talking about our respective Course-embedded programs, and what we've learned over the course of several collaborative research projects. We'll draw on projects we've done together, but also with our friends Kevin Dvorak, Julia Bleakney, Paula Rosinski, and Courtnie Morin. Perhaps writing center work is always, and thankfully so, a team sport. We'll also talk about collaboration and what such a term, writ large, might mean in a time of crisis.

But, first things first: thank you, and thanks to South Central Writing Center Association, for spending time with us today; given the stresses and challenges of our current moment, it is a joy to know that so many people are working hard—and, working together, in a variety of ways—to support and sustain college cultures of writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Editors' Note: This article is derived from a presentation by Whiddon and Carpenter at the 2021 South Central Writing Center Association Conference. It contains not only the transcript of the presentation but images and texts from the PowerPoint slides used in the presentation.

Although many college writing centers have taken on course-embedded programming—often referred to as “writing fellows” or “writing associates” programs—the term might seem somewhat unfamiliar to some. On many campuses, classroom and writing center geographies are seen as distinct, situating teaching and tutoring within different pedagogical landscapes. Classrooms are often viewed as the spaces where writing instruction takes place, while writing centers are spaces where writers receive *assistance*, not instruction. Course-embedded tutoring programs attempt to bridge these distinct locations and, when done well, transport the intellectual work of the writing center to the classroom space by assigning select tutors to select classes. As course-embedded tutors navigate classroom environments, they develop relationships—the forging of a “diplomatic partnership between the center and the instructors” as Teagan Decker explains (18):

On many campuses, classroom and writing center geographies are seen as distinct, situating teaching and tutoring within different pedagogical landscapes. Classrooms are often viewed as the spaces where writing instruction takes place, while writing centers are spaces where writers receive assistance, not instruction. **Course-embedded tutoring programs attempt to bridge these distinct locations** and, when done well, transport **the intellectual work of the writing center to the classroom space** by assigning select tutors to select classes.

**Fig. 1.** Decker Quotation

Such initiatives can happen in a number of ways, and there are a variety of schemas for organizing the day to day labor of a course-embedded program (for a single section, for a set of classes, or even for a large-scale initiative, in Rusty’s case). Some programs require students from a selected class to work with a staffer or staffers on all tasks; other programs highlight specific course tasks for collaboration. Some programs require staffers to attend their respective classes; others attend on specifically selected days, determined in advance. It could be argued that many of the skill sets of course-embedded work are close kin to the work that staffers already do; Hall and Hughes note that similar to generalist “writing center tutors, [CECs] learn how to ask smart

questions of student writers, how to listen carefully, and how to structure a dialogue to help a student rethink and revise a paper” (31).

*Although Writing Fellows programs vary in the specifics of their implementation at colleges and universities across the country, all of these programs share several key features: they link students to specific writing-intensive courses; they encourage partnerships between a [staffer] and a course professor; and they promote collaboration between peers. Whatever the name for such a program (Peer Mentors, Writing Associates, or Curriculum-Based Peer Tutors), it unites in powerful ways ideas of collaborative learning, peer education, WAC, and faculty development.*  
- Hughes & Hall

**Fig. 2.** Hughes and Hall Quotation

Hall and Hughes also explain that CECs might be required to conduct conferences on papers they’ve commented on extensively. In the end, what separates course embedded programming from more typical one-off sessions might be described as “sustained intentionality.”

“Sustained intentionality”

**Fig. 3.** A New Term

In addition to working one-to-one with students, course-embedded tutors often navigate the teacher’s territory. Course-embedded tutors often meet with faculty at the beginning of a semester to discuss course outcomes and syllabi, and then during the semester to review assignments and student progress, forming an ongoing partnership with faculty members. In some programs—often, depending on funding—they sometimes engage in teaching activities by conducting workshops, forming peer-response groups, and providing individual conferences during class time. Along the way, Carol Severino and Megan Knight contend that course-embedded tutors also serve as “ambassadors” for their writing centers or for the tutorials that take place in those spaces. As noted by Hughes and Hall: “Although Writing Fellows programs vary in the specifics of their implementation at colleges and universities

across the country, all of these programs share several key features: they link students to specific writing-intensive courses; they encourage partnerships between a [staffer] and a course professor; and they promote collaboration between peers. Whatever the name for such a program (Peer Mentors, Writing Associates, or Curriculum-Based Peer Tutors), it unites in powerful ways ideas of collaborative learning, peer education, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), and faculty development.”

And to be honest, all of my work with Rusty and others when it comes to Course Embedded Peer Writing Consultation and writing centers started via an informal conversation at the SWCA conference in North Carolina, hosted by East Carolina University. At the time, I had been a director for a few years. I had slowly become active in both regional and national organizations, and our writing center was starting to develop a new identity on campus. What was once a site that was specifically seen as a space for remediation—in a former walk-in closet, no doubt—was now beginning to be seen as a site for all student writers, regardless of ability. I had revamped our staffer training as a credit-bearing, faculty approved course in pedagogy; I had taken on a variety of public relations campaigns, all with staffers at the helm, to try and help revise how we were seen by students, faculty, and administrators. All of this happened within a period of significant change at my institution: all in all, I’ve served under five presidents and seven deans in fifteen years total.



**Fig. 4.** Ongoing Writing Center Discussions

As many of you know well, change is slow on college campuses, and especially at small liberal arts colleges. Furthermore, much of the work of college writing centers is somewhat evangelical: convincing others of the value of what we do and how such labor plays into the values of both individual student needs and the institution as a whole. As we prepared to move into a new space in the library, I wondered: how could I develop a program that helped faculty and students alike see, first hand, the great work that happens when writers talk about writing in sanctioned spaces? How could I build upon what I was learning via scholarship about course-embedded work in a way that fit a small-college culture?

**RUSTY:** While Transylvania University's program is designed for a small liberal arts college environment, Eastern Kentucky University's Course-Embedded Consultant (CEC) program, housed within the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity's Writing & Communication Program, is a critical component of the first-year experience for student learners arriving at the University who are below academic benchmarks. In designing the program, we were focused on having consultants contribute to the culture of writing inside the classroom while encouraging active, peer-to-peer writing relationships that bridge classroom and writing center.

At EKU, we realized how critical our first-year writing courses were and that performance in this course is an indicator of a student's potential for success at the University. With that in mind, the University focused on how we might build on what we were already doing. The Noel Studio for Academic Creativity already offered one-on-one and small-group consultations for undergraduate and graduate students, but the CEC program allowed us to increase the frequency with which students receive feedback. At EKU, CECs are embedded in each four-credit-hour reading-intensive, co-requisite first-year writing course. CECs model productive academic strategies—including writing, critical reading, metacognition, learning, and academic engagement—for students inside the classroom and through individual consultations in the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity. CECs are critical—a strategic investment—in the University's efforts to offer a high-quality learning experience for first-year writers, to support students in establishing successful patterns and practices as they enter the University.

Given the impact course-embedded programs have had on our two different campuses, we now would like to highlight some of the key things we've learned in designing and implementing these initiatives. These projects span about seven years and represent priorities for the ways writing instruction and enhancement are designed at our respective institutions (a small traditional liberal arts college; a regional comprehensive university with graduate students): Our most recent publication, with colleagues at Elon University in North Carolina, and Nova Southeastern University in Florida, was featured in a 2020 issue of *WLN* and examines CEC and faculty perceptions of the benefits of course-embedded writing consultant programs; we learned that such benefits can, and often do, transcend institutional type and mission. With the same colleagues at these two institutions, we applied the students as partners model for teaching and learning as a way to better understand how programs are designed and operate. In 2015, Scott and I completed a close review of faculty narratives and what they helped us understand about our CEC programs:

### Our Collaborative CEC Research

Bleakney, Julia, Russell Carpenter, Kevin Dvorak, Paula Rosinski, and Scott Whiddon. "How Course-Embedded Consultants and Faculty Perceive the Benefits of Course-Embedded Writing Consultant Programs." *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, vol. 44, no. 7-8, 2020, pp. 10-17.

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Carpenter, Russell, and Scott Whiddon. "'The Art of Storytelling': Examining Faculty Narratives from Two Course-Embedded Peer-to-Peer Writing Support Pilots." *SDC: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2015, pp. 85-107.

Whiddon, Scott, and Russell Carpenter. "'From belief to evidence...': Designing and Assessing Course-Embedded Peer-to-Peer Writing Consultation Programs." International Writing Centers Association Conference, 30 October 2014, Orlando, FL.

Carpenter, Russell, Scott Whiddon, and Kevin Dvorak, eds. Special Issue on Course-Embedded Writing Support Programs in Writing Centers. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014. Double Issue.

Whiddon, Scott, Russell Carpenter, Kevin Dvorak, and Sophia Gourglotis. "'For We're All Jolly Good Fellows': Course-Embedded Writing Support and Development." Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference, 6 February 2014, Greenville, NC.

### Fig. 5. Examples of Collaborative CEC Research

With Kevin Dvorak, we guest edited the 2014 issue of *Praxis*, focused on course-embedded writing support programs around the country; this

collection of essays showcased a range of voices, including community colleges and HBCUs. We have also fostered dialogue among major writing center venues throughout the country and region such as multiple International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) and Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) presentations, posters, and workshops, along with the productive and inspiring conversations that have taken place in our own state (in our case, via SWCA-Kentucky, where our programs are both involved). The input and feedback from our writing center colleagues have led to new ways of thinking, new collaborations, and new scholarly networks to form that have shaped our collective understanding of CEC programs. We see this new understanding of course embedded work in three parts: benefits for staffers, benefits for students, and benefits for faculty.

**SCOTT:** Perhaps one of the most surprising advantages of CEC programming, even on a small scale, is how it impacts the educational experiences of the staffers themselves. CEC programming builds upon many of the reasons that students tend to apply to small colleges such as Transylvania: the potential for close collaboration, leadership opportunities, and potential for significant undergraduate research. My work with Rusty—as well as other WCDs at four total institutions—suggests that such rewards, when thoughtfully implemented and understood across stakeholders, transfer across institutional types. Given the extended nature of CEC programming, with sustained and intentional contact with select students in ways that are different than a more typical one-off session, staffers get a crash course in what it means to support student writers. Such programming also allows staffers to potentially develop even stronger identities as tutors, as writers, and even as researchers.

I was pleased when several of my brand-new staffers asked to be part of our current initiative—even with the challenges that come with distance learning and online support at a college that brands itself on the in-person experience. Some of these student/staffers recently presented their reflections on their CEC experience at the SWCA conference in February—drawing upon both student surveys as well as interviews with participating faculty and previous CEC-led research projects; Kate McMahan (in her 2018 piece from *Southern Discourse in the Center*)



provides rich descriptions of how staffers were able to make connections between their own CEC experiences and their growth as writers and leader. McMahon also offers wonderful advice for faculty taking on CEC programming via her participant/observation perspective. More recently, my staffer Emma Masur developed not only a significant literature review of sources that trace the growth of CEC programs, but also showed how her work with a mid-level course helped students develop better facility with multimodal writing and podcasting; I was incredibly proud when she was selected as an invited and featured speaker at the Pedagogicon conference this past May.

To be sure, CEC programming, and CEC student research, requires significant maturity and time management from staffers. However, studies such as Hughes et al.'s Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research, published in *Writing Center Journal* in 2010, show how peer tutoring—especially peer tutoring in writing/communication—might emblemize the values of liberal education—playing into community leadership roles, maturity in personal relationships, and even career advancement long after graduation.

#### Benefits for Staffers

- ***Opportunities for significant development as staffers;***
- ***Opportunities for leadership roles given collaborations with students + faculty; and***
- ***A deeper understanding of process, genre, disciplinary thinking, WAC, etc.***

**Fig. 6.** Benefits for Staffers

**RUSTY:** Perhaps most important to our role as educators, we have observed, via work in our own programs, that CECs benefit *student development* as well, by providing them with enhanced planning, revising, and writing skills. As Kevin Dvorak et al. explain, embedded tutoring helps students achieve first-year composition course learning

outcomes. Equally important for student development, Dvorak and the team at Nova report that students learned the value of working with another person on their writing (n.p.), in addition to specific and related skills, such as grammar, punctuation, clarity, and citation formatting (APA or MLA).



### Benefits for Students

- ◉ **Buy-in**--making connections between reading and writing; increased participation in class;
- ◉ **Process**--increased willingness and time spent revising and reflecting on drafts and comments provided by the instructor and CECs; and
- ◉ **Enhanced revision process**--more structured time spent in meaningful writing activity.

**Fig. 7.** Benefits for Students

Other students reported learning “brainstorming techniques,” “comma and tense use,” and how to understand different assignments and, in some instances, “structure and organization,” “word choice,” “proofreading,” “transitions,” and “how to write an introduction and conclusion” (n.p). Profoundly, students also reported “learning about themselves as writers” (n.p.).

In a similar manner, Dara Rossman Regaignon and Pam Bromley also find that “working with the writing fellows [or course-embedded consultants] multiple times over the course of the semester results in a positive and measurable difference in students’ writing” (48). As CECs are able to model effective writing practices inside and outside of the classroom, Regaignon and Bromley suggest the importance of CEC program configuration.

. . . working with the writing fellows [or course-embedded consultants] multiple times over the course of the semester results in a positive and measurable difference in students' writing." (48)  
– Dara Rossman Regaignon and Pam Bromley

**Fig. 8.** Regaignon and Bromley Quotation

Through these designs, they recognize the benefits to student development from the structured interactions of placing them in one course directly paired with a single, designated CEC throughout the duration of a semester. CECs meet with students weekly inside and outside of the classroom, which helps them build trust and rapport.

Working directly with the CECs over the course of the semester allows students to become more aware writers. Students and CECs form learning-based partnerships during their early experiences on campus. At EKU, we have observed that CECs significantly and positively influence learning during the first-year writing experience. Early engagement in this intensive, structured design promotes connection to the institution, pride in academic effort and success, and value as scaled to the larger context of the university.


Students learn and model behaviors alongside the CECs in the classroom, while CECs also connect students to learning cultures prominent in the writing center. CECs also establish valuable academic partnerships, as we discussed in “Effectively Integrating Course-Embedded Consultants using the [Students as Partners] SaP Model,” which are built on respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Dvorak, Bleakney, Rosinski, and Carpenter). The CEC and students gain respect for one another through ongoing interactions throughout the semester. By communicating with one another regularly, students also see the writing process as reciprocal; that is, CECs and students each give input and learn from one another. Both CECs and students share responsibility in the writing process.

As we found in one of our earliest collaborations, experienced writing instructors from ECU and Transylvania University recognized the ways in which students in their classes saw *value* in their CECs, via evidence of:

- Buy-in—making connections between reading and writing; increased participation in class;
- Process—increased willingness and time spent revising and reflecting on drafts and comments provided by the instructor and CECs; and
- Enhanced revision process—more structured time spent in meaningful writing activity.

While much of the focus of our previous research has been on staffer and student benefits, we’ve also observed enhancements to innovative teaching and learning.

From the faculty perspective, CECs add value to the pedagogical process of teaching writing. Having CECs modeling writing and commenting processes alongside students both in the classroom and within the space of the writing center allows the faculty to make connections between intellectual work that happens in the structured space of the classroom—writing, reflection, and modeling—and those practices that are formed outside of the classroom—structured and dedicated writing time, focused revision, intentional reflection and metacognition. Placing CECs in an authority position within the classroom (that is, allowing them time to offer interactive workshops and whole-class feedback to students focused on writing and writing process) suggests the prominence of their positioning within the teaching and learning design and relationship with the faculty member.



Benefits for Faculty

- Enhance **innovations** in teaching and learning;
- Add value to the pedagogical process of teaching writing as a **process** with an eye toward **revision**; and
- Model **commenting** alongside students both in the classroom and within the space of the writing center.

**Fig. 9.** Benefits for Faculty

Faculty members reported that working with CECs allows for students to connect consistently to course goals, as Scott and I found (Carpenter and Whiddon). In addition, faculty members in ECU's program reported seeing a difference in the writing as the student worked with a CEC. Similarly, ECU instructors have reflected on ways in which the CECs promote engaging pedagogy, including through interactions with students, noting that the increased contact hours increase the energy level inside and outside of the classroom, resulting in a more collaborative approach to writing and writing processes. Faculty and CEC collaborations highlight the importance of developing a *process-centered, writing-oriented pedagogy (teaching and learning)*. Working side-by-side (as partners) with CECs and planning interactive opportunities to co-facilitate classroom writing and revision experiences refocuses attention on important course goals and ways in which programs can help students become successful writers while also envisioning what these initiatives can become in the future.

“ . . . [O]ne of the good teaching practices is contact, and so [. . .] here we are two by two. [. . .] instead of one person doing it, you got two people. [. . .] and two are always better than one if you're trying to move energy and go along.”  
 - ECU Faculty Member

**Fig. 10.** Faculty Testimonial

**SCOTT:** Writing centers—and those with aspirations of designing similar course-embedded programs at their institutions—might consider several threads that we see running through our experiences with CECs:

- I. While all writing centers can benefit from collaboration, it is central to the design of course-embedded writing support programs. Although ECU and Transy's implementation of embedding consultants in courses might look different, and they are, both have benefited from highly collaborative designs that place collaboration at the heart of their programs. Collaborations involve the

CECs, writing centers, faculty, and the students enrolled in the course.



Benefits of CEC Programming

While all writing centers can benefit from collaboration, it is central to the design of course-embedded writing support programs. Although EKU and Transy's implementation of embedding consultants in courses look quite different, both have benefited from designs that place collaboration (CECs, students, faculty, and admins) at the heart of their programs.

**Fig. 11.** Benefits of CEC Programming I

- II. Embedded writing support programs allow us to rethink the ways writing centers support students. Focused on sustainability, that is ongoing coordination with students to learn their writing, reading, and learning abilities and patterns over the course of the semester, promotes a broader understanding of the student (and a more holistic approach) to support.



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**Fig. 12.** Benefits of CEC Programming II

III. Course-embedded writing support allows writing centers to extend their networks beyond the activities that happen within the walls of the writing center space. That is, they allow writing centers to expand their reach and diversify services to support student writing. Students experience the writing center through interactions that take place within the classroom, and these experiences transfer back to interactions within the writing center itself. Such work also helps promote writing center work across campus—often reaching audiences we never imagined.



Benefits of CEC Programming

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**Fig. 13. Benefits of CEC Programming III**

But, where are we now, given the challenges of hybrid and distanced classes and the stresses of a global pandemic? To be sure, I didn't intend to take on another wave of CEC work this past Spring, when COVID first hit. But in our summer workshop for faculty teaching in our required first year seminar program, held online, many faculty members asked about additional ways to support students given distance, given stresses, and given the challenges of a compressed semester (as we went from a 14 week semester schedule to a series of 7 week modules). In Fall 2020, TUWC supported 7 sections of first year seminars with CEC programming (2 staffers per section, working with about 8-9 students each); we also supported an Introduction to the major class for our WRC program (17 students).

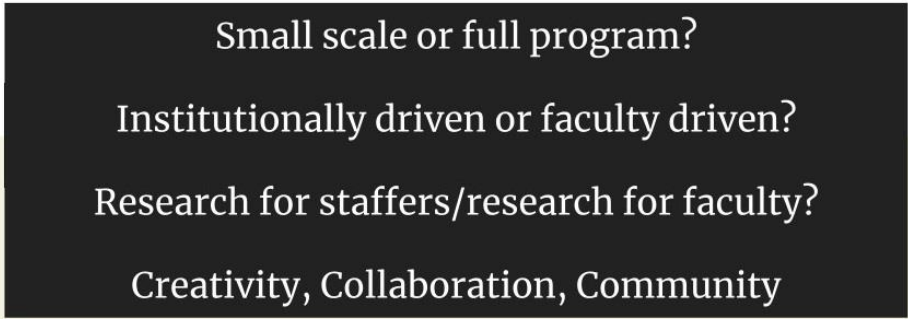
At various points in the term, we surveyed all students enrolled in these courses specifically about stress and how CECs helped provide support—as something akin to lifeguards or personal trainers for writing. Here’s a few data points: 87% of surveyed students noted that their assigned CEC had a positive impact on their drafting/revision process; 76% noted that working with a CEC helped reduce or negotiate stress in a difficult time; 92% of the students who took a CEC-enhanced course in Module 2 said that they would encourage peers to take a CEC-enhanced course in Module 3 or in Winter Term. Currently, in our Winter modules, TUWC is supporting 8 out of 16 sections of first year research seminar classes via course-embedded programming. Although small liberal arts colleges are mostly known for their emphasis on in-person experiences and small group learning, our shift to online peer writing support—especially in our CEC sections—has gone exceptionally smooth: a testament to the ability of our staffers and participating faculty members.

**RUSTY:** While EKU has largely moved to hybrid and online instruction amid precautions due to the pandemic, CEC work has continued to focus on supporting students and faculty in the first-year, reading-intensive co-requisite courses. The CEC program has continued to support the first-year writing students across 42 sections. All instruction takes place virtually, but students have more options for collaborating individually with their CEC; that is, they can choose the delivery and design that best works for them that day. The pandemic has prompted a number of changes at the institution, and the CEC program has been responsive by following a flexible approach. Students can choose synchronous online consultations (when bandwidth, access, and schedules allow) or asynchronous consultations (when time, health conditions, or personal circumstances warrant it).

This design fits students’ schedules in the moment and allows for flexibility in scheduling. The process of “pivoting” as we have called the shift to flexible course design and delivery has also allowed our program to explore “new” and even “innovative” ways of supporting students, providing structure to important writing processes amid challenges, and allowing students to choose approaches that best fit them. While the conditions in which the CEC program was revised and re-envisioned



were challenging, and the pandemic continued to necessitate change, our designs and decisions demanded even more collaboration and partnership than previous, on-ground models.



**Fig. 14.** CEC Applications

**Scott:** In closing, we hope that y'all can see that CEC work can do a number of things for a wide range of writing centers and campus cultures of writing. CEC work can be small scale, like Transy's, or it can support a whole program, like EKU's. It can be institutionally driven, but faculty-fueled. It can provide avenues for research—especially for WC directors who need to generate data from the work that they're already doing, or for staffers who want to take their first steps into disciplinary writing in rhetoric/composition or related fields of study.

To be sure, CEC work isn't a panacea—a cure all for all things writing—especially in a moment in which all seems so uncertain from moment to moment, for individuals and programs alike. CEC work adds labor—for faculty, WC administrators, and staffers. We recognize our respective privilege in such moments as tenured professors/administrators. That said, the two of us—with our different backgrounds, different programs, and different student populations—have been able to sustain work that is creative, collaborative, and community-driven, even in the midst of an ever-changing educational landscape. We look forward to seeing what comes next. Thanks.

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