



Southern Discourse in the Center

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

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From the Editors

Scott Pleasant
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This conference retrospective issue of *Southern Discourse* does much more than simply look back at the 2021 SWCA Conference, which, like much of our work during the ongoing COVID-19 situation, was conducted online. The wide-ranging pieces in this issue come together to ask some of the most important questions all of us in the writing center field need to address. How can and should we modify and update our services to meet students where they are rather than where we imagine them to be? How can our centers contribute to positive change, not just for the writers we work with but for the people who work in those centers? These kinds of questions may seem more relevant than ever in this time of unprecedented challenges, but we didn't need a worldwide pandemic to make us consider these issues. Those of us in the writing center field have been thinking about them for years.

Before introducing the various pieces that make up this issue, we should stop to consider the journey we have taken as an organization, as a field, and in society at large over the last two years. When we last met in person as an organization at the 2020 SWCA Conference in Birmingham, COVID-19 was already in the news and most of us were aware of the possible scenarios, but few, if any, of us felt any real sense of urgency. At the outgoing board meeting that year, we talked about the theme and the call for proposals for 2021 meeting scheduled for Memphis. It seemed nearly impossible that something as small as a virus could derail our plans. Now, almost two years later, we have been forced to schedule yet another conference as an online rather than in-person meeting.

Since we last met in Birmingham, the world around us has changed in ways few of us would have thought possible, and yet, through all of the challenges we have faced, this organization and writing center professionals in general have continued the vital work that is so important to our institutions and the students we serve. The story of

writing centers during the COVID-19 pandemic is one of resilience and adaptability. Just two years ago, some center directors debated whether they should integrate any online tutoring options into their centers' services. Then, in just a matter of weeks, most of us transitioned comfortably, if not seamlessly, to a fully online modality via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other platforms. Just two years ago, most of us had barely considered the very real risks of infection tutors face when they engaged in face-to-face consultations with students. Now, centers that offer in-person tutoring do so with the aid of masks, plexiglass barriers, and ever-present bottles of hand sanitizer.

With the success of vaccines and other public-health measures, a "return to normalcy" appears to be on the horizon (though we should be careful not to tempt fate by assuming that return is inevitable). And now, after working so hard to create safe environments, many of us are probably wondering if we can successfully transition yet again. But we definitely can and will—because we always have. The larger story of writing centers over the last forty years and more has been a tale of constant change and adaptation.

This issue highlights some of the most important kinds of ongoing changes we are seeing in the writing center field. Those changes are almost entirely positive ones, and we will be stronger as a field for embracing them.

In the piece that opens the issue, members of the SWCA board who worked on planning for the 2021 virtual conference focus not only on adaptations required for that conference but on larger changes as well. They remind us of the need to "intentionally decenter whiteness from our discourse" and provide "diverse experiences" and "shared spaces." The change to online modality, they explain, is neither purely a positive nor a negative. They discuss not only the potential for diverse conversations and connections offered by an online modality but also the possibility of "Zoom bombing" that can disrupt such a space. Near the end of that piece, Duane Theobald sums up his reflection on the value of the conference in this way:

I understand, now more than ever, the necessity for robust and engaging online presences for writing center work. The students my center has served online have been incredibly receptive and grateful for our presence in that

environment, and I imagine the same is true for those who attended SWCA's online conference.

As Theobald suggests, it seems quite likely that the 2021 SWCA conference led many others in the field to reconsider their methods

The second piece in the issue is an edited transcript of the keynote panel featuring the voices of four Black student tutors. Like the reflection piece that begins the issue, this one focuses on the importance of and the need for broad and lasting changes. The kinds of change advocated for in that keynote discussion are perhaps best summed up by panelist Adara Cox:

We should acknowledge that diversity matters, inclusion matters ... but I feel that it shouldn't be just on the shoulders of those who are these minority groups or the marginalized to acknowledge it and to continue this conversation in the writing center.

This kind of call for systemic change can help us improve what we already do well: connecting with students and other writers on our campus to help them become more effective communicators.

Scott Whiddon and Russell Carpenter continue this focus on changes that can help us connect more effectively with our students. They argue persuasively for incorporation of course-embedded consulting (CEC) as a way of putting consultants into closer and more meaningful contact with student writers.

In addition to these pieces, this issue features an excellent book review by Brittney Byrom and a "Back to the Center" profile by Megan Keaton that demonstrates the positive changes made at the Pfeiffer University Writing Center in recent years. We hope this issue helps you approach and navigate change in your own center.

--Scott and Devon

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