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## **Lessons from Early-Career Writing Center Administrators: An SWCA Conference Keynote Retrospective**

—Marguerite Armistead, LaKela Atkinson, Candis Bond, and  
Beth A. Towle

In February 2022, we came together at the Southeastern Writing Center Association's annual conference to discuss our experiences as early-career writing center administrators (WCAs), most of whom are also first-generation academics. We are excited to come together once more in this conference keynote retrospective to reflect on our experiences and ideas, as well as our challenges. Since every WCA's career will unfold differently based on their own intersectional identities, ambitions, and institutional contexts, we hope this retrospective inspires other WCAs to share their stories. We begin with self-introductions followed by a brief literature review of scholarship on WCA career trajectories. We then provide our responses to questions developed for our keynote address as well as reflections on the keynote's impact on our professional lives.

### **About Us**

We represent a diverse set of administrators – some of us have tenure or tenure-track positions, while some are staff or non-tenure track faculty or have hybrid positions. We come from a range of institutions, including an HBCU, a ministry leadership college, and research comprehensives. Our centers vary in size, and we come from different backgrounds and positionalities. But what unites us is a love for writing centers and a desire for writing centers and writing center studies to be spaces of advocacy for our students, as well as spaces that are accessible, diverse, and socially just. Before we share more about our experiences as early-career WCAs, we would like to provide background about our identities and local contexts.

**Candis:** I am in my seventh year as the director of the Center for Writing Excellence at Augusta University in Georgia, where I am also an associate professor of English and affiliated faculty in the Women's and Gender Studies program. Augusta University is a mid-sized, public R2 research comprehensive university within the University System of Georgia. AU is home to the Medical College of Georgia, Dental College of Georgia, and several other Health Science programs. Due to this specialization, AU is called Georgia's Health Sciences University. The university serves approximately 10,000 students, just under half of whom are graduate and professional students. Between 15 and 20% of our enrollment identify as first-generation college students. My own background as a first-generation academic has shaped my experiences of the academy and how I approach my role on campus.

**Beth:** I am in my fourth year as the associate director of the University Writing Center at Salisbury University on the eastern shore of Maryland, as well as an assistant professor in English. Salisbury is a regional comprehensive with about 7,500 undergraduate and graduate students, most of whom are local to the area. Many of SU's students are first-generation and/or transfer students.

**Marguerite:** I am in my third year as the director of the Highlands College Writing Center and in my fifth year as a professor of English Composition at Highlands College in Birmingham, AL. Our college is a biblical higher education institution focused on academic instruction, ministry training, character formation, and spiritual development. We currently serve 322 undergraduate students from all over the USA and from other countries. Our plan is to grow to serve 1,000 students over the next few years in our gorgeous, state-of-the-art building.

**LaKela:** I worked for ten years as a graduate and professional writing consultant in North Carolina Central University's (NCCU) Writing and Speaking Studio in Durham, NC. NCCU is a historically Black college/university (HBCU) and teaching institution within the University of North Carolina System. The institution serves over 8,000 students, more than half of whom are undergraduate. In addition, I was the graduate assistant director in East Carolina University's University Writing Center for a year during my graduate studies. ECU is a

predominantly white teaching institution that serves nearly 29,000 students, over half of whom are undergraduate students. I am currently a visiting assistant professor in the professional and technical communication program at Virginia Tech, which serves over 38,000 students. More than half of these students are undergraduates.

### **WCA Career Trajectories: A Review of the Scholarship**

Writing center administrators come from a myriad of experiences in terms of educational background, positioning and status, and institutional contexts. According to the Writing Centers Research Project, 61% of writing center directors and 45% of assistant or associate directors have doctorates across all disciplines, not just English. Meanwhile, according to data from the National Census on Writing, only 28% of WCAs have tenured or tenure-track positions, while 31% have staff positions, and the rest are made of non-tenure track faculty or hybrid positions. The lack of tenure-track positions in writing center jobs in general leads to many other issues, including the lack of diverse research in the field (Perdue and Driscoll). This wide range of institutional status and positions demonstrates the need for writing center studies to pay attention to the variety of experiences and diversity of knowledge held by administrators. Additionally, contextualization matters because it shapes how administrators, particularly early-career administrators, navigate their jobs and their places in the larger field.

The diversity of experiences alone does not account for how difficult it is for early-career administrators to find their place both in their institutions and in writing studies. As Geller and Denny make clear in their 2013 study on early-career WC professionals, writing center studies has long been positioned as the “lesser” branch of writing program administration (WPA) studies, itself an often overlooked area of writing and rhetoric studies. Due to their liminality, many WCAs lack mentorship as they enter their careers. In *The Everyday Writing Center*, Geller et al. point out that “Few graduate programs offer explicit instruction in writing program administration; even fewer address the writing center director’s need to both manage and lead” (113). Further, in their chapter on HBCU writing center professionals, Keaton Jackson

et al. address the need for more “culturally sensitive” (120) mentoring for graduate students of color and minority groups to navigate the primarily white space of academia. In their literature review of writing center mentoring, Rentscher and McBride also note the field’s lack of structured guidance for new WCAs and how this lack of mentorship can negatively impact careers. Even WCAs who are mentored in their roles may struggle, as their perceptions of writing center work may differ from reality and they often do “not anticipate how challenging the start of their professional lives w[ill] be” (Denny and Geller 101). Caswell et al. echo this sentiment in their book, *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*, which presented a case study of nine new WCAs across a wide variety of institutional contexts. They also found that new directors felt overwhelmed in their work and were often quite unhappy in their positions. Caswell et al. and Geller and Denny both mention that this can lead to high rates of turnover among WCAs.

While WCAs are often left in the position of seeking out their own mentors in order to successfully manage their institutions’ writing centers, they are also simultaneously serving as mentors for their staff and the students that they have consultations with, which adds significantly to the dimensions of the WCA’s labor. Lucretia Yaghjian explores how writing center consultants are involved in the bettering of the students, not just in the students’ actual writing product—in the “care of the soul” and in “holy listening,” which are similar to the interactions that students have with spiritual directors in a theological educational institution; she then underscores the benefits that could be obtained by recognizing the intentional roles that writing center consultants (and spiritual directors) fulfill in the students’ academic journey (224, 229). Just as there is an opportunity for new WCAs to be mentored, it is also important to realize the potential impact and responsibility that WCAs already possess as they mentor students in their work in the writing center.

WCAs who are also first-generation academics face additional challenges when identifying mentors, serving as mentors themselves, and navigating their careers overall. According to research by Redford et al., only 3% of graduate degrees are awarded to first-generation

students (cited in Van Galen and Sablan 1). First-gen students who become academics “often struggle against social class barriers in silence and alone. Few campuses offer workshops for administrators, faculty and staff on identifying classist policies and practice” (Van Galen and Sablan 5). While writing center research has begun to consider the experiences of first-gen college students (Bond; Denny; Denny et al.; Salem), very little scholarship examines the experiences of first-gen WCAs. Geller et al. aptly state that WCAs “need each other to figure out how to do this particular job” (111). We hope our retrospective can help WCAs, especially those who identify as first-generation academics, as they think about their labor and career development.

## **Keynote Q and A**

***Q1: How have your own backgrounds, identities, or experiences impacted your work in writing centers?***

**Candis:** It was, in part, my first-generation status and unfamiliarity with higher education that brought me to writing centers. When I applied to my M.A. program in English, I did everything wrong. As a first-gen undergraduate, I did not get to know my professors; I didn’t go to office hours; I didn’t form relationships. So when it came time to apply for graduate programs, it was hard to get good letters of recommendation. I also struggled on my GRE subject test because, since I had done my undergraduate degree in three years to save money, I took the subject test in my second year after having taken only a few literature courses. All this to say, my application to graduate programs wasn’t very strong. This meant I was accepted, but I didn’t get any funding. The chair of the English department emailed me and told me I could inquire with the writing center to see if they had any tuition remission options available. The implicit message was that this was a second-class role within the program. Her pretension led me to hold off on contacting the center for a semester, but eventually, out of desperation, I contacted the WC director and ended up working in the writing center throughout my M.A. and Ph.D. at that institution.

Although my Ph.D. is in literature, I felt a much stronger affinity for writing center work than I did for literary studies. Similar to Beth’s

reflections in “Other People’s Houses: Identity and Service in Writing Center Work,” I always wonder if writing center work appealed to me because of its emphasis on practicality and service. Service is familiar—I have worked in pretty much every service industry there is: food, retail, and hospitality. My first full-time position as a writing center administrator—the job I’m still in today—was a tenure-track position within an English department. I often felt tension between my roles as a WCA and a tenure-track faculty member. Like English and humanities programs nationally, my department aims to uphold its disciplinary identity while I was inclined to embrace a service identity for the writing center and myself. I wondered if the appeal of service was a form of imposter phenomenon or my true calling. I found myself repeatedly focusing on words like “impact” and “efficacy” when I spoke with people about work because tangible, concrete outcomes somehow gave me comfort and a sense of place within the university. It meant I could justify my center’s and my value.

Overall, I think my perception of writing center work as meaningful, powerful, and transformative is influenced heavily by my class background, as well as by my privilege as a white woman in academia. For me, literacy and education were key to social and economic mobility, but higher education is a historically raced, gendered, and classed institution. I often question the ways my class background paired with the privileges I hold as a white woman in the academy may lead me to view writing center work through rose-colored glasses. I’ve tried to become more conscious of the ways this labor can reinforce systemic inequities and impede progress—how it can uphold the status quo. I also realize my emphasis on efficacy and deliverables feeds into the neoliberal machine that is eroding much there is to value within higher education.

**Beth:** My background as a first-generation college student from a rural, low-income family has definitely impacted my work in writing centers, particularly my orientation toward the concept of “work.” I’m from a union family, so I come to writing centers as someone who sees the material in everything. I’m thinking constantly of budgets and costs, of fair and ethical labor, and of how social justice is tied to the material

aspects of our centers. Additionally, I recognize I come to the field as someone with a lot of privilege, as a white woman with a tenure-track faculty position. I have to be aware of that privilege in order to be part of writing center studies, and I also recognize that gives me power to actually change things. That being said, power is not the same as centering one's own voice. So that is something I'm perpetually trying to work on and one of the reasons I'm excited for a keynote like this where you can hear about lots of different experiences.

I also think it's important that my first love was creative writing and that I did an M.F.A. in poetry before my Ph.D. in Rhet/Comp. I lived and breathed the workshop model of writing for many years, and I think that's largely what appeals to me about writing centers. They are places where those kinds of in-depth conversations about writing and ideas can happen. And so writing centers really enliven me in that way – they make me love and think about writing and how hard writing can be for everyone. There's a sense of building community in the workshop model that grounds my philosophy and approach to writing centers.

**Marguerite:** This question has prompted some reflection. Thank you all for sharing how your experiences and backgrounds have impacted your work in your writing centers! I am in a non-tenured position at a ministry leadership college with approximately 322 students, and we launched our writing center in April of 2020 online. We began offering in-person consultations as well in the fall semester of 2020. I have the pleasure of teaching Rhetoric & Composition I and Rhetoric & Composition II as well as directing the Highlands College Writing Center. I think that my past experiences have helped me recognize the vulnerability of the students as a writing center consultant. Whether they are from Seattle, Washington, or Amsterdam, Holland, or even Iran, each of them has a unique story. I try to give them the encouragement and the practical skills that others have given to me.

Let me back-up a little bit. My mother was a “missionary kid” born in Dutch New Guinea in 1947 and, consequently, she grew up as a “third culture kid” (TCK). As a result, I also had some gaps in my socialization while I grew up in the multicultural environment of Miami, Florida.



When my parents divorced, I was eight years old, and my world became further fragmented. Writing became my outlet, especially poetry! This does not mean that I was proficient in writing. On occasion, between fourth grade and eighth grade, my father would sit down next to me in the evenings after work and help me on my assignments with paraphrasing, with summarizing, with paragraphing, and with vocabulary. Those small investments ignited my love of writing and inspired me to help others who might not know how to even begin to learn these skills in our “self-service world.” Over the years, other teachers also demonstrated a more effective way of teaching by, for example, noting the difference between “wether” and “whether” in the margin of my essay –with annoyance infused in every letter. These learning experiences have helped me realize what some students might need from a consultant in order to understand a concept and implement it in their own writing scenarios. Giving a kind word and modeling an example can do wonders during the writing center consultation!

**LaKela:** I identify as an African-American second-generation academic, and I would say that my experience with writing has been positive from early elementary through college. Writing was (and still is) a means of self-expression, but I also viewed it as an avenue to prepare me for a greater goal—I wanted to be a lawyer. However, early interaction with students in my writing center helped me learn that relationships with writing vary and that some are even traumatic based on students’ experiences. It was difficult to witness some students come to the writing center and immediately confess to being a bad writer before the session began. How could I help them meet assignment guidelines if they were already defeated? When I began as a graduate consultant at my HBCU over ten years ago, I wasn’t aware that the literacy experiences and practices between me and my minority peers could be vastly different. Of course, I knew that a similar cultural background does not equate experiences, but I did not always consider larger issues that can create inequities, especially for communities of color (access, invested teachers, etc.). Yet, when I had various experiences with students, I learned that my role was much greater than sitting with students and guiding them through writing assignments.

I had to face the fact that I had brought certain assumptions and biases to my consulting experience because I was taught a particular way. I spoke African American Vernacular English (AAVE), but I also spoke Standard English and knew how and when to use both. This realization actually inspired my dissertation, where I recall an experience working with an African-American client. That client shared that the bulk of her major writing experience in high school consisted of completing vocabulary sheets. I had judged the client's practices by the ones I had learned to be acceptable. Denny argues "that people of color often face pressure to accommodate to naturalized white codes of rhetorical expression, to perform them as stable, ahistorical standards" (38). I was performing these codes and internally expecting the student to do the same. When she didn't, I considered this to be problematic. To borrow from my dissertation, "I assumed that because her practices were different from mine, which are considered standard (in terms of a focus on correctness in word choice and grammar), she was limited in her abilities to succeed in a higher education space" (Atkinson 1). The opposite was true. She was successful in navigating her early college career, and taking initiative to seek out resources was one way that she showed an awareness of the support she needed. Her consistency and ambition contributed toward her success. Although I did not keep in touch with her, I know that her story is more common than not. Students use their experiences to help them gain access into the spaces that may not be welcoming to their many identities and practices.

Once I recognized my biases and the harm of denying students' voices (particularly those of color), I became more intentional about affirming their identities and writing styles even as I helped them to satisfy assignment guidelines. Helping them to employ aspects of the rhetorical situation, like audience, was part of my pedagogy. For students who came in defeated about their writing or inability to write, I verbalized that writing is a process and that even consultants in our writing center aided one another with writing projects because improvements are continual. I also made it a practice to guide students through rules so that they had a foundation and were informed if they chose to follow or disrupt the rules. Although I had a positive experience with writing, I know that not all students had a similar experience. Acknowledging and

questioning my biases helped me approach my writing sessions with greater empathy, understanding, and openness.

***Q2: How are things in your center right now? What are challenges your center is facing? What are current student needs you're identifying?***

**Candis:** My center is in a state of transition. This transitional period has coincided with a global pandemic, which has kept me on my toes, for sure! Within the last year, we became our own independent academic unit, changed our name from the Writing Center to the Center for Writing Excellence, and made several full-time, professional staff hires. These changes will significantly impact our mission, purpose, staffing, and outreach on campus (we're in the midst of developing a five-year plan as well as revised mission and vision statements, learning outcomes, and assessments). While the center has historically served primarily undergraduates, we are now focusing on growing our engagement with faculty and postdoctoral, professional, and graduate students. We are conducting research and networking to figure out faculty and graduate student needs. There have been a lot of meetings with program directors and deans to learn more about curriculum, professional genres, and extramural grants so we can design relevant supports. It's a lot of information to take in, make sense of, and put into action. Challenges we face are negotiating university politics and relationships with departments, colleges, and upper administration to ensure we grow in a way that preserves our own goals and disciplinary foundation.

Another challenge is establishing training and programs for our new, full-time staff that will help them feel prepared. I also want them to feel challenged and to have opportunities to advance toward their career goals. As we've rethought our staff training model and expanded supports, I've turned to texts such as *Redefining Roles: The Professional, Faculty, and Graduate Consultant's Guide to Writing Centers*, *Re/Writing the Center: Approaches to Supporting Graduate Students in the Writing Center*, and *Learning from the Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Writers*. In fact, the professional and graduate staff are doing a group read of *Learning from the Lived Experiences of*

*Graduate Student Writers* as part of our ongoing professional development. It will take time to know how the pieces will come together. We're still figuring out how the addition of professional staffing and our rebranding will affect our center's identity in the long term, since we have been an undergraduate peer-led writing center for nearly 40 years. I'm excited about the possibilities and future directions.

Although I'm excited and very optimistic about the future, I do like to have clear goals and detailed plans, so the past two years, which have been filled with uncertainty, have been very difficult for me. As a first-generation academic, I always feel like my colleagues have things figured out more than me, or like I'm going to miss something obvious or important. The last thing I want to do is let down the team by taking an uncalculated risk or making a preventable error. I have to remind myself that I'm doing okay and no one is perfect. I've also gotten more comfortable with uncertainty as a normal state of being and learned it doesn't have to be negative. Uncertainty can provide opportunities for re-imagining, re-visioning, and rethinking. In her book, *A Leadership Guide for Women in Higher Education*, Marjorie Hass argues times of transition can be generative. She states, "Often your most important initiatives will have their seeds in the dislocation you experienced as you stood between the worlds of your old [role] and your new one" (Hass 18). Uncertainty is not the antithesis of vision; the two can coexist, and the unknown can be fertile ground for creativity.

Times of change require emotional labor as well as cognitive processing. During our transition and especially due to the pandemic and all the changes it necessitated—we implemented an online training model and modified services to meet demand for synchronous and asynchronous online consultations, to name a few—I'm finding my staff need more emotional support. Students and faculty who use the center, too, need emotional support and spaces where they can be vulnerable without being stigmatized. As a center, we've been talking a lot about emotional labor and the emotional dimensions of writing center work, and I don't think these conversations will go away even after the pandemic eventually subsides. Some of our favorite texts we've added to training include Dana Driscoll and Roger Powell's "States, Traits, and

Dispositions: The Impact of Emotion on Writing Development and Writing Transfer Across College Courses and Beyond,” Maureen McBride and colleagues’ “Responding to the Whole Person: Using Empathic Listening and Responding in the Writing Center,” and Dana Driscoll and Jennifer Wells’s “Tutoring the Whole Person: Supporting Emotional Development in Writers and Tutors.” Making discussions of emotional labor and emotional well-being central to training and professional development has been powerful, and I’ve noticed a real shift in the ways consultants talk about writing as an embodied and emotional act in their sessions.

**Beth:** Because my institution is a public regional comprehensive, with a lot of local students who work or are caretakers, we have long had an accessibility statement saying we would meet the needs of students from all backgrounds and circumstances. This includes finding ways to tutor students who are currently deployed abroad, students with children, and of course, students with disabilities. But the pandemic and our move online for a year really pointed out to us how much better we could be at this. We actually discovered that the number of students working on out-of-class documents like scholarship essays, important professional documents, and application materials went up significantly when we moved online and became more accessible to students with busy work schedules. Trying to balance these needs with the students who really want to be in-person has been a particular challenge for us as we try to decide what is fair to our consultants, who also have lives outside their writing center work. I would say trying to find ways to serve many different needs at once is our biggest challenge right now, but is also really allowing us to see new possibilities for how we can meet those needs.

The other big challenge we’ve identified when we came back in person this last fall was staffing. Tutors wanted significantly less hours on the schedule than they have in the past, and they often all wanted to work the same hours. We want to be fair and supportive of them, so we developed our schedule based on their needs. However, it also meant our writing center had odd, sporadic hours that often did not work for the students I just described who work or have families. One of our primary

challenges in the next year is to figure out how we can be ethical in our staffing while still providing the help students need.

**Marguerite:** As Candis expressed, our writing center consultations have also had an emotional dimension due to the pandemic and the numerous uncertainties that students are facing. During the “lockdown,” our fledgling writing center flourished because many students seemed to crave the social interaction of the synchronous online consultations. The students especially enjoyed “Walk-in Wednesdays!” where they could all pop in and out of the Zoom room, getting help with their papers together in a group setting. I found that it was more important than ever to be positive and supportive, to smile on the screen, to use the “applause” icon. We have continued “Walk-in Wednesdays!” but it is in person now in one of our new Learning Studios. We use WConline and are thus able to offer the students three types of appointments: an in-person consultation, an online synchronous consultation, or an asynchronous consultation.

Currently, the HC Writing Center is growing, and things are going well. When we compared the 2020-2021 academic year to the 2021-2022 academic year, we saw about a 20% increase in appointments/usage. Therefore, the needs we are facing include more consultants and more hours of operation to meet the increased demand. The way we have handled it this semester is by 1) hiring a part-time WC coordinator who is doing a marvelous job and 2) by creating a rotation of faculty volunteers. This increases the faculty’s awareness of what the students are struggling with, and it gives them a first-hand glimpse of how many students are taking advantage of this Learning Resource. It also increases the sense of having a writing community here on campus. After meeting with Karen, I realize that we need to take some simple steps to help students with disabilities or learning challenges. Perhaps some of our intrinsic educational values need to be expressed in ways that the students can see and hear them. Now that our WC is off the ground, I believe that we can start improving in this area. Many of our students also seem to need help with content development, unclear sentences, thesis statements, and citations. They seem to struggle with retaining what they have learned as well. It is our responsibility to find a way to

get through all the “noise” in their minds and help them remember what they’ve learned and apply it to their writing assignments.

**LaKela:** I am not currently in a writing center position, but my colleague at one of my previous institutions, Ms. Amanda Chambers, provided me insight. She is a professional consultant at North Carolina Central University’s (NCCU) Writing and Speaking Studio and shared that the university is evolving and is trying to catch up with the times. According to Chambers, NCCU was not prepared to go online. The university, like many HBCUs, doesn’t have the resources that predominantly white institutions (PWIs) have. The writing center is developing online resources and beefing up social media. She shared that challenges include the writing center’s own resources. Currently, the Writing and Speaking Studio refers students to Purdue OWL and UNC. The Studio has a demographic of students that they’re trying to reach (electronic videos, handouts, etc.), which may be different from those at other institutions. Current student needs are resources, as the writing center is only open for limited hours and students need to be able to access things on their own time because of work. Having webinars, seminars, and recorded demonstrations available is a need.

I also asked my colleague, Dr. Nicole (Nikki) Caswell, the same question. She is the director of the University Writing Centers at East Carolina University. This was Caswell’s response:

The writing center is almost always in a constant state of change. We’ve had lots of turnover staff wise because of the pandemic and workloads. We returned to face to face last fall with a staff that had never worked face to face before, so in many ways what we are doing right now is teaching and modeling how we operate in a face to face context. While we are trying to rebuild our face to face work, students are primarily selecting online appointments. We are also trying to be more intentional with our linguistic justice work in individual sessions.

***Q3: How has your writing center continued to be supportive and accessible to marginalized students during the pandemic?***

**Candis:** The pandemic led us to make many positive changes. We have extended our hours late into the evening most weekdays, and we've added weekend hours. We also added video and audio to our online appointments (prior to the pandemic, we were only allowed by our university's IT department to use the text feature of WCOOnline), and we made asynchronous consultations available to everyone; previously, only graduate students, faculty, and staff could use this form of support. In addition to expanding our support, we've used social media to form relationships with groups on campus who represent the interests of underrepresented students, and we've also been more intentional and strategic with our own social media presence in order to emphasize our commitment to inclusivity and equity within the university. While the pandemic led us to implement positive changes, there is still a lot of work for us to do. We realized a need for more online resources, for example. We hope to add interactive, self-paced online modules in the near future on a variety of topics students ask about most, such as how to write literature reviews or integrate quotations. We need to be sure the resources we develop are fully accessible to all writers by offering multiple ways to engage with the text. We also need to do an accessibility audit of all of our online materials, including social media posts and handouts.

Another goal is to develop an accessibility statement. Beginning in fall 2021, staff began reading Andrew Appleton Pine and Karen Moroski-Rigney's article, "What About Access?: Writing an Accessibility Statement for Your Writing Center" as part of their required training. Staff have been inspired by this article's tips and arguments about restorative justice and are ready to begin the work of drafting. I'm looking forward to the development of the statement itself as well as the opportunity to reflect critically on our values and what we can accomplish within our institutional contexts. As Appleton Pine and Moroski-Rigney explain, "An Accessibility Statement reflects the mission of an individual center and is distinct from the field-wide call-to-arms suggested by the position statement from the IWCA because it makes clear an individual center's beliefs and goals surrounding disability (whether physical, emotional, or mental disability). It asks: not 'What can the field do?' but, 'What can we do?'" (para. 5). Being



accessible and inclusive cannot be a one-off; it is something you work toward constantly. I'm hoping we can not only draft an Accessibility Statement, but also integrate ongoing data collection, perhaps through focus groups, that helps us understand writers' evolving needs so we can build a center that is responsive and inclusive.

**Beth:** I'll admit this is really hard, in part because being online last year really limited our ability to reach students for whom the technology might have been a barrier, which is often students who are already marginalized on our campus: students with disabilities, poor students, students with caretaking responsibilities or who do not have a quiet home environment. Being both in-person and online this semester has helped that somewhat in terms of who we are seeing using the writing center again. But for us, I think the thing we really have come back to is how we are building our support. In 2021, our administrative assistant and I began an assessment project where we compared writing center data with institutional data. We found that the percentage of non-white, transfer, and Pell Grant-eligible students who visit the writing center far exceeds the percentage these students represent on the campus as a whole. Which means the writing center is serving as an important resource to marginalized students. But why? Is it because of institutional racism that tells non-white and working-class students they need "help" with their writing? Is it because we are a visible resource? Is it because of something in our practices that is working for students? Do they see themselves represented in our staff? We need to get at the heart of that. Having this quantitative data is awesome, but it really just serves as a springboard for us to do better, more advocacy-minded assessment. What do students get out of the writing center? And what are we missing, what do we need to be doing that we aren't? That's what I really want to know and what I think is the duty of my writing center, as a space of advocacy, to be doing.

**Marguerite:** Our writing center has been supportive of and accessible to marginalized students through the online consultations that we offered during the pandemic. However, we need to work on getting closed captioning for those Zoom meetings because that will help those students with hearing difficulties, and it will also help those who are visual

learners. Technology has been a tremendous tool over the past two years. Zoom also enabled me to extend my hours of operation during that time. However, as Beth pointed out, it can also be an obstacle for lower-income students who have an old computer that does not work properly or for the students who live in a noisy house and are trying to have an online consultation. Fortunately, students are able to have an in-person consultation now, instead of only the online option. We made our WC easily accessible by placing it in the learning studio that is right next to the HC Library, so students can quickly get the books and sources that they need while they are conducting their research and creating the citations in their essays. In the past, we have collaborated with the Student Life department to send out weekly messages to promote “Walk-in Wednesdays!” and other events. We should get back into that routine because the repetition really helped the students remember to come to the WC. One of the things we are doing in our new Student Success program (for at-risk students) is telling the students (in their individual meetings with their Student Success Coordinator) to go to the WC, which has also been effective.

**LaKela:** This is also another question I defer to former colleagues. According to Amanda Chambers, the Writing Studio has utilized the online chat feature for initial online pre-pandemic. The writing center has extended online features to video and audio to have the feeling of in-person be as normal as possible. Face-to-face consultations are limited to one consultant, but students can come in for scheduling and paper resources.

I also asked Nikki Caswell, and this was her response:

As we drafted the linguistic justice letter to faculty last year, we discussed ways to engage pro-Blackness actions in sessions such as making comments on oppressive language in each session – which requires constant professional development for consultants (especially with turn over). But all of our services are open to all. We don’t have specific support for marginalized populations.

***Q4: What do you see as the role of mentorship and community-building in your writing center or in writing center studies?***

**Candis:** When I first started my job, I thought a lot about how I wanted staff to perceive me, and I landed on “mentor” as my administrative identity. As I’ve mentioned, I struggled to form relationships with professors when I was a first-gen undergraduate, so it is important to me to normalize those relationships with my undergraduate peer consultants. I also believe that writing centers function best when everyone is using their strengths. I hire not based on some standard criteria, but based on what our team is lacking that the candidate might bring. But we can’t know one another’s strengths unless we’re talking with one another, and a lot of that talking can happen in mentor relationships. Within my writing center, I try to work collaboratively with all staff to give them what they need to achieve their personalized goals. I try to use mentorship as an opportunity to learn from my staff how we can make our writing center better through their gifts and interests. I also developed a mentor program as part of our staff training. Experienced consultants help to train incoming consultants throughout a semester. It’s been rewarding to see how staff have mentored one another over the years, and I love seeing consultants develop as leaders through their experiences with mentoring.

Within the broader discipline, I think mentorship is also important. Being a writing center director can be an incredibly isolating experience. You are usually the only person like yourself on campus, so finding allies and people to ask advice of is challenging. Having mentors within the field can give you access to advice, affirmation, resources, and other things you need to do your job and maintain your mental health and well-being. I’ve regularly participated as both a mentor and mentee in the International Writing Centers Association’s Mentor Match Program, and unfortunately, not all of my experiences with writing center mentors have been good. I think the field needs to identify models of mentorship that are healthy and productive for mentors and mentees, but I have found many people who have supported me. For me, having mentors who listen to my goals, respect my boundaries, and view the relationship as a mutual exchange has been transformative. I’ve gained a lot of

confidence about myself as a WCA and researcher through these relationships. I've also found I really enjoy mentoring. Being a mentor allows me to give back and serve as an advocate for others—more of that service work I'm drawn to—but it also, somewhat selfishly, alleviates my own feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome in the field.

Both sides of the mentoring relationship have helped me find myself. I've been able to identify my values, how I work and lead best, my aspirations, and the pathways I have available to me. I hope I've been able to help others I've mentored in the same ways; I love watching staff and mentees in the field find themselves and make progress on their personal, professional, and academic journeys. Being both a mentee and a mentor within the discipline has been foundational to my development as a WCA and leader. In their article, “The Importance of Intention: A Review of Mentoring for Writing Center Professionals,” Maureen McBride and Molly Rentscher note that current writing center mentorship models operate hierarchically and do not have clear guidelines for setting healthy boundaries. I hope our field takes up their call for more structured, egalitarian programs in the future, ones that offer WCAs multiple models, options, and resources as they navigate their careers.

**Beth:** I would not be in this field if it weren't for the mentorship I've received. And I believe I need to pay it back by mentoring others. However, I do think the concept of mentorship and the “niceness” of writing center studies and our professional spaces has become somewhat problematic. It doesn't say great things that we are a field that cares a lot about mentorship but is made up almost primarily of white women. What does that say about who we think is worthy of mentorship? So I think mentorship is the bedrock of writing centers, but that we always have to be questioning the role of mentorship, too.

In some ways, that's why I like the idea of community-building more. I like the way it makes me think of actual physical space, for one, and how spaces are shaped by people. I think that's a helpful analogy for me in terms of how I want to see writing center studies. I want to see it as a space that is welcoming but also one of real engagement, where having

a community sometimes means being uncomfortable or having to advocate for change. I want that in my center, too. I think community-building has been really hard during the pandemic. And our consultants really wanted it, but we had to think about their health and safety. So I know that's something we're invested in again in a way that felt "natural" before Covid. We have to think about it some more. For me, a lot of it is including tutors in all the parts of writing center work. Not just tutoring, but giving them opportunities to do research, to help with programming, to develop content for us. We have started building "professional development" hours into the schedule and in our staff budgets, and for us so much of that is about making opportunities for community development – for having chances for tutors to just talk to each other and mentor each other and problem-solve together. And I wish we had more of that kind of space in writing center studies as a whole. I want writing center professional gatherings to feel like staff meetings where we aren't there to listen to an expert or to impress each other with what we know, but to really work together to solve problems and share experiences.

**Marguerite:** I agree that mentorship is an essential part of running a WC. When I was asked to launch the WC in February of 2020, I met with Dr. Jaci Wells in order to learn how a successful WC operates. She has been a mentor to me, and I hope to pass that blessing along and help mentor all those who will serve in the WC. I wonder if the SWCA has ever considered starting a program for mentoring new WC Directors. I would also like to see some of our students serve as peer tutors and/or as Embedded Course Consultants in the future so that they can mentor the younger students. I believe that mentoring is actually the heart of the WC, because ever since we launched our writing center in 2020 I have noticed that students will return again and again if they know that we are invested in their ideas and in helping them express their ideas through their own writing voice. As I mentioned earlier, there is often an emotional aspect when students come to the writing center and offer us a glimpse into their thought processes and allow themselves to become somewhat vulnerable. These meetings are points of connection for the college or university, which entail a certain amount of responsibility to support students academically, intellectually, emotionally, and even spiritually. They are opportunities for mentoring. Based on my

experience in 2020 and onward, I would agree with Yaghjian's assertion that writing center consultants are in some respects "car[ing] for the soul engendering the writing" (229). This mentoring, in turn, leads to community-building. The students feel a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, and then we are able to come alongside them and help them develop their writing skills.

I have felt a strong sense of community working with Jaci to create the writing center at Highlands College, and I have also felt a deep sense of community when working with the students, or with groups of students, in our new writing center. There is definitely a sense of community in working together to meet the students' needs in the WC. There is also a sense of community-building for the students when they come to events (workshops) like "Papers & Pancakes: Night Against Procrastination" and get help from their instructors on their major papers for the term—and in "Walk-in Wednesdays!"

In the area of writing center studies, I would love to see more research on how students really seem to enjoy working on their essays together in an environment of creative energy. Ultimately, with each consultation, I see my goal as finding myself eventually out of a job in the sense that the students improve and do not need me anymore. Then they go on to help other students with the skills that they have acquired in the WC. It is fulfilling to see this happen from time to time!

**LaKela:** I use two definitions of mentoring--Brown et al.'s definition as "the process by which a novitiate person is positively socialized by a sagacious person" (106) into the traditions and practices of a particular environment and Griffin and Toldson's definition "as one who observes, calls out, and cultivates unrealized potential in others" (103). Both of these definitions describe the mentoring relationship with my former writing center director, Dr. Karen Keaton Jackson, an African-American woman. This was an informal relationship because it just organically blossomed when I was a graduate consultant. She took the consultants under her wing and ensured we had experience with preparing proposals, presenting at conferences, and engaging in professional development (sometimes at her own expense). This was particularly important for a

predominantly Black/African-American staff because we represented a marginalized background in general and specifically in the writing center field. What makes our mentoring relationship so successful is her time in academia, experience with racial minority learners, and similar cultural background and interests. She shared effective strategies to support all learners, instead of encouraging us to steer them away from their identities. It was clear that she cared about students, especially students of color, and I learned how to better support students from her example.

Engaging in a mentoring relationship allows a person to be both vulnerable and accountable. I recognized the impact of my own biases as an educator of color regarding other racial minority learners. It was through mentoring with my African-American writing center director that I better understood how to appreciate students' varied identities. I believe she set a tone for our entire space because of her strong mentorship. While my mentoring relationship was with another female of color, successful mentoring relationships can be cross-cultural (Guramatunhu-Mudiwa and Angel 99), as various attributes help writing center professionals resist one way of knowing and acting in mentoring relationships.

In a sense, community-building was a result of the mentorship that my director provided. She modeled the family environment we needed to help us view the space as more than an assistantship. Veteran consultants modeled her example for newer consultants. Everyone's role was key from scheduling to conducting sessions. Once the tone was set from the inside, it became easier for us to establish community with our clients, where students came to visit to simply say hello or thank us for supporting them with an assignment. So, without both mentorship and community-building, I am not sure that our writing center would have had the unity, stability, and solid reputation that it has had for so long.

***Q5: What do you see as the challenges and opportunities in writing centers in the next ten years?***

**Candis:** I think one challenge facing writing centers will be how to form an identity that is independent of English departments and English as a discipline. This is true even for writing centers who are not and perhaps

never have been part of English departments. Even these centers, I think, gain some credibility and identity from a loose association with what students, faculty, and administrators see as “English.” English and the humanities more broadly are facing incredible challenges in the increasingly neoliberal academy; they must constantly defend their worth and rebrand themselves to remain relevant within a market-driven economy. As an English faculty member, this breaks my heart. As these departments adapt and transform, writing centers may find they have to work harder to justify their existence and form identities that don’t have that underlying disciplinary foundation. I am not at all saying that writing centers should not be grounded in a discipline, or that this discipline should not be what has historically been known as English (at least for the last century or so). But I am saying centers may need to come to terms with the fact that other disciplines may cease to recognize English as a valid field, and so they may need to get creative with how they form disciplinary identity and pedagogy while staying relevant within their institutions. The field will need to find ways to become increasingly diverse while still having some kind of unifying connection—something that provides a sense of cohesion and solidarity.

Another challenge writing centers face is interrogating best practices and what Jackie Grutsch McKinney calls the writing center's grand narrative (3); this entails deciding what the field will value as research, especially as the discipline becomes more and more diverse and globalized. So many writing center studies that are used to justify practices are grounded in very small samples or very isolated contexts, and they are conducted and written by people with immense privilege and limited points of view; there are not enough cross-institutional and cross-context studies and definitely not enough voices at the table. If we want to have some sense of cohesion about what our discipline values and how we practice, while also keeping room for flexibility and creative play, we need to find ways to do more large-scale research and to collaborate effectively across institutional contexts. This means our practitioners need more training in research methods and they need academic structures that give them support and time to do this work. We also need to decide what research can look like. For several years, the field found itself in a backlash against story, narrative, and lore—often rightfully so.



RAD research became the mantra, and while RAD research is important, this emphasis has shut down a lot of valuable scholarship, in my opinion. I think we're seeing the tides turn again in the past few years, with more emphasis on narrative and alternative rhetorics, as well as on methods like auto-ethnography and counter-story, but this means we're in a critical moment where we can choose to be more open-minded about what writing center scholarship can be or we can shut doors and lose momentum. I hope we can come to a place where we have innovative research within our field and we can recognize that "systematic" does not always mean "empirical."

**Beth:** I can be a bit of a pessimist, so hopefully my answer here isn't too pessimistic. We already know we're at an enrollment cliff at most institutions, with enrollments going down and likely not going back up anytime soon. And institutions have done a terrible job preparing for that. I see my institution panicking about this, and it frustrates me that the writing has been on the wall for so long without any real action taken until it got bad. So I see austerity measures coming, which will absolutely impact budgets across all writing centers. It also means universities are going to start to recruit more international students or students who might not be as prepared for college as some faculty wish they were. And this means writing centers need to do better at how we serve diverse student populations. I'm glad that writing center studies has really begun to take social justice seriously, as we need to be more inclusive in our pedagogies, our practices, and in our theory and research. And it shouldn't only be what we think is socially just – we need to listen to the actual voices of the writers we work with.

Going along with this, I think we need to start thinking more explicitly about labor in the field. And I mean that pretty broadly. We need to think about who become writing center directors and why it's such a white field. We also need to think about material aspects of labor, like pay and the positioning of admins, and how much work we do. We also need to think about how we pay our tutors, and who we hire and how we train tutors. I've been feeling really inspired by the "great resignation" happening and the way we're seeing unions coming back and starting to gain real momentum. I'm not necessarily saying writing center directors

should start a union, but what would it look like if we did? What does just thinking about our work as unified labor provide us with in terms of thinking about fair labor practices for directors, tutors, and all the other staff we work with?

**Marguerite:** The challenges and the opportunities that I perceive in WCs over the next ten years are actually interconnected. Our goal is to help the students develop their writing skills and their individual writing voice. Yet, many students seem to be “wired” differently than their predecessors, which is not a bad thing. The challenge is trying to help them truly understand the concepts and then implement them in their writing, so that their writing voice is not all jumbled up and garbled on the page, so that their message can be heard on the page. Perhaps texting, editing software like Grammarly, and environmental distractions on social media are making their ability to focus, retain the information, and grow more challenging. However, we can also use more technology in our WCs to help students overcome these challenges. For example, in our WC, we have “learning pods” with monitors. Each pod is a table with four to six chairs around it and a monitor on the wall at one end of it. We can sit at the pod and project the material we are teaching (or use an i-Pad to project our notes) onto the large monitor, which captures our students’ attention. They can also connect and do the same with their work, which is extremely engaging for them. I believe that we will need to use cutting-edge technology in our WCs in order to teach students in a way that they are able to receive the information and make it their own. The technology that is changing how our students think and how they receive information can also be an opportunity—as a way to connect with them during their WC consultations. I also agree that WCs need to be viewed as an essential Learning Resource that benefits the students (and the professors) in all their courses (even if it is writing lab reports for biology), not just English.

Additionally, plagiarism is a challenge that writing centers can help alleviate through citation workshops and individual consultations. The sources are not difficult to locate and the copy and paste function makes it easy to forget the in-text citation. Around the world, approximately 20% of college students have plagiarized according to the owners of

Unicheck (Zakharov and Klymenko). This problem is growing. Yet, it is an opportunity to teach the students about academic integrity and to show them that they are standing on the shoulders of the scholars who provided that information for them. They need to give credit where credit is due, instead of stealing intellectual property.

**LaKela:** I know of and have learned about funding being cut for writing centers. While we know the importance and vital role this supplemental resource plays for our institutions, particularly for our students, many writing center professionals are waiting semester- to-semester or year-to-year to learn about budget approvals. Since the absence of a budget is a reality for many writing center professionals, I imagine that many writing centers will still be advocating for consistent financial support to continue to operate these spaces.

Having worked in two different institution types—an HBCU and a PWI—I see gaps in resources between the institution types. These resources range from staffing to an ability to adapt when it comes to inevitable situations like a pandemic. While I don't mean to generalize these institutions, research does point to the differences in support when it comes to many public HBCUs vs. public PWIs. I think for institutions that struggled prior to the pandemic, they will struggle even more so because of additional layers that we don't have consistent answers to address. As a result, they may fall further behind in providing relevant support that students need.

For this reason, I see many more opportunities for collaborations with PWIs and minority-serving institutions to help mitigate some of these struggles. Writing center collaborations/networks are helpful because an institution may have a creative idea for resources that supports a general population but is also considerate of marginalized students. Also, I suggest technological ideas that are inclusive of those who are not engaging in technology regularly because of the face-to-face sessions that occurred prior to the pandemic.

**Conclusion: The Importance of Sharing Our Stories**

***Final Question: As we reflect on the panel, we respond to the following questions: How was the panel experience beneficial? And how do you think this will help other early WPA professionals?***

**Candis:** I hope writing center organizations continue to prioritize discussions about writing center administrative labor and career trajectories. I think these conversations are needed to give WCAs more insight into pathways they might pursue and how to theorize, articulate, and get credit for the important work they do. Being given the opportunity to think about my career, and to do so in collaboration with directors from a variety of institutions, was eye-opening for me. So often we go about our day-to-day work without thinking reflexively about the values and goals driving our labor. Or perhaps we begin with these values and goals in mind but get distracted by the many hats we wear and the constant demands for our attention. Thinking deeply about the questions posed by my co-authors gave me the opportunity to think about my work with more intention. I also got new ideas and gained perspective by reading my colleagues' responses. I hope other WCAs, especially those early in their careers or those just starting writing centers, will find our responses useful. Even if readers do not share our goals or experiences, they may find it affirming to see that there are many valid approaches to writing center work—there's not just one pathway or one way of doing things. More importantly, I hope reading this collection of perspectives will encourage other WCAs to share their own early career experiences and insights. Keep the conversation going.

**Beth:** Moderating and participating in this panel reminded me why I love writing centers so much -- because learning from each other is necessary. We come from a wide range of institutional contexts, with different sized writing centers, serving different student populations. It is very important for WCAs, particularly new administrators, to hear about contexts different from the ones they've personally experienced. Not only does it give you an appreciation for the multiple ways in which writing center work can be done, it also provides you with insight on how institutions operate, how writing centers fit into institutional power structures, and how WCAs can be better positioned as change agents. We often tell our tutors how important it is to listen, that engaged listening is a key part of

being a good tutor. A panel like this one gives opportunities for engaged listening - not just for audience members but for us participants, too. I learned so much from my fellow WCAs on this panel. My hope is that this type of presentation inspires more discussions like this - whether in the formal space of conference panels or in more informal gatherings and special interest groups at other writing center events. I also hope it inspires us as a field to think more deeply about labor and how labor operates across different contexts and for different types of writing center administrative positions.

**Marguerite:** Serving on this 2022 keynote panel discussion with fellow WCAs and scholars was an honor. The experience was invaluable in that I was able to appreciate those who have gone before me and paved the way for launching a new writing center (even in the midst of a pandemic) and in that I was able to learn from my colleagues about crucial areas for future growth and improvements to our writing center. More importantly, participating in this panel renewed my passion for helping students find their unique writing voices and share their ideas with clarity and professionalism. At a CCCC conference, Nancy Sommers reflected on her discovery that “College writing is a matter of being personal *and* academic by questioning and testing sources against one’s own rich and abundant life lessons. Being personal requires students to bring judgment and interpretation to bear on what they read and write, learning that they needn’t leave themselves behind when writing an academic essay – imagining that they, too, will become sources from which readers will draw inspiration” (Anson et al. 127). It is my deep desire that this panel discussion was able to reignite the passion that other WCAs feel for the crucial work that they do in their various writing centers across the country.

**LaKela:** The panel provided me an opportunity to hear from and present with other panelists whose experiences are similar and different. Hearing the different paths, challenges, and successes of fellow early WCAs provided me assurance that there was no one way that I was expected to begin my career. I think it was important to also provide representation for people of color beginning in a field that is primarily white. As a person of color, I was able to share my experience navigating the writing center field at an HBCU and PWI, where my experiences were

drastically different in a field where there is also much overlap in expectations and service. I hope that our collective presentation provided insight into varying experiences that impact our approach to our work. I also hope that it helps us engage in more dialogue with other WCAs, as the work and situations we encounter are not always intuitive. Helping others to learn about the supports that worked well for us may also encourage others to seek out similar supports to develop their professional growth.

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