

Chapter 35. Positioning Our Shared- Leadership Research and Practice: Multivoicing Our Multiculture of Writing at an Historically Hispanic-Serving Institution

Steven J. Corbett
METHODIST UNIVERSITY

Shelby Coalson
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, KINGSVILLE

Annette Vara
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, KINGSVILLE

Elsa Angelica Alvarez
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, KINGSVILLE

Alyssa Morales
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, KINGSVILLE

Larisa Garcia
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, KINGSVILLE

Casidy Leal
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, KINGSVILLE

Texas A&M University, Kingsville (TAMUK) is a Hispanic-Serving Institution. About 75% of our students are Hispanic (one of the highest percentages in the country) and, since 2015, about 55% of our students have been first-generation. At TAMUK, writing center tutors have played the pivotal role in working with multicultural writers and faculty. Tutors have taken on functional leadership roles including visiting classrooms for informational visits and writing workshops; overseeing the day-to-day ebb and flow of student visitors to our center; managing the schedule; and serving as peer mentors to other tutors, especially newly hired tutors. In short, student tutors and administrative assistants have realized crucial shared, functional leadership roles in all our undertakings. We believe it's important to share our shared-leadership stories. Our chapter features short narratives written by diverse peer tutors working with fellow writers.



Figure 35.1. UWC staff “sending up Js.” (Our university’s unique mascot is the Javelina). Photo by Steven J. Corbett

We will describe our impressions of working with writers—especially our views on the social-justice work we do in relation to our individual identities and positionalities. We hope our vignettes illustrate how if directors use their authority to foster a communal identity and positionality, where authority and leadership are shared, it complicates and enriches the notion of what it means to lead and to be(come) a leader.

“An Environment of Shared Leadership and Trust”: Steven

Identity matters. And learning from other people’s identities matters a lot. In 2016, I was hired to direct TAMUK’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), a crucial part

of our regional reaccreditation.¹ Our QEP involved the founding of the University Writing Center (UWC) as well as the implementation of the writing-intensive courses. From the moment I hit the ground at TAMUK, I began interacting with tutors and administrative assistants that blew me away with their intelligence, caring, and willingness to work together toward our common goals. My past experiences administering writing programs, teaching in the classroom, and publishing had taught me that, if you give students a chance to show what they can do in leadership positions, they will often prove more than up to the task.

After almost twenty years of experience, I had come to truly believe that a peer-centered model for shared writing center leadership offers an approach in-line with many of our long-held power-displacing, feminist, inclusive, and collaborative educational philosophies and practices—and I wanted to put those practices into effect immediately. This is exactly what happened at TAMUK. I began to lean more heavily upon the administrative assistants to run the day-to-day hustle and bustle of students in and out of our increasingly busy Center. I began to replace some of the readings on tutor training with more observations and discussions from experienced tutors. I offered and encouraged more experienced tutors to take on increasingly more responsibility for all aspects of the UWC's operations. I began to, first, invite students into conference presentations then, later, happily watch as they began to submit their own proposals (and later even co-author papers for publication with me and each other).

Over the years, this approach really paid off. We started gaining a reputation around campus with faculty, staff, administration, and—most importantly—students. Faculty began to see and hear confident students taking ownership of their abilities to help fellow students. The word increasingly spread among students that our Center was a place they could visit where they would meet fellow students they could trust, peers that looked like them, acted like them, and (they would come to find out) even shared many of their own insecurities about writing and talking about writing. We'll continue this multilogue with our friend Shelby, since her leadership roles have had an enormous influence on the rest of us. Shelby's impact demonstrates how one person's positionality can have a positive and lasting ripple-effect on so many others.

“Understanding, Courageous, Intelligent, and ... Compassionate”: Shelby

I was a tutor at the University Writing Center (UWC) from the spring of 2019 to spring 2022. I was flabbergasted when I was invited to work at the UWC by my English 1302 professor (and director of the UWC), Dr. Steven Corbett. My degree is in Civil Engineering, and I have two learning disabilities, Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia. At first, I was sure Dr.

1. See <https://tinyurl.com/ycxt5xfn> on Google Drive for the full report.

Corbett emailed the wrong student and was adamant he found a more qualified individual. However, despite my initial protest, Dr. Corbett urged me to apply and said that he saw so much potential during our class time. I decided to take the job, which I consider to be one of the best decisions of my life. I did not see it then, but my misperception of myself, as a disabled and underqualified student, was limiting me in my potential. Despite my negative experiences with disclosing my neurodiversity at a young age, my positive experiences as a tutor have proven that the benefits are far greater. Students who also struggle with similar neurodiversities need to see that it is possible to be a good writer—sometimes even a good writing tutor—despite their “disability.”

Growing up, I had many encounters with educators that resulted in me feeling inadequate in my skills and incapable of catching up with my peers. Often in grade school I was told that I needed to do things the “right way” and “just write,” but the programs and methods didn’t seem designed for me. I feel I missed out on years of personal development and exploration to fit their perception of what a good writer, or student, does. A perfect example of this was in eighth grade. I was reading an article and taking notes in preparation for a writing assignment, and I used every color of highlighter with many notes and arrows that lead to notes I had. When my instructor saw my handout, she scolded me for making a mess of it and forced me to redo it with less color. I would avoid using colors to help make parts of passages stand out and only make notes in black ink. I didn’t score well in her class, and I sure didn’t learn as much as I could have if she had worked with me instead of against me.

My initial reservation about Dr. Corbett’s job offer stemmed from my misperception of a writing center’s role and, by default, the tutor’s role in the writing process. Before I was a tutor, I was a student who could have significantly benefited from the writing center services; however, my initial misunderstanding made me fearful of going in for help. At the time, I did not know that the writing center was a place that promoted neurodiversity.

Personally, I wanted to avoid experiencing anxiety and the potential to be judged for something out of my control. On the other hand, this risk presents neurodivergent tutors with the opportunity to be challenged by their inhibitions and, perhaps, to even learn to embrace leadership roles. Often, tutors with ADHD or dyslexia have had to work harder to create coping mechanisms yet still fall short in their assignments.

Currently, I am recently-married and working as a civil engineer in Kansas City. In my last year working at the writing center my leadership role developed beyond the tutor-student relationship to include my coworkers. Looking back, I was very aware and purposeful in sharing with the next generation of tutors my coping mechanisms and compassionate approach to each appointment that was inclusive for neurodivergent minds but were beneficial to any student. With first-hand knowledge, I know that the next generation of student writing tutors at TAMUK are understanding, courageous, intelligent, and capable of being compassionate to any and all minds they encounter.

“Pointing a Person in a Right Direction”: Alyssa

What makes a leader? When diving deep into this question, we can say that being a leader is pointing a person in a right direction. Those who look up to leaders are putting their trust in the leader, and that is something we should not take for granted. Being a tutor at the TAMUK University Writing Center has taught me a plethora of skills that I will take with me long after I have gone.

But I did not learn these skills all by myself. Other tutors took me along and helped train me while I observed them during tutoring appointments. Tutors who significantly impacted the way I tutor were Shelby and Jaziel. Shelby taught me that it's okay to be different in your approach when helping a student because we are all different. She also taught me to be bold when students are not cooperating and are looking to have their essays written for them. Jaziel was very quiet but also outgoing and that taught me to not be afraid to be my truest self. I have taken what they have shown me and apply it still in the way I tutor and lead.

I am a Hispanic woman with anxiety. Anxiety significantly impacts the way that I act during tutoring appointments. I might start sweating, fidgeting with things, picking at my nails and cuticles, and/ or stuttering, but I know that I can take a minute to gather myself if needed. When we are open with the students about what we struggle with, they are more likely to feel comfortable. I also try and throw in the conversation that I am also still a student like them because that serves as a reminder that I am in their shoes.

“Students Can See My Personality”: Angelica

Coming to TAMUK in the Spring of 2022 as a naive transfer student looking for a part-time job, I was fortunate to find a home with the UWC. Within the first few weeks, I was immersed in a new culture of leadership, work ethic, and determination. Shelby was the first person I met during the new-hire phase. Shelby shaped how I go about appointments and how I present myself—as more than just a tutor, but a real person.

Shelby was open about her identity and all the qualities that made her Shelby. A quality I deeply admire about Shelby is that she was honest in her sessions and let the students know that, at times, she struggled due to her dyslexia and ADHD. However, this never kept her from being one of the writing center's greatest assets. When I find myself stuck and uncertain about the path to take with an appointment, I always ask myself, “WWSD,” what would Shelby do?

From then on, I started my appointments by asking the students how their day was going, what they were up to, or how they had been. Once the student and I found some common ground, both being college students trying to stay afloat, I would then ask basic background questions regarding the assignment.

Due to this initial “ice breaker,” the students can see my personality. This would humanize me just like Shelby, so they knew I was not necessarily a superior but a helpful peer. I felt comfortable using her strategies in each session. For example, I would always take a blank sheet of paper with me into the session in case any notes needed to be written for the student to have a better visual understanding of the paper at hand.

I identify as a 22-year-old Hispanic woman who is an extroverted introvert. That personality combo allows me to judge how to navigate certain appointments and communicate with coworkers. Being Hispanic helped me connect with many students who might have been raised in the same region and culture as me. But I have also gained a vast amount of leadership qualities from Shelby, qualities that helped me provide (in turn) a helping hand to my coworkers.

“The Opportunity to Prove My Worth within Myself”: Larisa

As I came into this new world of peer tutoring, I had a number of hindrances occurring all within my life. I was diagnosed with OCD and Borderline Personality Disorder. The weight of these diagnoses affected my mental health tremendously. When I was younger, something always felt a little off within my own self, and I didn’t know how to explain it or find the accommodations to make everyday tasks more accessible for me. Every item on my itinerary was a chore, and it made me feel as if I could not accomplish the same things as my peers. Getting out of bed in the morning was so hard; it got to the point where my mother would have to drag me out of it.

Once I was offered this job, I was given a new sense of worth and identity. I poured myself into my tutoring and writing. I felt as though I could be the best at what I did if I dedicated my full self to it. However, the way I went about my tutoring process was a struggle, so I began gathering resources and viewing my peers’ appointments a little more closely.

Specifically, I looked to Shelby and Linda—two of our fellow tutors in the writing center who have graduated now. I did not directly ask them for help; however, I did pay closer attention to what it was that they would say or do within their appointments. They constantly displayed how to take control of your appointments and express your thoughts in an organized way. I learned how to talk to and boost students’ confidence, along with the way to go about your critiques as well. Due to their mentorship, I had a much easier time managing the way my appointments went. The flow was better, and I could more thoroughly help and explain the concerns of each student.

Leadership and helping others for me have always been a dream. I was not just given the opportunity to help others, I was given the opportunity to prove my worth within myself.

“I Knew there Was Still Much to Learn”: Annette

As a Hispanic woman in college, I seek to meet people I can relate to and learn from. This was especially important to me when becoming a tutor at our writing center in 2021, where I met individuals I now view as leaders. Although I was still new to tutoring, I noticed how some clients had this presumption that tutors would do the work for them, especially me and fellow female tutors. Rather than asking how to improve their paper, I was handed it and expected to fix it for them. It was difficult to communicate with these students who seemed clearly disengaged and then suddenly became engaged with a male tutor. While there might be several factors as to why this has been a common theme, I knew there was still much to learn.

I was grateful to work alongside people who have heavily influenced how I handle these issues. Someone that I view as one of our notable leaders in the center is Shelby. Shelby, despite having dyslexia and ADHD, taught me how to make each session a collaborative experience. She provided strategies to capture a client's attention, especially for those that could be neurodivergent like herself. One of these strategies included disclosing having dyslexia and ADHD to the client. This was significant in that I learned how it could help clients feel more comfortable and engaged in the session. Another strategy included taking notes on paper during the session to provide for the client after the appointment finished. She told me that rather than simply listing off what needed to be improved during an appointment, this strategy helped her process each piece of information before moving on to the next.

We'd like to end our multilogue with our friend Casidy, a person who, even though she never had the opportunity to work directly with Shelby, has felt the lasting ripple-effects of her leadership nonetheless.

“Amazing People to Learn From”: Casidy

I began working at the UWC in Fall 2022 and was slightly apprehensive and didn't realize that I was stepping into a leadership role. In the past, I've suffered from anxiety, lack of confidence, and a hard time finding my voice. But I've been able to overcome so many of those struggles. I've found a confidence in myself that I didn't know I had, which has affected so much of my life, including improving my grades. I've also been able to find my own voice and communicate with others much better and overcome so much of my anxiety. The UWC has allowed me to grow in so many aspects of my life.

As a Latina student, it can seem like there are not many opportunities to step into leadership roles or find other Latinas to look up to, learn from, and work with. Being given a position at the writing center, I was excited to know I would be working alongside and learning from other tutors, the majority Latina. Working alongside tutors that double as administrative assistants, such as Annette,

Alyssa, and Angelica, has taught me so much about leadership and what a leader looks like. I've gained amazing people to learn from, work with, and have become fast-friends with.

Allowing students to have leadership positions and become role models on campus is so important when working with other students who need someone that they can relate to and feel comfortable around. A lot of students that come in for the first time can be nervous and scared that their papers will be judged harshly, and when they work with tutors who are kind, understanding, and helpful they begin feeling more confident in their writing and more comfortable coming back for help on future assignments.

The more we wish to send the most positive writing-centered ripples of change across our campuses, the more we should embrace a collaborative, shared model of leadership.