

Chapter 17. Counterstory: Ignored Labor with a Writing Center

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This is a writing center (WC) labor story. I am neither a writing center director nor a peer tutor at my university; rather, I am an English faculty member who joined this institution in 2015 and is currently an associate professor, but I have an intersectional relationship with the writing center, as I serve as the liaison between our university writing center and the English department. I also teach the writing tutor training course. As a WC practitioner, I have published some studies about writing centers. At the university where I previously taught, I volunteered as a faculty writing tutor. During my doctoral program study, I was a writing tutor, and my dissertation focused on the topic of writing center ideology. Because of my multifaceted experiences and because I do not have direct administrative or tutoring responsibilities, I see myself as both an insider and an outsider to the WC. Different from other WC stories (e.g., Caswell et al., 2016; Giaimo, 2021), my story is a counterstory about how my labor is ignored by my university's WC administrators.

In 2017, the writing center was taken from the English department and subordinated to the Office of Retention and Student Success (ORSS); its official name became Writing Support Center (WSC), and it was supervised by a non-expert staff member. Its location also moved from inside the library to a classroom building with reduced space. Sadly, there was no official campus announcement about these changes. Students and faculty only heard about them later through word of mouth. As a new faculty member, I did not know about the changes either until one day, in early 2018, I received a phone call from a former retention specialist, asking if I would be able to conduct tutor training workshops. Recommended by my dean, I was considered an expert because of my writing center background, so I complied.

I understood the changes to the writing center because some universities locate them in student life departments, etc. Based on its utilization, a smaller space for the WC could also work. However, I believed changing the name to WSC was imprudent as *support* carried a negative connotation that reinforces the long-term stigma of a WC as a “fix-it” shop. It may mislead students and faculty. This name change, to some degree, might encourage those faculty members who do not understand the work of the WC to direct their students to visit this facility to fix writing problems. Students might be reluctant to utilize it as nobody wants to be labeled “weak” or in need of “support.” What surprised me further was that

it was only then that I learned that those tutors had not received any formal or informal training before they started working as tutors. They were merely recommended as strong writers by their composition instructors or even self-recommended as they needed an on-campus job.

Firmly believing that tutor training is essential for tutors and benefits writers, I immediately accepted this invitation with compensation neither offered nor requested. I carefully prepared a series of workshops, covering various topics throughout the whole semester. The workshops were well received. Because of tutors' positive feedback, I was appointed by the dean to be the liaison between the English department and the WSC. Tutors' questions regarding different issues during the workshops made me realize that there was an urgent need for a writing tutor training course. I then proposed this idea to my department. With the approval of the chair, the curriculum committee, and the Office of Academic Affairs, I planned to offer a tutor training course in the 2020 spring semester. I was excited and thinking of how to assist the WSC to better serve students through their collaboration. But events did not go in the direction I expected.

When designing the course, I shared my course syllabus with the WSC administrator for her input. I did not receive any response, which was frustrating, but not unexpected. As the liaison, I expected to work collaboratively with the administrator. For example, I suggested having a conversation about renaming the WSC. Again, I did not hear anything back. Knowing the WSC had neither a mission statement nor a webpage to communicate its purpose and service, and suffered from a declining staff and client base, I proposed two remedial plans: (1) creating a WSC webpage and posting flyers, including its mission statement, service, location, and hours, (2) allowing tutors to visit classes, especially writing classes, at the beginning of each semester to introduce the WSC. For my proposed ideas to be heard, not ignored, I purposefully shared them during the 2021 fall semester's faculty meeting. Unfortunately, my first idea was ignored, and the second was rejected immediately. The reason was "we don't want to interrupt any classes, we cannot do so!" even though I explained that a tutor's classroom visit would be brief, simply promoting the WSC's existence and allowing its service to be known. This short-sighted thinking demoralized me. But I told myself that laymen need persistent enlightenment, so I continued to persevere.

During the pandemic, many university writing centers quickly switched to online tutoring, synchronous and/or asynchronous. The WSC, however, failed to make such adjustments. Its reaction to the abruptness of COVID-imposed restrictions was to limit the number of sessions and only allow scheduled sessions, excluding walk-ins. Believing that my suggestions might be ignored as usual, I altered my approach in communicating with the WSC about the importance of online tutoring. This time, I shared my tutor training course students' research projects with my students' permission. In order to protect my students and be discreet, I purposefully removed students' names and deleted sensitive statements that pinpointed the WSC's deficiencies. In my email to the WSC and ORSS,

I applied an inquiring tone and admitted that some ideas were merely a starting point. I also expressed my hope for an open discussion to address these concerns about the WSC. Not surprisingly, I experienced the same results as before—I never heard back from anyone, not even an acknowledgement reply.

Occasionally, I received emails from the WSC administrator, addressing issues such as the arrangements of the WCS practicum for my students. The WSC administrator's emails to me, however, focused on matters pertinent to what the administrator wanted to address, such as recruiting tutors, but ignored discussing my concerns and requests. During the 2022 spring semester, when I brought my students to the WSC for their practicum, I invited the WSC administrator to meet my students. The administrator's first question was asking students' major. When finding out one student was majoring in computer science, the administrator immediately said to him "I need you, I will hire you to tutor math!" Later, I even received a follow-up email from the administrator, requesting more information about that student. This was not the only occasion where my well-trained students were redirected into other "more important" areas. I understood that the administrator supervised several centers, but I felt these interactions should focus on introducing the WSC to the prospective writing tutors.

For years, none of my initiatives were discussed, let alone accepted. I kept consoling myself that the WSC administrator's priority was to ensure that all the centers run each and every day. Yet, I felt frustrated with my wasted efforts and recognized that a positive, collegial, respectful relationship was definitely missing between us. Honestly, I lamented the fact that such an indispensable learning facility was not fully developed or even recognized, and my expertise was neither valued nor utilized. I sometimes even thought about reporting my observations to my dean so that the dean would use his power to push reforms, but I also worried that such an attempt would be viewed as further interference.

Reflecting on these administrators' behaviors toward me, I thought it might be a result of their protection of their academic fiefdoms. I even joked about myself that I am just a liaison that can be seen as an outsider in these administrators' eyes, as someone who does not understand their practices but keeps bothering them. Although my ultimate goal was to assist in improving the WSC for students, I felt alienated from any meaningful engagement with it.

My counterstory displays a writing center practitioner's labor and frustration. I want to identify the crux of such a situation and hope to seek solutions to overcome the constraints I face. Meanwhile, my alternatives are limited: I could bypass the current political structure to make independent announcements about the WSC to the student body, but this would be seen as insubordinate to my department and make me an enemy of the WSC administrator. Going to my chair, dean, or provost would risk my reputation as being pushy, and I might still have no guarantee of a response. However, not performing the little work I am allowed to do could harm students. I feel trapped by my situation with no ethical way out.

References

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