

Theme 3. Advocacy Successes

Although the prior section examined precarity, there are many ways in which writing center administrators and writing center professional staff advocate successfully for better working conditions. Advocacy—often not in the job description but absolutely necessary for a functional writing center—is perhaps the most visible and identifiable form of metalabor. One of the most important points that demands advocacy centers on tutor pay. In this section, several pieces talk about the importance of shoring up tutor pay (Whiddon’s “. . . at least for now”; Tirabassi’s “Advocating for Equitable Pay”; and Anonymous’ “From the Archive”). Writing center administrators are often tasked with a difficult moral calculus: every increase in tutor wages can often mean fewer tutor hours, which, in turn, results in fewer students able to access writing center resources. For Whiddon and Tirabassi, better tutor pay is critical because they both staff their centers with student labor and struggle with profound staff retention issues because of low on-campus pay for student workers. Both share ways they have advocated through collecting data on pay across the region and across the country. Tirabassi also details a collaborative campus-wide effort to organize different student learning offices to increase pay for workers. These examples of advocacy and tutor/worker-centered approaches anticipate and provide useful examples of the forms of anti-capitalism we describe at length in Act III. There is astonishingly little published research on the topic of tutor pay. These stories invite further conversation and advocacy on this topic.

In “From the Archive of a Tutor Representative’s Email Correspondences (Summer 2022),” Anonymous provides a different take on advocacy related to union representation, professional tutor pay, hazard pay, and additional support for workers during the pandemic. Through everyday documents like email, Anonymous shows us how critical it is to both aggregate and share information about working conditions and union benefits and regulations. Without this kind of advocacy, workers can be adrift in the changing landscape of higher education. Even with this kind of advocacy work, however, upheaval tends to dominate the workplace. The emails not only share important information about pandemic pay; they tell the story of a director leaving their position and the writing center being moved. In this way, the union representative becomes a point of continuity in an otherwise chaotic moment in the workplace, highlighting the importance of labor organizing. Here we affirm and extend compositionist James R. Daniel’s (2022) assertion that “Unions are the most effective means of securing stable faculty positions, improving salaries, defending intellectual labor, and combatting the university’s privatization in ways that offer to provide contingent faculty the foothold they need in the academy” (p. 174). We feel Daniel’s (2022) claim is applicable to writing center staff due to stories in this collection, such as Anthony’s,

which details the issues of retention of professional staff because of low pay and lack of benefits. While some workers might prefer a part-time job, as Anthony notes, this particular and perennial issue of writing center work (low pay, low stability, high turnover) deeply impacts writing center administrators, workplace morale, and continuity of service. Echoing the previous section on precarity, it is one of our greatest challenges and has few easy answers.

Training and support are also a subject of advocacy among several of the contributions to this project, echoing some of Wang-Hiles' narrative in the prior section. Imirie ("I Have No Idea," this collection) and Dunskey ("Writing Fellows; Writing Students," this collection) each discuss the ethics surrounding tutor training. Whereas Imirie points out the problematic nature of assuming that a "good" writer will be a good tutor, Dunskey shows how organizations and the managed university can co-opt models that appear on the surface to be similar to writing center pedagogy but can often serve gatekeeping functions at odds with our field's best practices. Both narratives show the harm that can come to both tutors and writers through a lack of deliberation around tutor training and the kinds of work involved in taking an ethical approach to tutor training.

Finally, Keaton's "Overloaded" (this collection) examines how WCDs balance their own duties with professionalizing student tutors, with meeting the demand for sessions, and with outreach at the writing center. This labor, like so many other tasks around center work, is often fraught with implications both moral and practical.

Discussion Questions

- What are some of the challenges of hiring and retaining student workers in the writing center (especially during times when jobs are plentiful and wages are increasing)? What might we do to more fairly compensate writing center workers? Whiddon and Tirabassi share some of the actions they took in their narratives below.
- As highlighted in the previous sections, writing center administrators often face tension in balancing their writing center duties against their teaching, service, and research. Advocacy and other forms of metalabor associated with writing center administration obviously add more to this tension. Still, Whiddon's narrative demonstrates the viability of using research to fuel advocacy, and advocacy to serve as an exigence to identify gaps around labor and material conditions in the field. What other opportunities for advocacy do you see that are in need of more research?
- How do we build coalitions and organize on campus between various student support centers or spaces where student workers make up the majority of the staff? While Tirabassi shares some of her strategies in her story, try to develop additional strategies and actions that are specific to institutional context.

- An under-explored group of writing center workers—writing specialists—bring a lot to the positions they occupy in writing centers. At the same time, there are challenges in retention and hiring writing specialists. How can we create more sustainable and ethical writing specialist positions? What opportunities are there for bringing writing specialists into the writing center in ways that professionally develop them?
- Trace the different kinds of labor that Anonymous’s “From the Archive of A Tutor Representative’s Email Correspondences (Summer 2022)” undertakes to advocate for members of their union and, also, to push back against extractive workplace policies. What parts of the anti-capitalism framework (as we describe in Act III) are most applicable here and why?
- How do we prepare the next generation of writing center administrators for their work as on-the-ground administrators and as worker and workplace advocates? What lessons might we learn from Imirie and others who detail their on-the-job development?
- How do we frame writing center work as anti-capitalist? Is there value in doing so? And, if yes, what is the value?