



Writing Center Tutor Corps: A Veterans-Tutoring-Veterans Program

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The first time I entered the writing center at my undergraduate institution, I might not have been recognizably nervous, but I was definitely dealing with some internal stress. This writing center was set up as a series of tables with the tutors' backs to the wall and the students' backs to the door. Lots of people were walking through this one point of entry and exit. After going on urban patrols in Iraq, where the threat of an enemy attack is a 360-degree consideration, my head was on a swivel. Because I was unable to participate, I felt disconnected from the civilian world as a whole. After leaving that writing center that day, I never returned there to receive tutoring.

We begin with this reflection by co-author Micah Wright, a veteran who spent four years in the United States Marine Corps, in order to underscore a disturbing difference between how writing centers wish to be perceived—inviting, safe, and worthwhile—and how some veterans may experience them. Not only might the space itself provoke hypervigilance, but our non-directive tutoring methods can also be perceived as a frustrating waste of time and aberrant to military culture. Even publicizing our efforts as helping veterans “transition” from the military to academia can be seen as insulting. That terminology may suggest that veterans must abandon their military identification and training, even though that training clearly has value. Moreover veterans’ identification as individuals who have served their country is also a source of pride and can co-exist with an identification as a student.

It was precisely this disconnect between what our writing center was doing and what we could/should be doing for our student veterans that led to the creation of a veterans-tutoring-veterans program that we named Writing Center Tutor Corps (WCTC). Our great hope is that in sharing our story, other writing/academic support centers will find new ways to help the student veterans on their campuses.

VETERANS IN THE ACADEMY

Over one million veterans have enrolled in higher education, "constituting approximately 5% of all U.S. postsecondary students" (McCaslin, et al. 191). Although the national average for completing a postsecondary degree is 59.1%, with first-time, full-time students at four-year public institutions averaging a 67.5% graduation rate (The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center), 51.7% of student veterans are successful (Cate).

Among the challenges that veterans face, an important few can be ameliorated by a veterans-tutoring-veterans writing center program. For example, because the military is so structured, the autonomy of the academy can feel overwhelming. Student veteran Alex notes, "In the military, you're always told where to go, where to be. You don't have to develop a schedule" (Bagby, et al. 225). However, since a veteran tutor has also participated in the military experience and successfully adjusted, he/she can help provide student veterans with tips for planning and prioritizing coursework. Setting up recurring appointments and deadlines adds structure, as well.

Another concern expressed by student veterans is feeling adrift on campus, wishing they could establish the community they had come to depend upon in the military (DiRamio, et al. 87). As student veteran Joseph explains, "When you're in the military, you have this built-in social structure, [a] support network that's there, everywhere you go, that's based off shared experiences, shared culture" (Hinton 264). Unfortunately, for some veterans, their civilian colleagues often fall short. As another student veteran observes, "Dealing with younger students is difficult because they have no real perspective on life and don't understand what real life is like" (Gregg, et al. 95). In fact, as McCaslin et al. note, if veterans avoid non-veterans, this may even mean a loss of academic support as veterans avoid "potential sources of assistance (e.g. professors, counseling center staff) [who] may be viewed with mistrust and assumed to be unable to understand the Veteran experience" (193). Student veterans need tutors who can bridge the military/academia gap.

Assuming that qualified veteran tutors are available, why wouldn't writing centers make this option available? Hiring a veteran to tutor in the writing center is a great start toward serving our student veterans because of the unique qualities veterans possess. But getting student veterans to seek tutoring help and ensuring that they feel safe and want to return can be complicated. The steps

we took to create our veterans-tutoring-veterans program is the focus of the remainder of this article.

WRITING CENTER TUTOR CORPS

We sheepishly admit that in the fall of 2012, despite the fact that there were 1,203 student veterans enrolled at Texas State at that time, the only accommodations our university writing center made were a few flags at the reception desk and a “Thank You for Your Service” banner on our website on Veterans Day. We had no student veterans on staff.

And then two chance meetings occurred. First, while passing through our university writing center, the provost casually mentioned to Nancy, the director at that time, that there might be some money for veterans’ initiatives, and she should consider sending him a proposal. Second, at an English Department get-together a few days later, Nancy happened to speak with co-author Micah Wright, a graduate student in the M.A. in Rhetoric/Composition program at that time. He shared with her the story with which we begin this article, also mentioning that even before his visit he was reluctant to seek help at his undergraduate university’s writing center because he didn’t believe the tutors knew what they were doing.

For Nancy, the value of having a veteran on the Writing Center staff suddenly seemed so obvious. She requested \$3,000 to hire a student veteran to work in the Writing Center for twenty hours a week. Not only would this person tutor student veterans, but he/she would also provide insider knowledge of how to get student veterans into the writing center and how to make sure they feel comfortable while they’re there. Worst case scenario, if there were not enough student veteran clients to keep this individual busy, the veteran could be placed on the regular schedule.

With the requested grant from the provost, Writing Center Tutor Corps (WCTC) was launched in the fall of 2012, with Micah as the first WCTC Coordinator. In what follows, we describe the basic steps we took to create this veterans-tutoring-veterans program, as well as our rationales.

Step One: Connect with Other Veterans Service Providers

In crafting Writing Center Tutor Corps, we first checked with our university’s Veterans Advisory Council (VAC), a campus group of faculty, staff, and students that launched in 2008 in order to promote student veteran success at our university. In part we wanted to ensure that we would not be duplicating existing services, but

we were also seeking partners to help us publicize the program. VAC members have, in fact, become key players in the development of WCTC. Attending VAC “Pizza Days” and football game tailgating parties became key outreach efforts for Micah and Assistant Writing Center Director Caitlin McCrory. And because of the Master of Social Work (MSW) program’s focus on serving veterans, Micah began working closely with their faculty and students, even securing an MSW intern who was responsible for tutoring and mentoring student veterans.

Step Two: Design Special Programming

In addition to placing student veterans in the writing center as tutors, the Veterans Advisory Council recommended offering workshops specifically for veterans, such as “How to Write the Criminal Justice Paper” and “How to Shift from Military-ese to Academic Writing.” During our first semester, Micah initiated a monthly veteran-specific writing workshop entitled *Writing Boot Camp*, which included “The Basics of Writing,” “Professional Writing,” and “Resume Writing 101.” Doing so gave Micah access to a diverse military/veteran population at Texas State, but also provided veterans with more chances to reconnect with and help fellow veterans. Likewise, partnering with the Military Veteran Peer Network, WCTC hosted a writing retreat for the military/veteran community at Texas State and in the surrounding communities. The purpose of implementing the retreat was to pull veterans away from the academic or “civilian” world for a weekend, so they could connect and heal, if needed, with other veterans. By implementing workshops in a controlled and serene environment, we could help veterans by not only mentoring them, but also by helping them mentor the other veterans at the retreat. Eventually, this mentoring function warranted its own program, which now exists as Veterans Guiding Veterans, modeled after and co-located with Tutor Corps. The current WCTC Coordinator regularly attends a Friday fly-fishing event for student veterans.

Step Three: Tailor Promotional Materials

To attract student veterans’ attention, we needed to revise our existing promotional materials featuring students of traditional age tutoring other students of traditional age. In crafting new promotional materials, Micah followed Florence A. Hamrick and Corey B. Rumann’s recommendation that “higher education administrators should work to create symbols and messages within their campus cultures that indicate to Veterans and service members that they are respected, appreciated, and welcomed” (82). For example, Micah wanted to emphasize the comradery of the

military while clarifying that this was an academic service. “Writing Center Tutor Corps” fit the bill. Our promotional materials also expressly acknowledged a student veteran’s dual identity—a student *and* a veteran. Micah designed a WCTC logo and developed promotional flyers that drew parallels between the challenges the veteran faced in the military and academic challenges. One flyer, for example, featured the combination of the question “Are you losing sleep over writing a paper?” and a quotation from the head of U.S. Central Command General Mattis (who became the Secretary of Defense in the Trump administration): “I don’t lose any sleep at night over the potential for failure. I cannot even spell the word” (Roy).

Writing Center staff sported Writing Center Tutor Corps t-shirts, sending a message that the Writing Center was a veteran-friendly environment with staff fully committed to supporting our veterans’ academic success. We promoted the program whenever anyone presented on the writing center in order to reach as many student veterans as possible. Again and again, we sent the message that if the student veteran feared failing because of a paper, he or she would know that the Writing Center Tutor Corps existed to help him or her “complete the mission” of graduating.

Step Four: Assess Your Writing Center Space

In 2013, the Writing Center appointments took place in cubicles with the student sitting with his or her back to the door of the cubicle and facing a window that looks out to a busy commons. However, in “‘Front and Center’: Marine Student-Veterans, Collaboration, and the Writing Center,” Corrine E. Hinton notes that by “conducting sessions in a less visible location, consultants may reduce any anxiety or embarrassment student-Veterans may feel in asking for assistance” (273). One option was to locate WCTC at the Veterans’ Center that was to be located in our university student union, but the Veterans’ Center was going to be a site for social gathering, so it would be noisy and therefore distracting for any tutoring sessions held there.

We opted to house the WCTC in the Writing Center, but were able to designate an office specifically for the WCTC. It feels safe physically and psychologically because what is said cannot be overheard. Although the student veteran typically sits with his or her back to the door, the veteran tutor sits facing the door and is thus able to watch the student’s back. The veteran tutor is also able to, if requested, close the door, shutting off the world that makes the student nervous. Of course, not every writing center will be able to designate an office for veterans. If this is the case, writ-

ing centers should ask male and female veterans to assess their writing center space for possible triggers and then do whatever is possible to eliminate them.

Step Five: Tap Student Veterans' Strengths

With so much of the literature on student veterans focused on their shortcomings, it is important to consider their strengths. Although student veterans may be reluctant to seek help (McCaslin et al. 193), if they do come into the writing center, their tendency to believe in the importance of “competence, resilience, self-reliance” (193) can translate into a strong motivation to focus and learn. Student veterans are also accustomed to teamwork (Hinton 264), which is good news for writing centers, given our emphasis on collaboration. Indeed, Hamrick and Rumann found that student veterans’ strategies for succeeding in academia include “attempting to form a student group” and “strategically disclosing experiences within supportive environments” (452). It is also especially useful in a writing center to consider that many student veterans have considerable experience with writing, and those skills are transferable; that is, professors also appreciate clear, concise, and correct writing. Even a preference for professors to “be direct, concise, and specific in their communication, show models of acceptable work, or provide repeated feedback at all stages of an assignment” (Hinton 271) is indicative of an individual motivated to learn and not waste time.

TUTOR CORPS, 2012-PRESENT

Two years into the WCTC program, Micah received the following email from Bob Kupcho, a graduate student in our university’s Master’s in Social Work program: “I have started to look at the data we collected in our 2013 Needs Assessment, and I wanted to let you know that the Writing Center got a positive response from several of the Veterans that took it. One Veteran even reported that it was the most helpful resource they have used on campus, which was another question.” In an appearance on *Education Talk Radio Two*, Alexis Hart also gave a nod to Micah and Tutor Corps, citing it as an example of an innovative program designed to encourage student veterans to seek out writing assistance. In response, Provost Gene Bourgeois wrote, “A chance walk through the center and a chance meeting with Nancy leads to support for an innovative and successful initiative! And people ask why I like being a provost!”

Which is not to say that all has been perfect. In a 2014 letter to the editor in our university newspaper, Alex Porter, an individual with no known connection to our university, blasted our writing cen-

ter for “fracturing the staff” by identifying on our website those who had participated in “Veteran sensitivity training.” He asked, “Why do I need someone with my same background and experience to help me edit a paper? What is this about? It’s insane.” (Porter also criticized on the same grounds the LBGTQ Allies.) A student veteran responded, “Mr. Porter is obviously not a Veteran because even a Veteran who did not choose to be tutored by another Veteran would understand why some might.” The tutors were also troubled; they resented someone projecting his own bias onto them and were frankly bewildered that someone would deny student veterans a service that all students could use. When asked about the letter, a veteran tutor shook his head and replied, “you can’t receive ‘preferential treatment’ if the entire academic system is set up without you in mind at all.” However, Porter’s letter did alert us to the need to clarify in our promotional materials that WCTC is not proprietary: WCTC tutors can, and often do, tutor civilian students requesting appointments, and veterans can, and often do, seek help from civilian writing center tutors.

A major, positive shift in WCTC occurred in 2014 when it expanded to include the university’s Student Learning Assistance Center (SLAC). When asked why, WCTC Coordinator Brooke Holbrook answered, “because veterans need help in other classes, too.” Eight student veterans are now providing tutoring at SLAC in math, biology, chemistry, history, political science, art, communications, philosophy, Spanish, and German. In Fall 2016, they tutored 85 student veterans with a total of 405 visits. And the WCTC program itself continues to thrive; in this same timeframe, the Writing Center tutored 39 student veterans with a total of 90 visits.

We believe strongly that our program has improved student veterans’ lives, helping them to feel valued, supported, and successful, and we hope that our experiences will help other Writing Centers seeking to do the same. Our veterans deserve no less.



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