

Tutors' Column: "Is Writing for the Majority?: Examining Diversity in the Writing Center"

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Editors' Note: *Daisha Denise Oliver passed away on June 17, 2021, while in the process of revising her Tutors' Column. To honor her memory and her voice, we are publishing the May 2021 version of her column—unfinished, but still vital. Daisha was a 2021 graduate of Pfeiffer University and was to continue her studies in the Masters of Social Work program at Winthrop University this fall. WLN is grateful to Daisha's sister, Dedra, for her assistance in publishing this column.*



Why don't more minorities come to the Writing Center? Am I stepping outside my race standards or expectations? Where are the individuals who look just like me? Am I always going to be alone in the Writing Center? These questions come to mind when I reflect on being an African American employed by the Pfeiffer University Writing Center. As a new consultant, I wondered why so few minorities seem to be employed by or using our center. Being an African American and a fairly new consultant puts me in the position to improve my WC by considering the issues that impact diversity, especially because I can see the center in a different light than my fellow staff and faculty.

During my first semester in the writing center, I worked with only three African American clients; during Fall 2019, I had five African American clients. In these two years, I have met with fewer than ten Latinx students. A review of the statistics of ethnicity at Pfeiffer University reveals that our student population is 59% White, 27% Black, 6% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Non-Resident Alien, 2% Asian, <1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and <4% other or unknown ethnicity (*Pfeiffer University Fact Book 2017-2018*). Although more than half of the students are white, 41% are minorities; it follows that I should be consulting students of multiple different races, but that's just not happening. The lack of diversity among the writing center staff could be one factor that contributes to this problem. Last year, I wasn't the only African American consultant, but now I am the only African American tutor on our staff of eight. All to-

gether, there are only two minorities other than myself, and they are administrative assistants. According to my director, mostly white women attend recruitment interviews.¹ The lack of confidence that students of color possess could be leading them not to apply. Reflecting on my own experience, I had never thought of myself as a writer before becoming a consultant. Of course, I could put words on paper, turn in an assignment, and hope for a good grade, but transforming into a consultant who helps others with their writing? I could never have seen that in my future because I had low confidence in my writing.

This fear and low confidence could have held me back from becoming a consultant. However, in 2017 I was invited to work in the WC by my director, who was previously my English professor during my freshman year. When my director offered me the position, I was shocked at first, but two aspects gave me the push to take the opportunity. First, my roommate and friend worked in the Writing Center at the time, and talking to her increased my interest. The second aspect that pushed me was being noticed as a good writer. To hear the confidence my director had in me motivated me to at least try. While many consultants might feel this fear of not being good enough to work at a WC, my fear is tied to my race and living in a racist society, which makes these feelings more challenging to conquer. Not only do I cope with a lack of confidence, but I also have to consider my identity within academia. When some African Americans take high positions in a white-dominant career, of which writing center work is one, they have to transform themselves to be taken seriously (Wingfield and Alston 274). Moreover, when African Americans transform themselves, it's usually by acting or thinking as a white individual. Issues of racial identity combined with the fear of not being good enough can lead minorities to avoid seeking or accepting employment in writing centers, as was almost the case in my situation.

In addition to the diversity problem in writing center staff demographics, we also have the problem of lack of writing center use by minorities. For many minority students, it is more dangerous to "step outside their comfort zones" because of racism. In the same way that the pressure of racial identity affects me as a minority consultant, it also affects me as a student writer. As an African American college student, I'm held on a pedestal and expected not to typify racist stereotypes. At the same time, when I was growing up, my African American peers would classify what behavior was considered white and black, and if I ever did something deemed "not black," I was looked at as abnormal. Writing was perceived as a white activity perhaps because there was a bias to how and what

was taught in writing classes. This concept of "writing white" comes from the ideology of "colorblindness." "Colorblindness" is a way of avoiding the racism of the past by simply pretending that racial differences don't exist, which means students don't see color in their writing and students of color need to mask themselves, their experiences, and views (Barron and Grimm 59). The idea of "writing white" is complicated further by the need many people of color feel to "protect" the feelings of white people, which happens when individuals of color avoid directly voicing their thoughts and opinions in their writing and instead choose to dilute their message. In the past (and perhaps the present) when minorities make white people angry, the outcome for minorities was never good, and can even be dangerous. Thus, protecting white people can be a defense mechanism on the part of minorities so that chaos doesn't come. Writing assignments often call for a personal connection to a writer's truth, and it is difficult to become personal in such fraught circumstances.

Throughout any college campus, students will have to write essays, but what happens when a student needs to write about a controversial issue or topic that is uncomfortable for people to read, but captures the reality of the world we call home? In many of my courses I am the only African American. I love to write about racial issues relevant to my generation, and if a professor or student takes the time to read between the lines, my writing speaks of the reality African Americans endure. African Americans often see writing assignments as an opportunity to tell their truth, but they worry the assignment will be downgraded because professors or consultants harbor racism, even if they don't realize it. I see this issue at the heart of why some students of color struggle with writing assignments: they are forced to enact a double consciousness, always thinking of how their writing will be perceived by others, and the potential harm that may result from that perception, instead of writing their truth.

This need to disguise one's true feelings in one's writing can provoke resentment towards writing assignments and may explain why attendance at the WC by people of color is so low. Students of color expect the WC "to comment only on their sentence structure, organization, [and] help them find the 'right' phrases, but [consultants], unaware of his or her participation in the colorblind pretense, may wonder what 'right' phrase means" (Barron and Grimm 59). In other words, when consultants change certain aspects of a paper written by a person of color, it can seem as if the consultant is eliminating that student's race, ethnicity, or culture. Thus, the WC runs the risk of becoming a place that eliminates your culture

out of your writing under the pretense of “correction.” “Writing white” often means that minorities resist inserting their authentic selves into their writing and fear visiting the WC.

In conclusion, the colorblindness of campuses and the topic chosen to write about in the paper are two reasons why minorities might be avoiding writing centers; however, that doesn't mean diversity is a complicated issue. The expansion of diversity in writing centers could be achieved by adding more minority staff and encouraging minority students to come to the center for help. I encourage all staff and consultants to consider every individual who may enter your writing center as a unique person because consideration and acknowledgment go a long way. I recommend that consultants make sure a personal belief and race show through students' writing. When a consultant is helping student writers of color, make sure you can still read who the student is.

NOTE

1. When it comes to diversity among staff in my Writing Center, my director reports, “I often think about the diversity of the consultants—in terms of color, gender, and major—and I want to increase the diversity. Most of the time, though, the people who come for interviews are white women.”

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