



# Southern Discourse in the Center

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

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# ***Back to the Center***

## **Creativity, Collaboration, Community: The Transylvania University Writing Center**

Jordan Long and Katherine Tucker

Founded in the early 1980s by longstanding professor Martha Gehringer, the Transylvania University Writing Center has recently moved to a collaborative space in the Academic Center for Excellence located in the university library. Current Writing Center initiatives, such as the Writing Lab program and growing social media presence, have allowed the TUWC to gain enough momentum to win a variety of awards. The center was the winner of the 2018 Martinson Award from the Small Liberal Arts College Writing Program Administration organization and the winner of two Christine Cozzens Research grants from the Southeastern Writing Centers Association for course-embedded peer tutoring pilot program. Similarly, staffer Jordan Long received the Southeastern Writing Center Association Undergraduate Tutor of the Year award for 2018. TUWC has also been represented via research in peer-reviewed journals such as *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship* and *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*.



Figure 1. Four students working collaboratively. (Photo courtesy of Scott Whiddon.)

## ***Center Insight***

Transylvania University offers students the rare opportunity to study at a liberal arts school located in the heart of a major city. Founded in 1780 as the oldest college west of the Allegheny Mountains, Transylvania's rich history and urban setting allow students to live at the intersection of culture, history, and growth. The interdisciplinary nature of the liberal arts curriculum is the heart of the academic experience at the university, as students immerse themselves not just in their major, but in the four disciplines of humanities, fine arts, social sciences, and natural sciences as well. Writing is heavily integrated within this interdisciplinary curriculum, both as a tool of communication and as an analytical framework for the larger world.

The Transylvania University Writing Center furthers the liberal arts mission of the college by fostering a collaborative environment designed to create better writers, not better papers. In such a writing intensive collegiate environment, the writing center aims to improve the confidence and abilities of students across campus in order to help them not just with their papers, but with their holistic writing process as they prepare to move on to the job market and graduate school. To that end, the writing center offers a wide breadth of services, including one on one consulting sessions, class workshops, repeated writing lab sessions, course embedded tutoring, and pre-health workshops.

### **FALL 2017**

Sessions for Semester: 488 (Does not include in-class workshops or course-embedded peer support)

Number of Consultants: 13

Center Hours: 9AM-5PM M-F; 8-10PM T, TH, Sun

Consultants are recruited through a dual nomination and application process. Faculty members and veteran staffers nominate potential staffers, and nominated students then fill out an application. The combined input of staffers and faculty results in a diverse, talented set of new consultants. Staffers are recruited from various disciplines across campus and offer a wide knowledge base; the recently graduated class of

staffers are pursuing opportunities in fields such as law, medicine, education, digital media, public policy, conflict management, and programming.



*Figure 2. Consultant working with student. (Courtesy of Transylvania U./Stephen Russell.)*

### ***Training and Professional Development***

The Transylvania University Writing Center's success is dependent upon the training and dedication put in by the staffers themselves. Each staffer completes a director-led practicum course during which they spend a semester exploring topics in writing center discourse, the strengths and weaknesses that a wide range of writers bring to the table, and expectations of writing both within Transylvania's community and the larger culture of writing. Similarly, each staffer must shadow and lead sessions of their own, with the encouragement of seasoned staffers, to begin the transition from trainee to consultant. With a holistic focus in all areas of education, such as theory, application, and professional development, the practicum course prepares staffers for work both inside and outside of the TUWC.

As a part of the continuing professional development for staffers, the Writing Center hosts guest speakers and a yearly pedagogy workshop in collaboration with the University's Writing Advisory Committee. In 2018, the writing center had the privilege to welcome Dr. Danielle DeVoss from Michigan State University for a lecture on the use and implementation of multimodal work. TUWC has also hosted Stacia

Watkins, Tiane Donahue, Bruce Horner, Rebecca Nowacek, and others. The speaker series sponsored by the writing center provide a space for students to engage in dialogue about writing theory and pedagogy, as well as integrate the writing center with the larger campus community.

### ***Growth, Goals & Multimodality***

The Transylvania University Writing Center curates a space that serves as a resource to faculty and students alike, focusing on the evolving needs of the campus community. Data collected during this past academic year show that over 66 percent of all available consultation hours were scheduled for individual appointments. This is a dramatic increase from the previous two years where only 33 percent of available hours were used: TUWC doubled its amount of one-to-one peer consultations in such a brief timespan. The vision of the TUWC is to have consistent and sustainable growth, both as a staff and within the institution. Our new location receives more student traffic and has allowed for greater visibility for the Center as a whole. With a more central location, the TUWC has seen an increase in individual appointments. Similarly, the space has shifted from being strictly reserved for Writing Center activities to a more inclusive setting for the academic and social arenas of Transylvania's campus. Now more than ever, events such as poetry readings and student newspaper workshops are hosted in the Writing Center, organizations use the space for regular meetings, and students choose to gather for group study sessions.



*Figure 3. Consultant and student reading together. (Courtesy of Scott Whiddon.)*

The move to the library has also begun to bridge the gap between the TUWC and the rise of digital literacies throughout campus, and has served as the first step toward the program's goal of integrating multimodality and technology in the writing process. The TUWC aims to mirror the rising use and prevalence of digital technologies on Transylvania's campus due to the Transylvania Digital Liberal Arts Initiative, which has become crucial to the liberal arts curriculum across all disciplines. Given that the move prompted the upgrade of technological equipment and the library has a vast collection of accessible digital tools, the inclusion of digital literacy into the WC pedagogy was seamless. With recent rebranding initiatives, a new staff, research proposals in digital rhetoric, and a variety of student composed promotional materials, the TUWC is working towards rethinking staffer professional development to incorporate a strong multimodal component.

### *Support for Students*

The campus impact of the Transylvania University Writing Center is reflected in the rising number of one-to-one peer appointments, ESL tutoring sessions, in-class workshops, and the most recent pilot programs. During this past academic year, there were 488 one-on-one appointments in the fall, with 197 of those being first year students. The Writing Center is historically a complimentary resource to Transylvania's first year writing program, which is reflected not only in the amount of individual appointments made with consultants and first-year students, but also in the fact that, in 2017, 50 percent of all First Year Research Seminar sections requested and hosted in-class workshops.

Such positive responses to in-class workshops led to the creation of the writing center's pilot course-embedded tutoring programs. TUWC's first course-embedded pilot focused on three courses outside of First Year Seminar offerings, collaborating with faculty members in English, Sociology, and Exercise Science. The second and third pilots -- in conjunction with SWCA-affiliated writing centers at Nova Southeastern, Elon University, and Eastern Kentucky University -- focused on first-year programming and writing center campus branding. Each of these pilots led to presentations at SWCA conferences and built stronger campus ties to the writing center, as 97 percent of students

involved in course-embedded tutoring stated that they were likely to come back outside of their class.



Figure 4. TUWC brochure (Courtest of Jordan Long).

Furthering this campus outreach, the Pre-Health Workshop series extends the success of classroom-based workshops and embedded tutoring to the professional realm. Through a series of four sessions, the workshops offer students who plan to pursue health career paths the opportunity to brainstorm, draft, and refine a personal statement. These workshops, in partnership with the Office of Career Development and the Library, teach students not only how to draft a personal statement for graduate school, but provide a completed product for the pre- health committee.

***The Path Forward: Room for Improvement***

In addition to making more frequent visits to the writing center, Transylvania students are truly seeing results from the time that they spend in the space. Of the students that completed the feedback survey sent out after their individual appointments, 89 percent of respondents asserted that sessions were “excellent,” while 98 percent of respondents noted that they planned on returning for further sessions and would highly recommend our services to their fellow peers.

Such success depends on the writing center responding to the ever-evolving needs of the student body without compromising the staffers' ability to cultivate relationships with patrons. However, in the attempt to both move pedagogy forward and cement strong relationships, the staffers often feel overstretched and overworked. To address this concern, an expanded cohort of 22 staffers will begin in the fall of 2018, and an internal grant will provide funding for courses- embedded tutoring for this coming academic year. This workload challenge, in conjunction with the difficulty in maintaining the wide breadth of services offered, has precipitated the opportunity to re-evaluate the identity and purpose of the writing center.

In the coming year, the new team of staffers seeks to improve services by clarifying the goals and practices of TUWC to campus community members, by developing stronger ties to campus writing stakeholders, and by being more proactive in communicating our vision via our new website ([embed link](#)) and active social media presence ([embed link](#)). With these goals in mind, the TUWC strives to cultivate the human relationships at the core of a liberal arts education. As one staffer articulated, “the writing center provides this really useful academic resource, but, in a way, it is kind of like a support system too. People are always here just to see how you are doing and are always willing to collaborate with you in whatever way that might be.”



*Figure 5. Four students writing on laptops and talking. (Courtesy of Scott Whiddon.)*