

Back to the Center

The Center for Writing Excellence at Palm Beach Atlantic University

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Center Profile:

- Palm Beach Atlantic University enrolls over 3,600 students, including undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students.
- Director: Lisa Marzano, Ph.D. Director since Fall 2011.
- Undergraduate peer tutors (writing coaches): Typically between 20-25, not including those in training
- Hours: Sun. 3pm-9pm; M-Th 9am-9pm; F 9am-4pm
- Number of writing coaches available per session: 2-3
- Appointments per month: On average 300-400 appointments of 30-minute sessions per month, not including custom workshops or embedded coaches
- Organization: Located in the School of Arts and Sciences; independent of the English or any other academic school
- Other Services: Embedded writing coaches in classes; customized workshops; assistance for faculty (syllabus, assignment, or rubric clarification; professional writing feedback) provided by the director; presentations on CWE services

Palm Beach Atlantic University (PBA) sits on the intra-coastal waterway in South Florida, 1.1 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. In many respects, PBA is a destination school for undergraduate and graduate students due to its desirable location. PBA provides an excellent Christian, liberal arts education. Part of that education includes access to the Center for Writing Excellence (CWE).

The CWE is located on the lower level—we resist the term “basement”—of the campus’s Warren Library, located in the center of campus. The library houses a print collection, small art gallery area, archives, and computer work areas. The library was opened in two phases, with the final phase in 2009.

The CWE is a room that opens into an area of books. It is a small space of only 270 square feet. It has three tables, each with a computer and resource materials. There is a small alcove that has houses a love seat and a chair. The room also has a small refrigerator. There are no windows other than the vinyl picture of a window posted on the wall. The room was initially built as a computer workroom with high bar shelves and chairs. In the summer of 2012, the space was converted and the high shelves were removed, outlets were moved down on the walls, and the current furniture was purchased. Over time, we tried to add some color and interest to the space. Four large paper lanterns were hung to add more light. We placed colorful carpet squares to the floor. Finally, we painted the walls a soft blue/gray, and also added a chalkboard wall. While not a perfect space, it has become an interesting space in which to work.

The university chose the combined topic of writing/critical thinking in 2006 as the topic for the SACSCOC QEP; it was implemented in Fall 2008. From almost the very beginning of the discussions in 2006, a writing center was envisioned as a featured part of the initiative. Before that, only the adult evening school was running a writing center for its own students.

The CWE has gone through many changes since 2008, well beyond the few physical space improvements. In 2011, there were approximately six tutors, and the hours of the center were extremely limited. Most notably, the room’s solid wood door was kept closed, making the entry for clients awkward, at best. Writers often felt that they were interrupting ongoing conversations and were reluctant to enter.

One of the initial changes in 2011 was to engage with the library dean to discuss making the space in the lower level of the library collaborative workspace, so that the CWE could keep the door to the center open. Keeping the door open happened immediately. Later, as part of the major renovation in 2012, the doors were changed to ones with a large section of glass so that, even if the door had to be closed for some reason, students could still see inside. We believe that small change in practice accounts for a portion of our appointment numbers jumping nearly 200% in the academic year 2011/2012.

Those interested in working in the CWE are recruited by faculty, current writing coaches, and through emails to all PBA students. Typically, there is a basic informational meeting at the beginning of the semester where students are supplied with a list of expectations for training and the job description of the writing coach. Those who are still interested begin the process by completing an application and gathering faculty references.

Using JotForm as a form builder and collection tool works well. We create forms and distribute the URL. Potential trainees can click on the link, complete the form, and the results are sent to the director. One component of the application includes submitting sample work, which applicants can upload to JotForm. From within the application form, there is a URL applicants can use to solicit faculty recommendations. Those results also come to the director only. All responses from JotForm can be converted to an Excel file or CSV.

Once there is a complete application and positive faculty references, applicants begin an orientation period of about two weeks. During orientation, trainees are given detailed information regarding the training process, which occurs over the course of the semester. If they remain interested, paperwork required for hiring is completed. The CWE is fortunate that trainees are paid minimum wage during the training semester.

Training plays a key role in the Center for Writing Excellence. Our training program consists of a two-hour “class” that meets about ten times during the semester. During that time, we discuss articles on writing center theory and pedagogy. We review CWE specific policies, of which hospitality plays an important part. Of course we talk about

HOCs and LOCs! Perhaps most importantly, we practice reviewing papers.

We have a collection of different types of papers and different levels of writing. During the training class, we spend time reviewing those papers and discussing how to approach them. Trainees learn skills such as how to consider the paper as a whole and then how to break it down into various sections. We also discuss differences between papers from less proficient writers and those who are more experienced. We consider this among the most important work in training.

Along with the class meetings, trainees have other assignments. On the LOC side, they complete a series of grammar exercises to brush up on those skills. They also convert papers from one formatting style to another. One of our most important formatting practices is to not rely on our memory for formatting. As part of the collaborative process, writing coaches pull out manuals to look up formatting information and work through it with students.

Another training focus is hospitality. While the CWE is not a business, we do provide a service to and for writers; we want our writers to feel comfortable and welcome. Some of those hospitality practices have to do with how we greet writers who enter the CWE space. Because of our space issue, primarily, we do not have a receptionist to assist those coming into the room. Therefore, it's important for writing coaches to manage what they are doing, neither abandoning their current client nor ignoring someone who has just entered the center.

In order to facilitate that process, we use a white board in the CWE room. As writing coaches come on duty, they check their appointments and write them on the white board. They list times and then put in the first name for those appointments, leaving the open times blank. That practice assists in several ways. First, a client coming into the center sees that we are expecting them. Second, if there is a walk-in anyone of the writing coaches can look at the board and see if there is an immediate time available. If the director sees a walk-in approaching, she can quickly assess whether or not there is availability.

We stress that greeting someone by their name—"Hi. Are you Jane?"—is much more welcoming than greeting them with "Hi. Do you have an

appointment?” This might be a small detail, but we find this greeting helps to immediately establish rapport, and adds a level of professionalism to the center.

Training also focuses on our response to and relationship with faculty. Our guidelines are clear that no writing coach should contact faculty directly. If a faculty member happens to come to the CWE, coaches refer that faculty member to the director. Writing coaches are also trained that they should support faculty prompts and feedback, and not offer any “grade related” opinions regarding student work.

Trainees complete four observations and they complete a reflection assignment for each. Trainees also complete three to four mock sessions. For these sessions, trainees schedule an appointment with a current writing coach; that current coach brings one of their papers to the session. The trainee conducts the appointment as a writing coach, allowing the trainee to get a “feel” for sessions. These appointments also give an opportunity for the current coaches to get to know the trainees, offer suggestions to the trainee, and give feedback to the director about the trainee’s session.

Finally, trainees complete four hours of supervised sessions. They are paired with an experienced writing coach and attend that coach’s sessions. During that appointment, trainees are introduced to clients and the training context is explained. The trainee conducts the appointment while the experienced coach observes and offers further information or direction as needed. After appointments, the trainee writes a reflection; the writing coach completes a form giving the director specific feedback about the trainee’s session. At the CWE, the current coaches have substantial input into the hiring of new trainees.

Palm Beach Atlantic University is quite supportive of the Center for Writing Excellence. The director provides feedback to the university, receives regular feedback from the university, and is recognized as having a positive effect on retention. All involved with the CWE believe that training is the key for our current and future success.