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Consultant Insight

The (Liberal) Art of Replication: The Transylvania University Writing Center Peer Alumni Research Project

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Introduction

In 2019, Transylvania University's Writing Center (TUWC) was interested in learning more about its alumni. As part of this process, we reviewed Bradley Hughes, Paula Gillespie and Harvey Kail's "What They Take with Them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project," or PWTARP. This project, which explored the impact of tutoring on tutors themselves, was insightful, especially as each of us was preparing to begin our time as on-campus tutors. We learned that tutoring would likely impact us in a variety of ways, including the development of personal and professional skills, a new relationship with writing, and a commitment to collaborative learning.

Still, in discussing PWTARP as a group of new staffers, we recognized that something was missing. Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail only focused on large universities, a category that did not include Transylvania University, an institution with roughly 1,000 students. This gap led us to consider if the benefits of peer writing support for staffers at a small, liberal arts university are somewhat different than those noted via Hughes et al. We decided to find out by replicating PWTARP in a small-scale pilot.

We corresponded with 56 alums of Transylvania University's Writing Center, sending each one a survey with questions from the original study

as well as new questions, which were intended to investigate the specific impact of Transylvania University on their experiences.¹ We then coded these responses to identify three common themes that aligned with the original study, as well as an additional theme that highlights the ways the peer-tutor experience might be influenced by the small, liberal arts college experience.

We discovered that TUWC alums were greatly impacted by their work as staffers, especially within their personal, professional, and civic lives. Our initial findings suggest that the benefits of writing center work identified by Hughes et al. might transcend institutional size; that said, the values connoted by the small college do seem to accentuate and sustain values of peer based learning. In this piece, we review and discuss the results from our survey.

Methodology and Quantitative Data

Our survey went out to 73 Transylvania writing center alumni; with 56 respondents, we had a 76% response rate. Of the 56 alumni respondents, 80.4% of respondents identify themselves as female, 17.9% identify themselves as male, and 1.8% identify themselves as non-binary. Our survey respondents come from 17 different graduating classes, spanning 26 years. We received responses from tutors in every graduating class for the last twelve years straight, from the class of 2007 to the class of 2019. 27 of the 56 responses, very nearly half, come from alumni who graduated within the last five years. This trend is likely a reflection of the fact that our Writing Center has become a much more professionalized and disciplinarily-engaged program over the past ten years or so. We also received responses reaching back as far as 1993, when the Transylvania Writing Center was in its first decade.

TU Writing Center staffers pursued a wide variety of majors and minors. Between 56 respondents, 30 fields of study are represented.

¹ TUWC was founded in 1980 by Prof. Martha Gehringer. We drew upon social media and worked with various campus offices to get as many email addresses for TUWC alums as possible. We recognize the challenges that come with such a method; however, we were quite taken with the depth and breadth of responses.



Fig. 1. Word Cloud of Fields Represented in Survey

The most common field are WRC (Writing, Rhetoric, and Communication), Biology, English, and Spanish.

Many of these alumni also continued in formal academic pursuits after graduating from Transylvania. Of the 56 alumni who responded to our survey, 47 pursued further education, including Master’s degrees, PhDs, juris doctorates, and medical degrees. Regardless of their post-graduate paths, Transylvania alums tell us how their time working in the Writing Center helped them along the way.

A New Relationship with Writing

To supplement our quantitative research, the PWTARP survey gives us the opportunity to hear back from our alums through open-ended questions. These responses provide a sort of narrative tangibility to supplement our aforementioned quantitative findings. Hughes et al. argue, “Becoming better writers involves something of a transformation

as they entered into a new relationship with the writing process itself” (25). Like the original PWTARP study, many of our respondents’ written sentiments indicate a new or altered relationship with writing as a result of having worked so intimately with the writing of others.

For many of our respondents, a new relationship with writing begins with a new relationship to the feedback or criticism of others. As one puts it, “I have learned not to be too attached to my own writing and to welcome feedback.” Another: “I’ve learned how to be patient, ask the right questions to see what writers intend to say, give constructive feedback, and walk through my suggested edits in a collaborative way.”

The second main thread we can gather from our respondents’ new relationship with writing is a gained perception of its limitlessness. Outside of the Writing Center, we often don’t see the writing of others until its final draft—on a billboard, in a novel, or an email. The part of writing we often don’t get to see are the processes outside of our own—of which, our respondents’ have found, there is a near infinite expanse. This respondent tells us, “Not only has [my experience] allowed me to be more compassionate toward the writings of others, but it has also allowed me to be more compassionate toward my own writing.” Another, “Being exposed to a number of different writing styles and seeing those styles develop in my repeat clients gave me ideas for how my writing could change or grow as well.”

This new perspective can provide a sort of ease, an earned confidence in this expanded set of skills and options for writing: “When I was invited to be a writing center tutor, I thought that the center had lost [its] mind. I was sure I was totally unqualified. But I gained confidence in my own voice by helping other students to find theirs. I can’t tell you how rewarding that was for me as a young person, and how much I still draw on that confidence every day.”

Personal and Professional Skills, Values, and Abilities

Former tutors told Hughes et al. that “the correlation between peer tutoring and career relevance is ‘eerie,’” demonstrating that alums’ experiences in the Writing Center have a profound impact on their professional lives. Several respondents express that their familiarity with the foundational work of the Writing Center has gifted them with abilities

that have helped them transition easily into successful post-graduate careers. One alum tells us that “no one teaches you how to give feedback on writing in graduate school. I...had a distinct edge on my cohort since I had some instruction in writing feedback as a writing tutor. It helped me write effective assignments, anticipating the types of struggles students might encounter...I had a lot of ideas at the ready.” Although many former tutors chose to continue their education through graduate programs relating to the humanities, the skills alums develop are not confined to a single discipline or career. They are practiced and adapted, in a fitting interdisciplinary fashion. As one alum notes, “...the writing center was a huge part of keeping me both grounded and well-rounded, and certainly made me a better doctor, as I practiced my empathy and ability to educate in that space.”

These skills, values, and abilities former tutors developed are also illustrated in their personal relationships. Our respondents reveal how the quality of their relationships with their colleagues, friends, partners, and children is influenced by the skills they practiced as Writing Center tutors, such as interpersonal communication, patience, and compassion: “I think I’m a more effective partner, friend, and family member because I pay closer attention to how my writing/words will be understood, as opposed to just how I intended them. I value teamwork/collaboration more, I ask for help more easily, I use writing to express myself because I can more effectively convey a feeling, whether that’s providing feedback on a friend’s cover letter or writing an eloquent birthday card message.”

Through the development of these skills, values, and abilities, we can derive that being a Writing Center tutor is a powerful experience that transforms alums’ personal and professional lives. As one says, “all of these things have served me over and over in my career journey so far, and I have no doubt that they’ll continue to do so in the future.”

Collaboration

In the original PWTARP study, former tutors reported that they developed a “deeper understanding of and commitment to collaborative learning” as a result of their work in writing centers. In our survey, respondents reflect this same theme. Transylvania University past tutors claim that their work in the Writing Center, as opposed to their regular

time in the classroom, taught them to value collaboration, and that this shift has had a great effect on how they view learning overall.

Specifically, respondents insist that their perception of writing as a collaborative act has changed dramatically due to their work as tutors. One past tutor learned that “writing, while incredibly personal, is also a collaborative thing” and reports that they are now more open to receiving feedback on their work from others. Another respondent who admits not utilizing the Writing Center much before becoming a tutor reports they too came to value collaboration and thus began using Writing Center services as a way to collaborate with fellow staffers on their assignments. This tutor maintains that they “grew to value the creativity, and simply stronger work, that grew out of collaborative writing.” Our study finds that peer tutoring work has a significant, personal effect on many previous tutors: not only do tutors report a fundamental shift in the way they view writing, this shift toward collaboration opened tutors up to utilizing a collaborative approach in their own lives, as evidenced by the fact that they began coming to the Writing Center more themselves. Ultimately, our respondents rejected the idea that writing is a solitary, private activity; instead, they insist that there are great benefits of creative collaboration in the writing process.

Whether it be in tutors’ personal or professional lives, it is evident that writing center work fosters a commitment to collaborative learning that follows tutors even after graduation. One past tutor expresses this best when they say, “I am a stronger writer because I work more collaboratively, which in general has made me a stronger team player than I would’ve been without TUWC experience.”

The “Transy Effect”

Aside from trends originally identified by PWTARP, our study discovered a pattern unique to Transylvania University and that might be extended to the small college landscape, all in all, which we have fondly termed “The Transy Effect.” From the beginning, we’ve asked: what, if anything, about Transylvania specifically affects the experience of writing tutors, while on campus and beyond? We then developed new survey questions that specifically sought to investigate how both the small size and liberal arts curriculum of our university may have affected tutors’ Writing Center experience. In regard to their specific TUWC

experiences, we asked alums to rate the impact of Transylvania’s student population and size on a scale from 1 (no effect) to 5 (great effect):

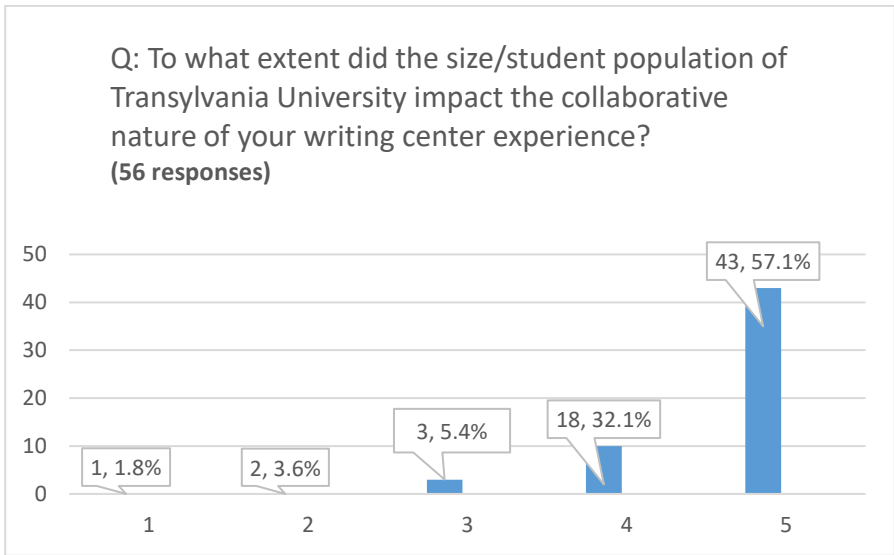


Fig. 2. Perceived Impact of Size/Student Population

In open-ended responses, respondents describe the influence of our campus’s size on the collaborative nature of one’s Writing Center experience. As one alum writes, “Transy’s size permitted the collaborative nature of the WC process to extend outside of WC hours. For example, if I had recurring appointments with colleagues who I knew well, we would often discuss things outside of hours.” In general, alums write that the small size of the school led to building better, stronger, more productive relationships with peers in the Writing Center.

We can also glean from open responses that our cross-discipline curriculum has a substantial impact on the way staffers learn and work at Transylvania and live and work beyond graduation, using their responses to the question in Figure 3 on the next page.

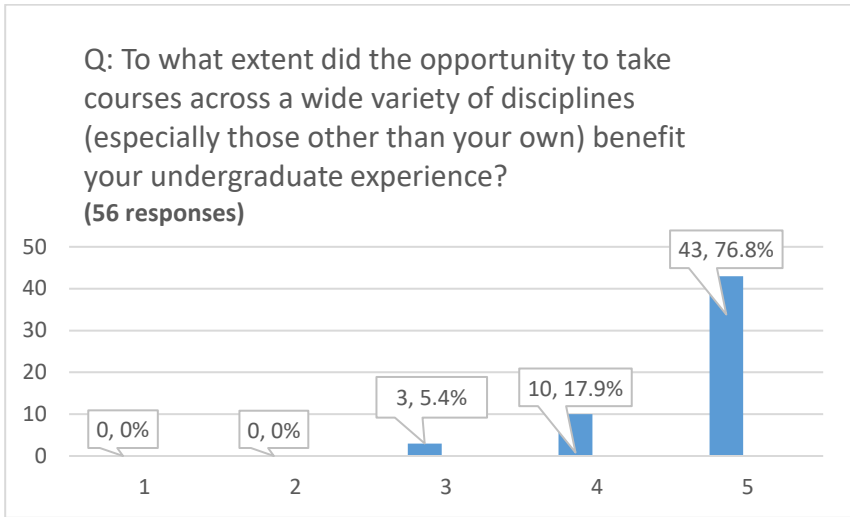


Fig. 3. Perceived Effect of Multidisciplinary Coursework

Elaborating on these numerical data, one respondent writes, “Because I had to take a wide variety of courses ... I typically had at least some background knowledge that could help me assist [any student]. Even if I didn’t, working in a wide range of different disciplines allowed me to be flexible ... enough to be comfortably able to approach basically anything.” Another describes an instance in which they helped a student with a mathematics paper: “It made me realize more than ever just how ubiquitous and critical a skill writing can be in every field of study.” The nature of Transylvania’s curriculum allows alums to become more prepared, more well-rounded writing tutors, which ultimately allows them to develop the skills and traits outlined previously.

Interestingly, the curriculum doesn’t just affect the way alums worked in the Writing Center—in some cases, the interdisciplinary nature of writing center work affects how students engage academically. As one of our respondents says, “I think the opportunity to tutor writing for a variety of disciplines had more of an effect on my educational experience than it did the other way around.” Another alum notes: “The opportunity to engage with students in a variety of disciplines incentivized my own intellectual curiosity and encouraged me to take a greater breadth and depth of courses.” In short, The Transy Effect impacts Writing Center experience, and vice versa, and both experiences carry their effects into tutors’ post-graduate life.

Conclusion

As researchers, we look forward to digging further into our data in order to learn more about how service as a writing center staffer--particularly at a small, residential college with a traditional liberal arts emphasis--plays into life after graduation. Many of our findings so far align with much of what the original PWTARP study offers, suggesting the values of substantive, sustained writing center professional development transcend institutional type. Yet, on the other hand, we've found that the small college landscape--with its emphasis on close relationships, small groups, and mentoring--seems to align quite well with writing center best practices and values and influences the ways in which these practices and values impact their post-graduate lives.

It is our hope that our findings so far help provide proof for what has been, until now, mere anecdote and speculation. Studies like PWTARP allow campus stakeholders to see the real value of writing center labor, and how such labor continues to benefit former staffers long after graduation. Like Hughes et al., we argue that such work showcases how writing center culture goes beyond service and, in fact, might epitomize the liberal arts experience.²

² As writers, we would like to thank the following individuals who helped support the various stages of this project: Dr. John Bradley (Vanderbilt University), Dr. Kerri Hauman (Transylvania University), Becky Mills (Transylvania University), Dr. John Williams (Transylvania University).

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