



Southern Discourse in the Center

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Extending a Helping Hand: Increasing Visibility for the University Writing Center at the University of West Georgia

Duane Theobald

Center Profile

- Number of Consultants: 35-40
- Hours Open Per Week: 35
- Number of Consultants Working Per Shift: 2-6
- Average Number of Sessions Per Semester: Fall semester—between 1,600-2,000 Spring semester—between 1,300-1,500

History of the University Writing Center (UWC)

The University of West Georgia (UWG) has had supplemental writing support of some kind since Dr. Martha Saunders created the “Writing Lab” in 1980. Over the years, as UWG has grown and evolved, so have the support services offered. In the fall of 1996, the “Writing Lab” transformed into the “University Writing Center” (UWC) and, in the fall of 2001, the UWC relocated to the first floor of the Technology-enhanced Learning Center. This location serves as a central hub for much of UWG’s campus community, making the UWC much more visible than it was previously. Though undergraduate writing tutors originally staffed the UWC, both first-year writing faculty and graduate writing consultants now meet with students. The Center also employs a Coordinator, two part-time employees, and student assistants.

UWG at a Glance

UWG is located west of Atlanta in the town of Carrollton, GA. Having evolved from a district agricultural and mechanical school to the thriving regional comprehensive university it is today, UWG is home to over 13,000 students and nearly 80 programs of study, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral. UWG enrolls students from 38 states and 73 countries. As the sixth largest public university in Georgia, UWG has become an institution where academic excellence is at the forefront and supporting student success is vital.

The UWC: Ripe for Growth & Reinvention

As the UWC's current Coordinator, I was hired on as a staff member in the fall of 2011 and quickly moved into an administrative role in the fall of 2012. Having never served in an academic administrative role, I took time to get my bearings. I came into the position with a degree in English with 6-12 grade teaching certification. I had never worked in a writing center, nor did I know much about the world of writing center studies. At first glance, the Center was doing pretty well: assisting a modest number of students every semester and partnering with a few faculty here and there with specific writing assignments in their classes. We were running pretty efficiently. However, after a few months in my new role, there was one nagging thought that I kept coming back to over and over: we were primarily serving students in English Composition classes. Being housed under the Department of English & Philosophy at the time, this made perfect sense. Most of our consultants are first-year writing faculty, so logically they would send their students through the Center. However, since UWG is such a large and academically-diverse institution, we could easily be drawing more students from other disciplines and backgrounds. There was certainly work to be done, and the best way to begin addressing this underutilization was to increase visibility and presence for the Center on our campus.

Connecting to Campus Community & Establishing Brand Identity

In "The Writing Center as a Site of Engagement," Linda S. Bergmann states that "one of the reasons that writing centers become sites of engagement is that people looking for various kinds of help, knowledge, and interaction with projects related to writing and literacy often contact

effective and visible writing centers” (160). While the UWC was effective, we were hardly visible. Yes—we had posters all over campus and faculty who worked in the Center talking to their students about our services. However, we were not regularly communicating with our students, faculty, and staff across campus. We were not going out into the campus community to speak to classes, and we didn’t often set up tables to advertise and engage with the community. Seeing an opportunity for growth, I set out to do this work and, at first, did much of it on my own. Was it exhausting? Yes. Was it worth it? Absolutely! Spending just a few minutes a couple of times each semester to email students, faculty, and staff about our services increased visibility. People knew that we were available to help, and it’s amazing how far that goes. Advertising hours, location, and other essential information is valuable, and I’ve also found just how effective class visits and workshops are. Each academic year, our Center tracks the amount of outreach we do and, based on post-session student surveys, class visits and workshops are the second highest way that students hear about our Center—second to professor recommendation. Furthermore, students recognize me and, now, other members of my staff from our in-class presentations. Being known as the “Writing Center Guy” on campus and throughout the Carrollton community isn’t a horrible thing; in fact, it serves as yet another reminder to students that the UWC is there for them, and there are faces attached to what used to be a mysterious entity.

The other piece to the visibility puzzle that Bergmann mentions is the need for clear branding. Now, I know that the word “branding” can make some academics’ eyes glaze over. However, it really does make a huge difference—especially if a center is lacking a clear brand and presence. I am by no means a marketing expert, so I am quite fortunate that UWG has a great Communications and Marketing department that is ready and available to assist. When I was first hired, we had nothing in the way of clear branding and marketing. The posters we had were interesting but supremely outdated. Through the help of talented marketing colleagues, I had a logo designed for the Center and, every semester, updated posters created that are physically posted all over campus and on digital screens in various buildings. We also have a banner that hangs over a balcony in our building and advertisements on our campus shuttles. In essence, our brand is everywhere.

I spearheaded all of the work above as the lead administrator of the Center, working closely with the rest of my administrative staff. The support they've offered throughout the years has been instrumental in carrying out all of these changes. Additionally, my consultants (both faculty and graduate students) have been huge supporters of the changes the Center has made.

Now, the question you're probably asking is: has any of this reinvention worked for the UWC? In short, yes. Our center just completed our last year of a university-wide Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that increased the amount of writing in the Core Curriculum. Given the work that the QEP has required, the UWC has been in the trenches since the beginning, helping faculty navigate how to best support their students in non-English Composition classes. We have seen increased consultation figures, with some waxing and waning in certain semesters, and increased engagement from faculty from across the disciplines. We also have departments regularly partnering with us for events and programming—such as the Office of Education Abroad, the Housing Academic Resource Center, the Office of First-Year Academic Programs, and New Student Programs. On average, our center takes part in roughly 200 outreach events, class visits, in-class workshops, and table set-ups per academic year. This has taken many years to accomplish, and there is still more work to do. However, our center has proven that investing in the campus community and establishing clear visibility can encourage that community to invest and engage with the work of a writing center.

Looking Ahead

As UWG continues to grow and evolve, so too must the UWC—and happily so. One area of our university landscape that we struggle to connect with is our online student population. Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, our Center only offered asynchronous online tutoring during the summer months; however, as you can imagine, this situation has changed significantly due the current pandemic. Now we offer both face-to-face and online services, allowing us to better serve our entire student population. After the pandemic, we're planning to keep these various modes of operation intact. Additionally, we're offering to host online writing workshops. So far, we've done this successfully with a variety of undergraduate classes and one of our

Education doctoral programs—though this is certain to grow. Additionally, we're always looking for ways to increase our services—including providing assistance with presentations and speeches. This has been done in small doses over the years, but we see real room for growth here. Of course, limitations like budget, space, and personnel make the aforementioned ventures challenging. However, some steps in the right direction are better than none and, above that, the campus community at UWG is worth it. There is something truly invigorating about walking through our Center and hearing meaningful, productive conversations about writing and critical thinking that makes me and the other members of the UWC staff want to come into the Center and do the work we do every day. If retention, progression, and graduation are the key words in the larger administrative game, then we should do what we can as a center to both assist with those ventures and make the writing center experience meaningful and purposeful for the writers we serve.

Works Cited

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About the Author



Duane Theobald is the Coordinator of the University Writing Center (UWC) at the University of West Georgia. He holds a BA in English (along with a Georgia Teaching Certificate for English, Grades 7-12) and an MA in English (with a concentration in Film Studies)--both from the University of West Georgia. He currently serves as the Georgia state representative for the Southeastern Writing Center Association and is a Past President for the Georgia Tutoring Association. His scholarly interests include Writing Center studies, post-secondary pedagogy, film as literature, and American literature (primarily early and modern). He resides in Bremen, GA, with his wife, Kate, and daughter, Hailey.