



# Southern Discourse in the Center

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TITLE: Black Tutor Perspectives on Trauma and Transformation:  
An Edited Transcript of the 2021 SWCA Keynote Panel

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## **Black Tutor Perspectives on Trauma and Transformation: An Edited Transcript of the 2021 SWCA Keynote Panel**

Keynote Panel: Chanara Andrews-Bickers, Micah Williams,  
LaKela Atkinson, Genny Kennedy, Adara Cox, Talisha  
Haltiwanger Morrison

### **Introduction: LaKela and Talisha**

#### **LaKela**

The idea for the keynote panel for the 2021 SWCA (Southeastern Writing Centers Association) Conference initially came through a conversation with my mentor, Dr. Karen Keaton Jackson. Her ties to SWCA go back to 2005, and she was instrumental in proposing the idea of an HBCU representative—a position that I now hold years later. SWCA had recently released its anti-racist statement in response to the heightened killings and racial tension in 2020. With hopes to involve more of the HBCU input, I conversed with her about possible ideas to back up our statements and be more inclusive through actions.

In our discussion, we considered panel ideas that would highlight marginalized groups and present a different perspective for attendees and the SWCA organization overall. The theme, “transformation in an era of change” provided the perfect place to bring about this change. After we proposed ideas and bounced them off of one another, we had the perfect idea: students would lead a panel in an effort to challenge the idea of who holds authority. More specifically, the panel would be comprised of individuals whose voices are primarily silenced in predominantly white professional organizations. Since so few HBCU institutions were actively involved, we would focus on African-American students. Our hope was that writing center professionals and their student staff would be engaged in a new format and be more willing to learn from those who

were directly impacted by issues involving racism, injustice, and identity.

After presenting the idea to the SWCA president and Board, I saw overwhelming support for this panel. Soon, interested board members formed a keynote planning committee, which consisted of President Dr. Janine Morris; At-large Representative Dr. Deidre Anne Evans Garriott, George State Representative Mr. Duane Theobold, and HBCU Representative LaKela Atkinson. We divided up tasks, which included creating an e-mail to the Board, drafting a CFP, securing a facilitator, developing proposal criteria, and forming a proposal review committee.

## **Talisha**

When Deidre Anne Evans Garriott reached out to me about moderating the keynote panel, I said yes without hesitation. I appreciate any effort to draw in or center the voices of student-tutors and this keynote seemed like a great way to continue that effort. I assisted with reviewing nominations and selecting the four amazing Black people who shared their insight for the keynote. Below, you'll find an edited transcript from the 2021 keynote. We began the panel with four prepared questions, and then continued with audience questions. As moderator, I also asked follow-up questions based on previous responses and conversation with the panelists. Authors have kept their responses as close to the original as possible, though sometimes editing for clarity or, in a couple of places, where the audio was lost. I hope you'll enjoy reading the responses from the student panelists and find them as enlightening as I did.

## **Edited Transcript**

**Talisha (Prepared Question):** What do you think are the consequences of Diversity & Inclusion efforts being reactionary rather than proactive, and what actions can or should the writing center take in promoting stronger campus culture around attitudes around race?

**Adara:** A consequence to being reactionary is that discussion on Diversity and Inclusion becomes a one and done process. There is no real transformation occurring when conversations regarding awareness

happen only when something problematic arises. Because the writing center is a space that serves diverse students, discussions regarding Diversity and Inclusion should be a part of mandatory training. A way to be proactive in acknowledging the importance of Diversity and Inclusion is to have consistent dialogue about what that looks like in writing centers. All writing centers are unique; therefore, measures of proactivity should be defined by the institutions' needs and student population.

A proactive process can also be asking consultants what they would like to learn more about regarding Diversity and Inclusion, and gathering information about what they already know, to ensure that proactivity within the writing center is as effective as possible.

**Chanara:** The consequence of being reactionary rather than proactive is doing too little too late. The efforts run the risk of being merely performative and will, to students affected by the lack of true diversity and inclusion efforts, be a sign of Writing Centers prioritizing their image rather than their writers. We have to emphasize the “action” in proactive and support students of color and international students in more ways than just saying “grading grammar is racist.” Writing Centers must be intentional in the assertions of our missions and our work to cultivate anti-racist, anti-xenophobic spaces. So much of what we can do as consultants or tutors is limited by our occupation of this liminal space between peers and, to a certain extent (that is real or perceived), academic authorities. That small window of opportunity is essentially slammed shut when we wait until after an issue arises to make changes. One way our centers can proactively promote stronger campus culture and attitudes around race is to expand our reach to faculty. We have plenty of resources and workshops for students but if they are being met with these harmful attitudes by their instructors, there will not likely be any change. If such workshops were to happen, I think they would have to be led by Writing Center directors to mitigate any issues related to the imbalance of institutional status or power where consultants and tutors are concerned.

**Micah:** I do agree with those comments. When you do have diversity and inclusion efforts that are reactionary within the writing center, they also tend to be temporary. When we usually think about racist actions, we focus more on the individual event more on the institutions at play that continue those individual events. So, once a particular instance is

solved, such as through a workshop or a confrontation, it seems like racism is solved in the writing center, which we know is not true. I also feel that with making things so individual, it also leads to another type of racism itself, for those that affected by racism tend to be pointed out as the issue for bringing up discrimination against them. Or, racism in the writing center is looked at as something to be “dealt with” rather than an effort for everyone to collaborate and elevate marginalized people to take a proactive stand against racism.

In terms of practices, conversation is always important. Collaboration with both students and administration on campus can help as well because as it comes to the writing center, we want to make sure we help our students with as many resources and connections to the university as possible, especially for Black students and students of color. Feedback through tutor surveys is important, too. These surveys not only focus on the effectiveness of a session, but also on how we made those students feel so that we can best develop our practices with people first rather than on pedagogy.

**Genny:** One thing I’d like to add is that oftentimes it's actually quite understandable, even from the perspective of a Black tutor, why a writing center might be reactionary rather than proactive in their endeavors to actually be anti-racist. And while that is understandable, one thing that is often a reactionary tactic is focusing on the education of those who have exhibited any sort of action that might be counterproductive in the direction of antiracism. But also something to keep in mind is providing a place for celebration and recognition for the black tutors in your spaces as well. When it comes to moving towards an antiracist space and moving towards an antiracist writing center, recognition and support of your black tutors is really important. While education is absolutely necessary to continue the culture of due respects and appreciation for those who are doing the work and labor within your writing center, there is celebration and joy to be had as well. Centering joy is also something that is often lost in these sorts of initiatives, which means oftentimes that labor falls upon on black individuals to have to subvert any sort of negative feelings that they're having while having no outlet for that. So, there is also due space for Black individuals in and of themselves to have that space to be celebrated and experience joy.

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**Talisha (Prepared Question):** Tutors face what can be conflicting obligations to promote students' academic success and also students' stories. What do you as tutors see as the relation between those two obligations?

**Micah:** Working in the writing center is tricky because I feel that we are supplemental programs to the Academy, more specifically the English Department. So, if an English department is all-inclusive of different habituses<sup>1</sup> of writing, that's great and easier on tutors to promote that within our writing centers. If not inclusive, we end up falling into that battle between supporting a writer's story and self through their writing and teaching them what we know is best for a good paper in that course—which commonly equates to writing papers in a White habitus of writing: logic over feelings, has to be concise, “scholarly” language, a clear thesis and structure throughout the paper.

It's not a bad way to write at all, and so we could potentially say “we want to teach you this so that as a writer, you know multiple ways to write” and then go from there to make their academic voice sound most like them. However, when one type of writing style is privileged over every other style as the most effective way to write, that's where we have issues. And many remedial and core-class English Courses are like that—you write how I want you to write, or you fail the class.

All that being said, I feel we should do our best to balance both obligations and to know which papers a personal voice is most appropriate for—for personal narratives, argumentative papers, research papers with a personal tie-in, I think it should be encouraged to shake up the traditional academic structure if the professor allows. But if they don't, we focus on teaching them the traditional way to write while

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<sup>1</sup> By “habitus”, I mean “a dominant set of durable and flexible dispositions to read and write in English, even though it is not static nor unified.” This definition comes from the scholar Asao B. Inoue. See Inoue, “Afterword: Narratives that Determine Writers and Social Justice Writing Center Work.” *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol 14, no. 1, 2016, pp. 94-99, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/inoue-141>.

gesturing them to express themselves in the content of their papers. It also gives us a challenge to critique non-inclusive courses and Academia as well, perhaps by talking with any diversity and inclusion teams within the English department or core curriculum to fix said issues and to expand our habituses of writing so that they are inclusive of more stories and more people.

**Genny:** One thing I'd also like to add...I know this question sort of angles towards what is the obligation that tutors have in addressing this sort of conflict-of-interest, but I also want to talk about the relationship for writing center because oftentimes, of course, we want to preserve the narrative voice our clients or our students we are working with. But I think that this is also a place of advocacy that could possibly exist for writing centers. Oftentimes, at schools—I'm from Georgia Tech—when it comes to trying to address professors with any sort of practices they do in the classroom that say, “You can only write in Standard American English” or “I only accept this type of grammar,” I think that that's a wonderful place for writing centers to step in and go and have people have those conversations with the professors. Because the conversations don't just end within the center. I think our work needs to be done outside of that because if we truly do want to promote a way for students to have academic success while also preserving their voice, we fully need to make sure that the institutes that we work with are on-board. And think that as we have faculty and staff in our own writing centers that often have a lot of leverage in different classrooms and in different leadership experiences. I think that that is exactly what should be utilized whether you are an ally or a part of the community. This is what advocacy can look like, and I think that that would make it all the more easier for tutors to address the student's concerns, and if they want to have any sort of appeals process as well, those are the sort of things I think would be great when it comes to addressing that tricky situation.

**Chanara:** I wholeheartedly agree with Micah and Genevieve. And I think that, as Genevieve is saying, what we really need is an epistemic overhaul of what we're even thinking of academic successes being. So that is something that takes time. It is so hard to honor your own moral and cultural code, honestly, as you're looking at the stories and you're like, “This is such a rich narrative and I love this,” and the student wants you to tear it apart. So, I think we have to—it's something so sustained—

it's such a big undertaking that I think just takes time and it takes a lot of effort outside of our centers and really engaging the campus community as a whole.

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**Talisha (Prepared Question):** Sometimes students bring in work that may be very personal or offensive to tutors. How have you handled difficult or traumatizing sessions, and what advice would you give to others?

**Chanara:** My experience and advice on handling these situations definitely depends on where the session falls between “difficult” and “traumatizing” because those are two separate, distinct places. If we're dealing with something difficult, we can work to communicate the difficulty of that situation academically and socially. When students bring in work that they might not even think of as problematic or being violent toward certain communities, you can explain to them, “In terms of your assignment, this is hurting you because it's not supporting your argument, it's not strong, it's not doing these things,” and also explain the histories and implications of these languages in these ideas outside of their assignments, outside of their classrooms, and outside of our campus. My advice on the handling of traumatizing sessions or traumatizing material is not to because yes, we are students and we are workers, but we are people first. I can't, in good conscience, provide a template for dealing with traumatic material and I think that's where we go back to writing centers being proactive. It's the job of the writing center to make sure that consultants and tutors know: you have an out, you have someone you can go to when this is too much for you. We have protocols in place for dealing with these things.

**Genny:** I really want to echo, first of all, Chanara's points. There is a very strong distinction to be made so I appreciate you making that difference between difficult and traumatic. Because honestly, when it comes to traumatic situations, I think that it very much is within the rights of consultants or tutors to step away but I also think that's so possibly a great place for allyship to exist. You know, there are instances where, for whatever reason you have to step away from a consultation whether it be, “Oh, I actually think that there's a better expert on

this,” but if you are like a Black tutor or you are of the group that is being targeted from whatever problematic work that you're reading and you don't want to do that labor of teaching somebody, possibly you could step away and call on another tutor and be like, “Hey, I'm having a kind of a difficult situation here and I don't feel comfortable. If you possibly could take over this situation for me, it would be really helpful.” But, of course, this would have to be a conversation that you would have within the writing center and expectations of one another prior to any sort of situation like this happening because sometimes it is helpful for other people who might not experience as much trauma or they have the privilege of not being specifically attacked by somebody's work to come in and go and actually call this person into a discussion of, “Hey, this is why your writing is exhibiting this, this, and this, and here's how we can move along.” I think that that could possibly be another way to deal with difficult situations. But stepping away, I definitely think, is helpful for preserving the tutor's perspective which is very important.

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**Talisha (Follow-up Question)** That's an interesting point. Do professional tutors have a different responsibility to stay within difficult or traumatic sessions based on those roles?

**Chanara:** As a student tutor, I can only speak from that perspective. But again, as a human being, I don't think that it is your professional, personal, or moral obligation to stay in any situation that is damaging to you psychologically or physically. There have to be protocols put in place and I think that you can say, for whatever reason, “I am not comfortable moving forward with this I can refer you to someone,” or not. There is a limit; there are lines that have to be drawn and a lot of the issues we have are because lines haven't been drawn before. You have to set boundaries for yourself in any space.

**Micah:** Yes, I agree with Chanara on that. Again, I am an undergraduate tutor, and a younger one at that, but in terms of faculty, I do think there is a place, especially if you are non-BIPOC or effectively traumatized by the material, to be able to call it out. Even if I do see something that is like, “Wow, is this incorrect information,” I wouldn't want to let a paper slip away with offensive language or ideas in it. And that's for the sake

of that student, the tutor, their grade, and for their potential audience. There's nothing more awkward and frustrating than for a problematic paper to come out from a Writing Center and to a professor who's wondering how it made it out in that state.

And so a lot of the issues with difficulty with these situations, because I do believe there's a difference between "difficult" and "traumatizing", has been more about incorrect information or just ignorance towards historical backgrounds and contexts within the arguments they are trying to make. A lot of those issues can be solved by asking why and playing devil's advocate to see where their arguments lie in, or perhaps suggesting ideas that are more correct or true in those essays. But I still know that ignorance hurts a lot. I do think it has more chance to be remedied than blatant racism because it's about having those student-tutor conversations to gather the "whys" and intentions of someone's writing.

There comes a time where you need to set those boundaries, and so especially for Black tutors, if it becomes too much, it would be best to send the situation to someone else who can handle it, to particular faculty and writing center directors.

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**Talisha (Prepared Question):** Oftentimes the staff of a writing center may not be very racially diverse. How have you experienced the emotional labor of being a Black tutor, particularly if you are the only or one of few Black or BIPOC tutors on staff? How is this labor, or other aspects of being a Black tutor, impacted when others misunderstand the mission and purpose of the writing center?

**Adara:** In my experience as a Black tutor, it's about being double-conscious. I'm always aware and recognize how different people are, how I live, and how others live as well. And I always feel the pressure to voice out matters of race and to be socially conscious about others' experiences beside my own just because that person lives with the experience of being othered, or belonging to a minority group. I also always feel like I need to place my identity within my work because if I'm not going to address the matter, who else is going to do it?

We should acknowledge that diversity matters, inclusion matters, just perspectives and experiences matter; but, I feel that it shouldn't be just on the shoulders of those who are these minority groups or the marginalized to acknowledge it and to continue this conversation in the writing center. Doing this will not only make us better tutors, but also a better community, and a better university in general.

**Genny:** Yeah, I'll jump in, absolutely. The conversation about emotional labor and what the responsibilities are for Black people in these conversations is always a tricky one. Particularly, after last summer or the uprisings and such that we saw, the notion of reaching out to your black acquaintances, your black friends, your black co-workers and you know saying, "Hey, do you need anything?" or "How can I support you?", and those indications that you are not just paying attention to them now but you know I guess it goes back to that reactive notion is that you are cognizant of when things happen and when they might be harmful to the people in your work space. One of the things that I enjoyed that COMLAB did at Georgia Tech over the summer was that they gave me the option to step away from tutoring for a bit because I and a lot of other people weren't feeling very great seeing black death every day on the news, social media, etc. And they offered to compensate me regardless.

I think that's what allyship looks like, and I think that when you reassure your black workers your black friends that you will be there even if they do not call upon you, but also you know respecting space and all that sort of thing. It's a delicate balance and of course black people are not a monolith. So, you really should pay attention to the individual you are talking to and trying to accommodate and appreciate. That's when I think that I feel recognized and seen and supported. And so it's also difficult being I believe that I was you know there are like a couple of black centers assistants, but I was really the black tutor. So, there are other black people in my space, but there definitely is that pressure because at the same time when writing centers or any sort of institution wants to, you know, make some sort of initiative, if they make it in a vacuum without any black people in the room it's bound to have holes in it. But at the same time, calling black people into the room and requesting labor and being at them but don't speak up...

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**Talisha (Question).** Thanks for those responses. Before we open it up to audience questions, I want to give the panelists an opportunity to respond to another question that came up in our preparation: During our earlier discussion in planning this panel, we talked about the conference theme and the language used in the call for proposals, specifically about how the conference frame's trauma. That conversation did not make it into our planned questions, but that was an oversight on my part, and I'd like to give any panelists who'd like a chance to share their thoughts.

**Chanara:** I brought this concern to the table because the conference title "Trauma and Transformation" was unsettling for me. The language is irresponsible and a little bit violent. As I said before, we have to honor ourselves and protect ourselves. Trauma is not something that we should be looking at as a tool to develop as scholars, or as tutors, or in any other way. Trauma is still damaging. Trauma is *trauma* and it's ours to work through -- it's a personal journey. So I think we have to be certain that we're not exploiting people's trauma and we're not romanticizing it as something that will "make you better" and "help you grow" because it stunts so much of our psychological growth. You just have to be cognizant of the ways that we're even presenting for entering into discussions about trauma.

**Genny:** I think that Chanara could not have said it better. That is such a trap that a lot of people fall into -- the romanticization of trauma. The concept that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Oh no! It can make you quite weak, unfortunately. One thing to be mindful of is -- as I was recalling the previous summer (2020), and [the trauma] is ongoing, [even though] it's not on t.v. anymore -- the concept of Black trauma and Black troubles often being the center of whatever conversation. I don't know if y'all are familiar with the terms "trauma porn," but it's the concept you're just engaging in traumatic stories often and you seem to get some sort of weird enjoyment from it. Basically, because you're like, "Oh my gosh, wow! This is so horrible," but you keep doing it, you know. I think that it's easy to fall into that trap because of the negative attention bias that media has. I was talking about this earlier, but when it comes to like Black History Month, which I'm sure a lot of writing centers and doing different sorts of things around to celebrate all of the

all writers and poets and we have— if you're not, you should. And when it comes to talking about Black history, people center our trauma, they center slavery, center things that happen to us. They don't actually talk about the greatness and the triumphs that we've made. I think that, instead of calling for more traumatic stories, because we have a *plethora* of them, that we should actually call upon people to share their stories of triumph, of joy, of celebration. There are difficulties that we certainly have experienced, and I think the stories should be told because people forget. But they are often centered because, truth be told, I think there is a fascination with Black struggles and Black trauma, and I think that we should move away from that because we are not fully humanized when we only see pain. We are so much more than that. So I definitely think it was a strange thing to call for and I definitely agree with Chanara's point. There is so much more to be asked for. We are more than our pain.

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**Talisha (Audience Question):** Thank you. We had some questions that have come up throughout the talk. Specifically, people are asking about your comments about triumph and joy. Would anyone like to share more thoughts about that? What are your triumphs or joys that you'd like to share?

**Chanara:** I am definitely opening it up to Adara and Micah if you all want to chime in here. And thanks, Genevieve, for even introducing joy into this conversation because joy is transformative. So, joys that I've had recently...Being selected for this panel! I was very excited about that and I'm really happy to be here. On Monday I was having a really hard day and I posted it on my Instagram like, "Does anyone else feel like they can't write anything worth reading right now?" and so many of my classmates responded, "Me too!" Then I presented the paper in my class and got positive feedback from my professor. I was so stressed out about that, so those affirmations made my day. That's my triumph.

**Adara:** Something that happened for me that I feel very blessed about... I am also very happy to be a part of this panel to talk about my experience here. But I am also presenting tomorrow for my own personal presentation, and I've been just very nervous about it for the past couple

weeks. And just hearing Dr. Morris and my mentor reassure me that I'm doing a great job just made me feel great because I am very passionate about this work and it does put an emotional toil on me because I do get very emotionally invested. Hearing people say that I am doing a great job, to keep doing what you're doing, and that this is going places is something that brings me joy all the time.

**Micah:** I agree with all the panelists in that I'm happy to be here, too. I was honestly really shocked when I got the email...like, "Oh...okay!" I think something that brings me joy is going back and reading the surveys my students have sent me through our writing center's online database system. It's just nice to see encouraging responses from the students, and so sometimes when I'm having a bad day or feel like I haven't had the best tutoring session, I go back to those surveys and read them because, you know, it's nice to hear from students. It's also nice to see encouragement from other tutors and to hear about others' joys and triumphs.

And I think that talking about joy is a perfect way to have allyship, too, because I definitely agree that trauma's not the only way we can have allyship to begin with. What makes us humans is that we have our joys and successes, no matter how big or small they are, and that we can include them in our conversations as we get to know one another as people, especially in this online format. Usually, many writing centers usually can bring tutors together through a physical breakroom and physical contact with one another. But sometimes, it's just good to hop on Zoom, debrief, talk about how your day's been or how a particular session went. That's as good of a time as ever to also know your Black tutors as individuals with their own personalities and their own ways of working as a tutor, instead of treating us like we're in one monolith.

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**Talisha (Audience Question):** What advice do you have for moving past "diversity and inclusion" and moving towards transformative change in the writing center, particularly within an institution that has remained pretty silent on these issues? I think this question is referring, in part, to discussions on how "diversity" and "inclusion" can become empty words, or words without action.

**Genny** : First, I just want to shout out the people who wrote this question. I know that, once again, I am speaking to peers when I say that specific words have specific meanings and often times they are conflated. “Diversity,” “inclusion,” “equity,” and “justice”: they all mean different things and, while diversity and inclusion are great, I think honestly if you ask me, I think writing centers are already moving in that direction quite comfortably. Equity and justice is a lot more difficult to accomplish because, at least to me, what you’re talking about is this complete upheaval of an institution, starting from square one. Because when it comes to equity, it’s kind of interesting— I’m sure y’all have probably been trainings or seen any sort of graphics online about the difference between equity and equality. Equality is sort of like giving everybody the same amount of food. Equity is like, give the most food to someone who’s hungry and some doesn’t need food, like, they don’t need food. Basically, that’s the concept of equity, and of course justice is, when someone has been wronged, moving towards a way for that person to receive peace.

And there’s different types [of justice]. Usually, we’re trying to do restorative justice, restoring people into a place that is, hopefully, better than where they were. So, with those sorts of definitions in mind, I think when it comes to an institution that often is silent on these issues, I mean I don’t know, raise your hand if your institution isn’t, honestly. I’d like to know so I can go there. But, jokes aside, I think that what that looks like equity-wise is, like Micah was saying earlier, getting to know your tutors individually. Oftentimes, I mean, you know, in the writing center, we do work, you know. We do labor. We are working with one another. And for anyone who’s ever had a job, you clock in, you clock out, and then you go on your merry way. You can feel like a cog in a machine, almost. Writing centers are usually more cozy than that, and that’s why I really love my work, but I think valuing each other as individuals with hopes, dreams, desires, and needs, I think, is where you find the beginnings of what equity and justice looks like. Because when it comes to that equity and justice, you need to pay attention to individuals and what they need. So, I’m not sure what that looks like from a center-to-center basis, but I think being conscious of the different places tutors might be in, even a day-to-day basis (such as through check-ins, honestly), is where we can

start to get our bearings on how to actually make sure our tutors are treated well in these spaces in that direction.

**Chanara:** To answer this question and just brag on my center a little bit, creating a community within the writing center is so important so you feel supported and, as Genevieve said, like you're honoring this person and what they need at that time. What we were in-person, it was amazing. I loved being in the writing center; I would hang out there when I wasn't working and it was a great time. But just having people who support you makes all the difference. I had a really weird experience with this student and, as it escalated, another consultant came and intercepted that. On the admin end, that person couldn't make appointments with me anymore, and wasn't permitted to schedule appointments with anyone until they sat down and talked through what happened with someone on our admin team. Having that kind of community helps. Understand that we're all people and we all need help sometimes and if there's a way that I can intercede for you and do that, I will.

**Micah:** I'll just add on. Here, I think again like one main things is that we like thinking on like that individual as well as the institution. Concerning the individual, I think it's important to educate oneself. I've known plenty of tutors who have went out their way already to learn more about antiracism through books like *Stamped From the Beginning*, *How to be an Antiracist*, *Bad Feminist*, *Eloquent Rage*. They have gone and found this scholarship for themselves, which alleviates the amount of emotional labor on Black tutors. Because sometimes, it feels like, "Ok, like because you're black, you must know a lot about fighting racism and stuff." But it's like, "Hold up, no. I'm still learning, too." Nevertheless, if we want a better writing center, we must try to be the best scholar-activists or scholar-advocates we can be. The more we read from others' experiences and then try to apply them in the context of the writing center, the more we can have conversations that are more nuanced and collaborative.

In terms of the institutional level, I know we've been talking a lot about the writing center from the inside. But changing the negative aspects of academia is a lot of work, especially for a writing center. We act as both our own institutions for learning, but in many cases, the writing center is also an appendage of the English Department. So, in some manner, the

way in which we tutor people reflects what English departments want in their courses. I believe to make institutional change, we should partner in allyship with other organizations on campus who also strive for diversity and inclusion in academia. Writing centers could host workshops, set and/or follow initiatives with fellow organizations, and other things like that to connect efforts for diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus. If we have efforts of diversity and inclusion not only within the writing center but also outside, we have better hopes to create substantial change.

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**Talisha (Audience Question):** How do we acknowledge, respond to, or recognize moments of explicit violence and microaggressions that occur in the teaching of writing between faculty and writers while respecting privacy and honoring trust?

I don't know if any of you have experienced that, as tutors, something you would consider violence, in the comments or feedback from teachers or a student has told you about an interaction with a faculty member.

**Genny:** So, I'd like to respond to this by actually referring to a comment that was made earlier. But when it comes to interacting and responding to the sort of situations that can happen, whether explicit or through microaggressions (which are still not very good), I think we need to refer those individuals outside of the consultation that happens. This is sort of where you get caught up in between "calling someone out" versus "calling someone in." So, when you call someone out, oftentimes people feel alienated or confused and immediately go on the defensive. But calling somebody in is saying, "Hey...I think that you don't really have a full understanding of this." And while ignorance is not really a defense, it is something that can be addressed.

I think a lot of universities have, especially in the wake of things people have tried to accomplish, different resources to address these people. Now, of course, sometimes there are social injustices that occur, and so disciplinary action will need to be taken. Of course, with honoring the trust of the clients and such, I think it goes both ways. Because we've been talking about tutors as the ones who need to be protected, and that's

very true. But this is also why we need to specifically make sure that tutors, consultants, professional consultants, and anyone on staff is trained to handle these situations, how to diffuse, as well as how to treat clients with respect. And again, I think honoring that is making sure it goes both ways. Much like Micah said earlier, just because I'm a black person, that doesn't mean that I'm a race scholar. And we all have so much to learn. I think making sure that it goes both ways and people have an out is a way for people to feel comfortable when they are in.

**Micah:** I agree, Genny. And that is a difficult question. Even the fact of looking through my appointments, I have had a couple moments where I've had to double check, especially with e-tutoring appointments, and I'm like, "Wow, does this sound like an experiences stemming from a microaggression between student and a peer grader, or even between a student and a faculty member?" As it comes to questionable comments, I've personally seen it most between other students when they peer grade each other in their courses, and the student sends me those comments. So, it leads to this challenge. I think it's best to of course think about the student, but to also make sure that they want to confront those issues to begin with. Like seeing if you can potentially help them out and refer them. Protocols are important as well so that as tutors, we know exactly what we need to do in certain situations like these. I know there are Titles at most colleges that protect students against discrimination. But again, it's about developing that trust so that the student feels comfortable with handling (or not handling) the situation with or without your help. But yeah, that is a very difficult, but good, question.

**Talisha:** I will say that at my previous institution, there was a student who was dealing with a professor, and it got elevated not to the Provost but to someone in the Provost's office who worked with diversity and inclusion. Eventually, someone called me in to work with a student who was being called in every week and singled out for writing support. This was a black female student. And so I met with that student, and she was very clear that she did not want me to intervene with the professor who was making her feel terrible to the point that she was planning to just flunk the class and not try to complete the assigned project. But I was able to work with her through my role in the writing center to create a plan to get her paper done so that she could pass the class. But that's the point about privacy and honoring the student: it's about what they want.

They may not want that further intervention. They just may want to just get through and try to move on. So, it's important to ask what they want, and if necessary, bring it up to the director so that the director can intervene with the faculty member or bring it up to whoever that faculty member's supervisor is. As a tutor, it wouldn't be your goal to contact the professor or intervene in any way.

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**Chanara (Audience Question):** How do we affirm the stories of those who may not speak English as a first language?

**Micah:** This is a great question because a lot of courses use American Standard English as the default. At UAB, we have a really diverse community that has a lot of non-native speakers of English. Their biggest challenge tends to be along the lines of grammar and with understanding enough vocabulary of the language to write their papers. However, a lot of students I've worked with so far actually excel in English as a second language. I haven't had too many experiences in which a non-native speaker of English was struggling, and if so, it has nothing to do with their intelligence or ability. One thing I do to help affirm the stories of those who are multilingual is to promote them to push the boundaries, especially in personal narratives, and incorporate their native language in their essays *a la* Gloria Anzaldúa.

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**Talisha (Audience Question):** If you have knowledge that the writer's first language is not English, how do you create a safe space for them to express their ideas?

**Micah:** Okay, that might be an easier question to tackle. So, as it comes to creating safe spaces, I think the first thing to talk about (like we did when talking about safe spaces for Black students and tutors) is in creating trust within that session. Get to know them a little bit so that you can make them feel as comfortable as possible. The tutoring process can be a vulnerable experience, and even more so if English is not a writer's strong suit. With any opportunity you can, encourage them for their

successes in the language and just for working with you in a vulnerable learning moment.

I think another thing that will help create a safe space for these writers is learning how their cultures work and how they write papers in their language. This is something I need to work and improve on as a tutor. Again, we are taught this certain habitus of writing, but we don't really think about how people from different countries write their papers, particularly as it comes to the flow of arguments or citations, formatting, and things of that nature. And so, I think that talking about their culture with them, if it's okay for that student, can create a space in which both student and tutor safely educate one another. This experience can also allow them the creative freedom to express their ideas better for us tutors to help them develop their own unique writing style rather than one narrow mode. Luckily, at UAB, professors tend to be accepting of different writing styles, and even encourage that in their courses.

**Chanara:** I am super interested in this question -- which is why it was stuck in my brain -- because my first month of tutoring was so scary because I convinced myself that I had no idea what I was doing. But I had a student come in and her first language *was* English but she did not have the language to express her ideas and this super cool thing happened that I told everybody about for at least a month. I had 3 pieces of paper -- I still have the picture in my phone -- and we drew what she was talking about. She sketched it out explaining, "I'm just trying to talk about how the character goes from this to this." So as she drew pictures, I wrote words, and it turned out to be the most cohesive idea that I had ever been presented. She just needed help developing the actual words to get there. So I think that kind of meaning someone where they are is valuable. I've had students whose first language isn't English and while working on a narrative assignment for their 1101 class, they want to explain a place or thing in their hometown but will say, "I don't know what it's called in English," to which I respond, "Okay, well just tell me what it looks like." It helps to get down to those very basic details and then build on that. It's like Legos.

**Micah:** As a side note to what Chanara brilliantly said, the Whiteboard is a particularly good feature on Zoom to draw things out.

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**Talisha (Audience Question):** Well that's a great transition because our next question is about how you've experienced tutoring when your body and the writer's body are not in the same space, so maybe using the technology or in any way, just as an embodied person?

**Chanara:** I do all asynchronous appointments now, which requires a lot more work than it used to when I did half in-person and half asynchronous. I find myself working overtime to compensate for the feeling that students are missing out something. I want to address every single thing in each paper and every question they have and every question they *might* have based on my feedback. So I do that and then at least once every other week, someone will e-mail me a follow-up question seeking clarity where I thought I'd been so clear. So I've become much more intentional about feedback and also varying the ways I present feedback. Instead of just saying, "You need to vary your sentence structure," or, "This is unclear," I ask more probing questions. I also provide example answers to these questions. For example, if I ask, "What did you mean by X?" I will follow that with "If you meant A, you might want to think about doing B. If you meant Y, you should consider presenting it in Z way." So going the extra mile but moderating that within the time that you have. It's been...it's been good. It's been hard, I'm not going to lie. This whole situation has been hard on everybody.

**Genny:** I also did tutoring last summer—and you know, it was all remote—and I actually saw a lot of the same clients. Usually during like spring and fall semesters, I never see the same person more than twice. But I had a lot of returners, and I got to know them kinda well. So, I made a couple of friends, which was cool. But I will also say to the question of how I've experienced tutoring with our bodies not sharing the same space, I think, unfortunately, boundaries aren't as clear as we're all still trying to figure out, like how to like, you know, be virtual still. I'm not going to lie; some of my clients got a little bold, stating things like, "Your hair looks different today." And I'm like, it's fine...allegedly. That's *fine*. But then they'll ask questions like "how do you do this" and that's when it's like, "Well, now we are straying a little bit from the point of consultation." Because I think when you're in a in a

dedicated space like a writing center, the intention is very clear of what's happening.

But when you're in your room and doing a consultation, people can feel more comfortable. For the most part, we all feel very comfortable in our writing center space, but there is an air of professionalism that is maintained for the usual safety and respect of one another, and I think that got a little lost at least earlier on. And I'm sure there's probably different situations as people got more accustomed to doing that, but this was in the summer only after we just had started online tutoring. So, when it comes to like addressing that, it probably just needs a reinforcement of like, "Hey, I know we're virtual, but you know, just make sure we stay on topic, please," and stuff like that.

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**Talisha:** We have about five more minutes, and we don't have any more questions, so this is a good time for any of you to share your final thoughts or recommendations for other tutors (student, faculty, professional) or writing center administrators.

**Chanara:** I would just like to say, for one, thank you for having me. Thank you all for being so engaged in our responses and for pushing us to think further. Some of these questions were really hard, and it's nice to have a community of people who are invested in doing the work to make our spaces better. I think that what writing centers do is exploited and undervalued, honestly, so this work is so important. We have to affirm each other and continue to have these conversations.

**Genny:** I am also so grateful and thankful for each and every one of you for coming out to this. This is definitely the highlight of my week. It has brought me a lot of joy myself. I honestly also want to say that like, I don't know if anyone else ever got this experience coming in the writing center community, but I didn't expect it to be as introspective and ready to change and shift as I thought upon entry. You know people have different workplaces and such, and so I want to say that it's always so refreshing to have conversations with people who are involved in this work because I think that we have a unique desire to grow and shift as we understand how language grows and shifts. So, it's always a

beautiful thing to see. Having a conversation with y'all, albeit virtual, has been very fruitful, and I am so thankful to be here as a panelist. Thank you so much.

**Micah:** I would like to say thank you as well, especially with being a younger tutor. Like wow! Even as a panelist, I've learned so much. And I've also learned things that I need to work on as a tutor, which is a good thing. This is an opportunity for all of us to grow—black tutors, tutors of color, and white tutors alike. So having this important conversation helps to push the boundaries to help us educate and figure out what's next for us. Again, thank you all for having me.

**Adara:** Just to piggyback off of everyone, thank you all for having me and allowing me to share my experiences with y'all. We should continue to always have these conversations in order to bridge the gap between our experiences and others, for where we'll have the most change is when we start identifying that we have important work to do and that we need to come together to make that change.

**Talisha (closing):** Thanks to all the panelists and everyone else who put this together. Thanks for inviting me to be part of it.

### **Conclusion: LaKela**

There were many successes from the keynote panel during the 2021 SWCA Conference. It was valuable having students' voices featured on a large scale, as writing center professionals are the individuals often featured. The students of color shared unique and collective experiences that provided insight beyond discussions about our student staff. Their perspectives challenged us as an organization to move beyond words and reactions and put in the work we say we're doing to support students of color in our writing center spaces. The keynote panel also reminded us that we need to engage in consistent dialogue with students of color to learn how to best support their needs, acknowledging that students' identities and backgrounds vary. This way, we are proactive instead of reactionary.

As we consider the ways that the panel benefited students and the organization, it is also important to acknowledge the growth we still need

to do. There are ways that we can involve our students in the professional organization more. Their contributions to organizing and planning are vital, especially for students interested in future writing center work. Perhaps working with us on future conference ideas, CFP planning, and delivery are some ways we can incorporate their feedback and ensure we are honoring their voices on a consistent basis. As much as writing center professionals serve as models for students, students also serve as models for writing professionals. That means that we recognize that their experiences are rooted in a variety of interactions--positive, negative, and the indescribable.

The transparency and vulnerability of the student panelists led to necessary dialogue in and outside of the keynote session. Through this panel, Dr. Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison and the student panelists reminded us that our work as an organization is ongoing. The dialogue was vital for future work and served as a great example of how we may imagine future panels and groups we hope to engage more.