



# Southern Discourse in the Center

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

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# ***Back to the Center***

## **The Writing Center@Piedmont Virginia Community College**

--Jenny Koster

### **About PVCC**

Piedmont Virginia Community College is located in Charlottesville, Virginia and is one of 23 colleges in the Virginia Community College

**The  
Writing  
Center  
@PVCC**

System (VCCS). The college is committed to providing access to a college education for all who can benefit, an opportunity for each student to reach their potential, and excellence in all programs and services. In addition to the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle County, which surrounds it, PVCC serves four additional, primarily rural, counties. In 2020-2021, the college

enrolled approximately 2700 full-time equivalent students [6700 headcount], an enrollment decline of about 10% from pre-pandemic years.

Over the last 20 years, the VCCS has developed guaranteed admission agreements with all state institutions, allowing students who complete their associate's degree with an articulated program of courses and who earn a specific GPA established by each transfer institution to receive guaranteed admission to that institution. Not surprisingly, because PVCC is located in Charlottesville, home to the University of Virginia, and in view of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, many PVCC students have hopes of one day attending "the University," and the college enjoys a strong relationship with its four-year neighbor. Students transfer to

other state institutions as well: Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth University, James Madison University, among others, and many students complete certificate or degree programs that prepare them for immediate employment.

## **About the Writing Center**

The Writing Center@PVCC was established in 2006 and has been coordinated by Jenny Koster, a full-time faculty member in the English department who was hired to build the center. In the 16 years since the center's founding, the Writing Center has contributed to the college and student success in three key ways: writing-specific tutoring; course-embedded writing tutoring in composition support classes; and through research, innovation, and the promotion of writing at the college.

In 2021-2022, the college, including the Writing Center, returned to campus for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic forced it almost completely online in March 2020. The center had its highest number of sessions ever, with 2456 visits. This increase is attributed to our commitment to accessibility. We strive to be available to students by drop in or by appointment so that our most vulnerable students, those most likely to not make appointments, have access to our services. The successful establishment of a Virtual Writing Center during the pandemic, a Zoom room where students could “drop-in” for tutoring during open hours or talk with our desk staff to schedule an appointment, is a reflection of that commitment.

The Writing Center has retained the drop-in Zoom room since its return to campus, offering sessions synchronously in Zoom or in person. [The Writing Center uses the national tutoring vendor Brainfuse for asynchronous tutoring. In 2021-22, there were 347 Writing “Lab” sessions.] This format seems to work well for students on a commuter campus, allowing them to access tutoring on days they don't have classes. Student usage of the centers was evenly split this past year, with 50.2% of sessions in person and 49.8% via Zoom. Thus, the Virtual Center will remain an integral part of our work.

Eighty-nine percent of usage in the Writing Center@PVCC is for humanities courses, with our highest usage for College Composition 1 and 2, but we also tutor writing for STEM subjects, like biology,

microbiology, math and anatomy and physiology, as well for business and IT courses. In addition, we offer tutoring for public speaking courses and support English Language Learners both through writing tutoring and through conversational English practice. We know that students who have two or more tutoring sessions are more likely to pass their courses [10 to 15%], and students who attend three or more sessions are even more likely [20 to 25%, sometimes even more] to successfully complete their courses. We understand this is correlation, not causation, but it is a point we like to make to students in Writing Center presentations, that success is not just about ability, but effort. Students who make the effort to get feedback are more likely to pass their courses.

In our end-of-session surveys, 97% of students said their session helped them to develop their assignment or improve their coursework. In the annual PVCC Survey of Student Satisfaction, the Writing Center receives a satisfaction rating in the high 90<sup>th</sup>-percentile and has achieved a 100% satisfaction rating three times. In August 2019, The Writing Center@PVCC received the SWCA's CARE Certification.

### **Course-Embedded Tutoring**

The Writing Center created a course-embedded tutoring program in 2008. The goal of the program was to integrate Writing Center supports into non-credit developmental writing courses. Since a redesign of the developmental courses in 2012, PVCC has embedded tutors in a co-requisite, non-credit bearing course attached to College Composition and in standalone “developmental classes.” By embedding tutors into these courses, students have built-in experiences with writing tutors, making it more comfortable for them to seek Writing Center services outside of class. The embedded tutor also supports instructors in differentiating instruction to meet students' needs.

Initially, writing tutors attended developmental support classes just once per week, working with students one-on-one or in groups and modeling student behavior in class. However, in fall 2020, PVCC participated in the VCCS Direct Enrollment Project which sought to enroll students into credit-bearing courses more quickly and thereby bolster completion. PVCC, one of the only colleges in the VCCS with a course-embedded tutoring program at the time, had already been enjoying success in our developmental writing courses, but the Writing Center seized the

opportunity to build the program, even further, embedding tutors into the entirety of the three-hour per week developmental support course.

While embedded tutoring once comprised 10% of the Writing Center budget, it now comprises 20 to 25% of the budget. However, PVCC's corequisite courses, and the new standalone three-credit developmental writing course, enjoy high rates of success with 71% of students in the co-requisite course passing College Composition and 93% of students passing the developmental course. Additionally, 92% of students in both courses say embedded tutors helped them to be successful in their course in Spring 2022. 67% used the WC outside of class, and 67% said working with embedded tutor increased their confidence in their writing. Thus, the embedded tutoring program is bolstering student success in critical first-year writing courses.

### **Research, Innovation, and the Promotion of Writing**

Finally, The Writing Center@PVCC contributes to the college beyond working with students. Writing tutors engage in research in the field of writing center studies and develop materials to support students and faculty. They present at conferences and write tutor education modules. They run our social media feed, lead English Conversation Circle, and promote the Writing Center in classes and at campus events

Writing Center engagement with the research led to two significant events at the college this year. In January, Professor Jay Dolmage delivered a talk to all college faculty and staff entitled, "Ableism and its Alternatives." The talk and resources provided by Dolmage has led to awareness and actions to support students' mental and emotional health. Writing Center staff presented a talk entitled "Towards an Antiracist Writing Center," sharing our research, questions we've been asking, and steps we've been taking in the Writing Center to ensure equity in our work. These presentations have been conversation starters and have sparked interest and action in others.

The Writing Center also promotes student writing across campus. Each fall, the Center sponsors an English 111 [College Composition] Personal Narrative Contest, as personal narratives are a requirement of every English 111 at the college. Tutors advertise, read, and judge the contest. We select four winners, who each receive \$25. We also select "staff

picks,” favorite essays that didn’t make it into our top four. We view this as a way to celebrate the writing from the course which constitutes the largest number of Writing Center visits. We publish the winning essays on a website.

In October 2020, the Writing Center@PVCC hosted Virginia’s first annual statewide writing tutor conference, TuColla-VA. Though the pandemic necessitated TuColla-VA occur in Zoom, the conference attracted tutors from 16 Virginia colleges and universities. PVCC tutors presented on strategies for promoting the voices of English language learners, Universal Design in educational materials, and connections between activist and Writing Center work. In October 2021, PVCC hosted the second TuColla-VA, once again in Zoom, with tutors attending from 19 schools, including two high schools and four out-of-state colleges and universities. PVCC Writing Center tutors presented on disability and the Writing Center and on using social media platforms to promote linguistic justice. TuColla-VA will continue next year, with the Writing Center@PVCC providing support to the conference’s next host.

This engagement with research, and with colleagues within the system, state, and region, helps to strengthen our work in the Writing Center, but also in the English department, and in the college. We bring back what we learn to the college, and it makes its way to the English department through our coordinator and to the college via staff-run presentations, infusing curriculum across the college.

### **Continuing to Grow**

While we are proud of the work we have done, we are also asking “What’s next?” For many years, because of the way general tutoring is structured at PVCC, writing tutors have also supported students with subject-tutoring related to the humanities. With a new tutoring center in design, the Writing Center will likely evolve into a Writing, Speech and Communications Center focused on supporting students with writing, public speaking and presentations.

Further development of course-embedded tutoring is also being explored. We know students who pass College Composition 1 with a C or below are less likely to be successful in College Composition 2. We are looking at opportunities to embed tutors in these courses as well. We

are also looking to recruit students who've worked with embedded tutors in their courses to become embedded tutors themselves.

As part of our equity work, we are continuing to explore ways to support linguistic diversity and to ensure policies and procedures in the Writing Center are inclusive. It is our goal that the Writing Center be a motivator of change and that it reflects the dynamic community of the college as a whole.



**Figure 1.** The Writing Center@PVCC



**Figure 2.** The entrance chalkboard wall in The Writing Center@PVCC