Wellness and Care in Writing Center Work

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Introduction

In the last days of 2020, as the United States and every other country around the world battles yet another peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and we are told by national leaders and health experts to prepare for an especially dark winter, it seems almost prescient that the authors in this book detail several interventions on wellness and care in writing center work. However, the idea for this edited collection was born long before the pandemic became a worldwide crisis. The outpouring of interest in this topic—which was the theme of the spring 2018 ECWCA conference that I hosted at Ohio State, and which led to the publication of a WLN special issue on the topic in early 2020—indicated that there remained more to learn about how the field of writing center studies confronts—or fails to confront—wellness issues in our work. As many of the chapters in this edited collection indicate, practitioners and scholars in writing center studies are devising intentional, social justice-oriented, and anti-capitalist approaches to wellness and care, even as our field confronts rising challenges caused by austerity and the neoliberal turn in American higher education.

   For writing center and writing program scholars, administrators, and practitioners hungry for changing how we labor and how we teach writing, this book details several interventions, pedagogies, and programmatic approaches that place wellness, vulnerability, and anti-racist community care at the forefront of our work. For practitioners outside of the United States, I hope that this book generates meaningful conversations about wellness challenges and care opportunities and leads to interventions that are culturally-specific and site-specific. Of course, as I have detailed in my other work on wellness and labor, the pandemic has given new

urgency to these conversations and has upped their stakes. This book, then, is an artifact of a pre-pandemic world. While subsequent revisions have woven in pandemic-specific reflections and information, we are still sorting through the wreckage of a harrowing year. In years to come, I hope that we will look back on this period of uncertainty and fear, and process how the pandemic reshaped us: our work, our tutoring and teaching practices, our attitudes about our institutions, our profession, our programmatic goals. I also hope we examine what the pandemic failed to reshape and [the many aspects of the academy that the pandemic adversely shaped](#).

Organization of the Book

This book is organized topically. [Chapter 1](#), "A Matter of Method: Wellness and Care Research in Writing Center Studies," by Genie Nicole Giaimo, provides an overview of recent wellness scholarship alongside best practices for developing and carrying out research programs on this topic. Detailing different kinds of approaches to wellness and care research through reviewing and categorizing published scholarship in the field, this chapter is a useful guide for anyone interested in conducting their own site-specific or cross-institutional research and assessment.

From methods, we turn to reflective pieces from current writing center administrators and practitioners. In [Chapter 2](#), "Naming and Negotiating the Emotional Labors of Writing Center Tutoring," Kristi Murray Costello defines and explores emotional labor and details how she used this concept to create writing center training that developed a community of care in her writing center.

Benjamin J. Villarreal engages in autoethnography in [Chapter 3](#), "Imposter Syndrome in the Writing Center: An Autoethnography of Tutoring as Mindfulness," to explore how practicing mindfulness in a writing center space helped him. He deeply reflects on his identities as a Chicano, first-generation college graduate, writing center tutor, and an

administrator to examine his sense of belonging and to cope with his feeling of imposter syndrome.

In [Chapter 4](#), "The Hidden and Invisible: Vulnerability in Writing Center Work," Lauren Brentnell, Elise Dixon, and Rachel Robinson explore how writing centers—and their workers—can work to acknowledge, address, and allow vulnerability. Their chapter identifies how vulnerability and emotions push their way into writing centers unexpectedly and often with little forewarning or training for center staff.

Chapters 2–4 are deeply personal insofar as they confront the kinds of feelings and experiences that are bound up with everyday writing center practices and that arise out of the quotidian actions of writing center work, such as going to the office, working with vulnerable writers, or, as Costello, Villarreal, and Brentnell et al. acknowledge, personally experiencing the kinds of emotions that others in the center also feel (uncertainty, vulnerability, grief, hopelessness, etc.) while also going about daily writing center work. Life, in other words, does not simply stop while we work with writers, as these authors all rightly point out and explore. In response to such experiences, these chapters provide different ways for us to integrate wellness into writing center training and work, as well as into our lives.

From here we move to chapters that are focused heavily on tutor training interventions. In [Chapter 5](#), "Cultivating an Emotionally Intelligent Writing Center Culture Online," Miranda Mattingly, Claire Helakoski, Christina Lundberg, and Kacy Walz explore how organizational culture can be improved by providing training on emotional intelligence to tutors. Especially in online environments—on which the authors focus their chapter—emotional intelligence training helps tutors to acknowledge, process, work through emotional labor, and foster a "culture of connectedness, empathy, and trust."

In [Chapter 6](#), "Tutors as Counselors: Fact, Fiction, or Writing Center Necessity," Sarah Brown identifies the challenges that

tutors confront in working with writers who are struggling with emotional issues that spill over into their writing work. Brown draws parallels between the therapeutic practice of Motivational Interviewing (MI) and writing tutoring and then provides a training model that incorporates MI into tutoring practice. This model, she posits, will better prepare tutors to support and help writers struggling with negative emotions surrounding writing and/or their academic experiences.

Chapter 7, "'A Triumph Over Structures That Disempower': Principles for Community Wellness in the Writing Center," by Yanar Hashlamon, rounds out this collection with a unique chapter that is part manifesto and part call-to-action and that advocates for an anti-racist approach to wellness and care work. Hashlamon centers his arguments in Black feminist texts and argues that our field should focus on communal—rather than individualistic—models of care. Drawing from the Black Power Movement, he maps out several action items that a writing center and its staff can take to be more intentionally anti-racist and care-oriented while navigating the pitfalls of the neoliberal academy, such as its often-ableist institutional wellness programs.

Together, these chapters provide a lot of insight, resources, and ideas about how we can incorporate various aspects of wellness and care into our writing center administration, tutor work, scholarship, and activism. And, notably, the insights and resources that they provide are incredibly interdisciplinary. To develop their wellness models, contributors draw from fields outside of writing center studies such as sociology, rhetorical studies, organizational theory, psychology, Black Feminist studies, trauma studies, queer studies, and self-help. These chapters are also deeply personal. Many of the authors incorporate personal experience and autobiography to situate their chapters even as they also acknowledge the daily indignities, struggles, and challenges associated with writing center work. The personal, in this sense, is also professional and

political; it informs much of the work we do. As readers peruse these chapters, they should look to the interactive footnotes, hyperlinks, figures, charts, and appendices; these are artifacts of our professional development and growth and they are also resources that I hope will be useful for practitioners who want to incorporate wellness and care into their centers.

This book is part of a relatively new series of digitally edited and open-access books that are supported by WLN and produced by scholars in the field of writing center studies. This book was created using Press Books and includes several learning resources, such as discussion questions for each chapter, chapter-specific activities, additional resources, and advice. Names of authors and publications are hyperlinked (identified by red text with a solid underline). In lieu of footnotes or endnotes, there are in-text hyperlinked notes (identified by red text with a dotted underline), in chapters throughout the book. Because of its digital structure, this book is best read online rather than as a PDF, though it can be downloaded and saved in PDF format. When saved in PDF form, some of the interactive elements, such as hyperlinks, might not transfer correctly and formatting may shift; therefore, some elements of the text might get lost in digital translation.

Genie Nicole Giaimo, December 2020

1. A Matter of Method: Wellness and Care Research in Writing Center Studies by Genie Nicole Giaimo

Introduction

Perhaps because wellness is a nascent research topic in our field, there are relatively few texts that bring specific methodological lenses to bear on wellness and care research in writing center work. While there are, of course, a variety of ways to study this emergent phenomenon in writing centers, and there are a number of fine texts ([Ianetta and Fitzgerald](); [Kinkead](); [Grutsch McKinney](); [Babcock and Thonus](); [Mackiewicz and Babcock]()) to guide such research, we have not yet taken stock of what has already been studied about these topics and, specifically, the methodological tools utilized to do so. While other empirical studies ([Mackiewicz](); [Hall](); [Mackiewicz and Thompson]()) in our field take as their focus specific methodological approaches and topics, such as corpus linguistic analysis of tutoring sessions and discourse analysis of writing center artifacts, few studies ([Hashlamon]()) provide methodological reviews of topically specific research in the

field, though [Sarah Liggett et al.](#) do provide a broad taxonomy of the field's research methodologies. Therefore, this chapter provides something new alongside something that is fairly common: it provides an in-depth analysis of individual methodological approaches that have been used in wellness scholarship while also offering methodological guidance for scholars who are interested in further examining this wide-ranging topic. This chapter, however, does not cover the other chapters in this Digital Edited Collection on wellness and care. This review only focuses on previously published scholarship. Additionally, the [introduction](#) to this book focuses on the important and, in many ways, holistic contributions that the other chapters in this DEC make to this emergent area of research.

Overview of Research on Wellness in Writing Centers

There seems to be a split between earlier and later wellness research in writing center studies. Articles on wellness from the first decade of the new millennium (2003–2008) focused far more explicitly on applying Zen Buddhism concepts and practices, such as mindfulness, yoga, and philosophies (Right Mind, intentionality, compassion, etc.) to writing tutoring practices, often with the intention of improving tutor practice. Deborah Murray's "[Zen Tutoring: Unlocking the Mind](#)," Paul Gamache's "[Zen and the Art of the Writing Tutorial](#)," and Erika Spohrer's "[From Goals to Intentions: Yoga, Zen, and Our Writing Center Work](#)," all offer tutoring practices that are informed by Zen, such as meditation and yoga. Murray and Gamache do not discuss assessment, instead focusing more on praxis-orientated advice, while Spohrer creates case studies about tutoring sessions that have not been successful and uses them

as evidence that mindfulness training for tutors may help them to forego rigid expectations of their tutoring sessions. These articles are focused on utilizing mindfulness interventions to improve tutor behavior and tutor labor.

Recently, however, articles on wellness in writing centers have become more common and more empirically rooted, especially in the last decade. Furthermore, a subset of pieces has emerged that critically examines the state of writing center labor and extends wellness interventions beyond the goal of improving or otherwise optimizing tutor labor. Two such articles have focused explicitly on tutors and their challenges with wellness issues while on the job. In 2015, Hillary Degner et al. published "[Opening Closed Doors: A Rationale for Creating a Safe Space for Tutors Struggling With Mental Health Concerns or Illnesses](.)." In 2017, Elizabeth Mack and Katie Hupp published "Mindfulness in the Writing Center: A Total Encounter." While Degner et al. and Mack and Hupp differed in their methodological approaches to studying wellness and care in writing centers, both focused on tutors rather than clients. Degner et al. administered a survey on mental health to tutors across multiple writing centers. The survey asked a range of open-ended, multiple choice, ratio scale, and Likert scale questions regarding tutors' experiences with mental health concerns. The survey also asked questions about whether tutors were trained to identify and address mental health concerns in their work. Through an analysis of survey responses using primarily descriptive statistics, the study found that most mental health training focused on clients' mental health rather than tutors' mental health, though tutors, like many others, struggle with mental health concerns at fairly high rates; overall, tutors reported wanting more explicit training on mental health and its application to writing center work (32).

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Mack and Hupp detail a set of mindfulness interventions that professional tutors conducted over a series of weeks, such as practicing loving-kindness toward clients, reflecting between tutoring sessions, and setting intentions inside and outside the center. A follow-up survey about the interventions, administered a year later, found that mindfulness training interventions had a positive effect on professional tutors' practice and tutors' perception of their work; however, the survey instrument was not shared in the article, so it is difficult to tell what effects were measured. Also, during this period of writing center scholarship (2016), a dissertation was written on "mindful tutors" ([Anderson](#)), but, paradoxically, it did not engage with current scholarship on mindfulness in or outside of writing centers but rather on rhetorical listening strategies. Most scholarship on wellness is preoccupied with tutors' experiences of writing center labor and advocates for expanding wellness training interventions in writing centers.

More recent articles make little to no mention of the origins of mindfulness techniques like meditation in Zen Buddhism. The exception, however, is "[The Mindful Tutor: How We Teach Writing Tutors](#)" (Featherstone, et al.), which provides a comprehensive overview of Zen Buddhism—a spiritual teaching across Asia—and how it has been utilized in a set of interventions in American medical, psychological, and educational contexts. Sarah Johnson's 2018 "[Mindful Tutors, Embodied Writers: Positioning Mindfulness Meditation as a Writing Strategy to Optimize Cognitive Load and Potentialize Writing Center Tutors' Supportive Roles](#)" argues that mindfulness meditation practices can be utilized by both

tutors and clients as a stress reduction strategy that helps to facilitate a writing session. The article, however, remains largely untested, insofar as it offers a meditation script and an exigency for implementation, but no data on post-implementation assessment. Claire Kervin and Heather Barrett's 2018 "[Emotional Management Over Time Management: Using Mindfulness to Address Student Procrastination](#)" argues that mindfulness techniques are useful in addressing procrastination in student writers. Their initial intervention, training tutors to work with students who procrastinated, was developed in response to a trend the authors observed after analyzing session notes and appointment data. There was, however, no follow-up assessment or articulation of the effect of the intervention. In 2019, Jared Featherstone et al. discuss a set of multi-year meditation interventions in tutor training courses as well as qualitative results from pedagogical assessment. The study design was longitudinal and included multiple sections of a tutor training course, which allowed for a more robust sampling among potential participants; it also included both open-ended and closed questions regarding the training intervention. The researchers used NVivo software, a program that tracks keyword frequencies and other patterns in linguistic data, to analyze the data. This study was well designed and articulated results clearly in the chapter. Findings include that seventy-four percent of respondents agreed that mindfulness meditation positively affected their tutoring practice.

The first special issue dedicated to wellness and care work in writing centers, published in early 2020 by [WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship](#), (co-edited by Giaimo and Hashlamon) contributed to the field with three articles and one tutor's column. In "[Tutoring Begins with Breath](#)," Nicole Emmelhainz provides guided meditation to students in a tutor training course and then asked them to write reflections on

their experiences. Eight out of twelve students found the intervention to be beneficial. In "[Cultivating Emotional Wellness and Self-Care through Mindful Mentorship](#)," Kelly Concannon et al. replicate and extend past mindfulness research from Mack and Hupp and then create an autoethnographic account of writing center administrators' engagement with mindfulness practices. The article concludes with advice for how to incorporate mindfulness into mentorship of others in writing center work. In "[Is Tutoring Stressful?: Measuring Tutors' Cortisol Levels](#)," Erik Simmons et al. conduct the first published biometric writing center assessment, collecting saliva samples from tutors to measure how stress levels are impacted by tutoring. Their findings, though preliminary and potentially confounded by such physical variables, such as resting/sitting, indicate that there is a large drop in cortisol, a hormone that regulates stress, levels among tutors between pre- and post-testing, which suggests that tutoring might actually mitigate physiological markers related to stress levels. In the tutor column, "[Just Say 'No': Setting Emotional Boundaries in the Writing Center is a Practice in Self-Care](#)," Katelyn Parsons explores the deep interconnectedness of emotionality and tutor work and the need for tutors to set professional boundaries and learn to say "no." While the articles vary in their kind of methodology from biometric (Simmons et al.), to qualitative (Emmelhainz and Concannon et al.), they all largely focus on interventions that positively influence writing center workers' confidence and work habits and that explore some work-related issues that tutors experience such as lack of confidence (Emmelhainz), lack of professional support (Concannon et al.), and stress (Simmons et al.). Parsons's piece, like others I will discuss, combines storying with theory and, in doing so, advocates for tutors to set boundaries in their tutoring work and bring subjectivity into their reactions and responses to what might seem like workplace expectations. For the most part, these

studies offer more specific research methodologies for those working with human subjects, though some (Concannon et al.; Emmelhainz) could include more details in the methods such as the number of study participants. Simmons et al. did not include in their study a few potentially confounding variables, apart from tutoring, that might affect cortisol levels, though they include a study limitations section in their article.

While mindfulness has been picked up by several scholars in the field, research on care (e.g., self-care and systems-level community care), with the exceptions of Parsons and Degner et al., has received far less attention in writing center research. Perhaps this is because mindfulness interventions are frequently used to support tutors in delivering a better "product" to their clients (i.e., more confident and supportive tutors, more engaging and active sessions for clients, more success in client learning outcomes), while care interventions are more directly connected to the welfare of the practitioners themselves and might include empowering tutors to complicate and interrogate their work, as Alison Perry's "[Training for Triggers: Helping Writing Center Consultants Navigate Emotional Sessions](#)" suggests. Perry shares tutors' reflections on performing emotional labor in writing center sessions and concludes that setting boundaries in writing sessions is critical to negotiating the emotional labor that tutors, particularly tutors of color and those who have experienced trauma, perform. Up to this point, however, our field has not published much on the Black feminist origins of wellness work (see [Hashlamon](#)), or interrogated [emotional labor within the context of race, gender, and/or class oppression](#) (Chong).

Perhaps some of the most definitive texts that address emotional labor and burnout—*[The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors](#)* (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson) and "[Writing Center Administration and/as Emotional Labor](#)" (Jackson, Grutsch McKinney, and Caswell)—do not ask

demographic questions about participants' race, gender, class, sexuality or other identity markers. The research project for both the book and the article was a longitudinal study that followed nine new writing center directors, and they utilized case study, interview, and survey methodologies to examine participants' labor experiences, including burnout and attrition, as well as positional precarity. Unsurprisingly, study participants did not frequently or explicitly discuss their identities in the interviews. Ultimately, five of the nine original participants in the study left their jobs as Writing Center Administrators (WCAs).

Neisha-Anne Green's "[Moving Beyond Alright: And the Emotional Toll of This, My Life Matters Too, in the Writing Center Work]()," is a further interrogation of emotional labor that connects Critical Race Theory with different narrative forms, such as storying and [counterstory](), to explore the experience of being one of a few people of color in the field, the vulnerability and danger that tutors and administrators of color experience in doing their work, and how writing centers are complicit in upholding white supremacist university standards for literacy education. Connecting similar phenomena that people of color and activists in the [Black Lives Matter]() movement experience with people of color in higher education, Green calls attention to how folks on the front lines of fighting and experiencing racism develop PTSD, depression, and "emotional turmoil and anguish" (19). Green makes a much-needed connection here between self-care and community care—which she advocates for through framing white allyship as "accomplice" work (29)—by arguing that these are critical elements within activist work both inside and outside of the academy. Self-care and community care ought to be infused into writing center professional development, research, and praxis. The connections between race and wellness/care in writing center work, as Green and other critical race scholars demonstrate, are inexorably connected and, as Hashlamon demonstrates,

have roots in Black feminist theory of radical care, which is community-oriented, liberatory, and autonomous. Research on wellness, then, also needs to be deliberately anti-racist and aware of its origins in civil rights and Black feminist theory and praxis.

Though self-care and mindfulness are reliant on each other, little research exists on how we can make broader ideas about care (such as community care) a more explicit ethos of writing center work, though Perry and Green begin to shape these conversations through their articles. As this review of articles demonstrates, tutor and administrator identity and lived experience within the context of wellness is relatively unexamined; furthermore, race, class, sexuality, gender, linguistic background, dis/ability, and a host of other factors affect who accesses writing centers.

These factors lead us to ask important questions in our research:

1. Who has access to support in writing centers and under what circumstances?
2. How are care and mindfulness practices enacted in writing centers?

Writing Center Wellness Research and Its Relationship to Labor

Another relatively under-studied element of wellness in the writing center is the role that stress plays in writing center labor. With the exception of Kervin and Barrett, the research referenced in this review mainly focuses on writing center workers' experiences of stress, be it tutor stress (Degner et al.; Perry; Mack and Hupp; Johnson; Featherstone et al.; Emmelhainz; Concannon et al.; Simmons et al.) or administrator stress (Caswell et al.; Green; Concannon et al.).

There exists little research on objective measures of stress among writing center workers.

Many, but not all, of these studies offer mindfulness interventions to mitigate experiences of stress. Yet there exists little research on objective measures of stress among writing center workers. Simmons et al. is one of the first studies to systematically study how tutors experience stress in their work, though the study is exploratory and lacks experimental controls, such as uniform pre-post testing protocols. Of course, there are many ways in which to explore stress in relationship to writing center work apart from biometric research.

Writing Center Wellness Research Methodologies Overview

I offer below (Table 1) a review of the methodological approaches for the studies on wellness and care that include human subjects and that analyze the data they collect. Some of the studies reviewed did not include human subjects research and data, which is indicated with "N/A." Research in

this field is not just RAD-focused. In later sections, I discuss Frankie Condon, Wonderful Faison, and Neisha-Anne Green's chapter on critical race theory, which illuminates the importance of researching wellness and care in writing center work through varying methodological lenses. I then offer a few possible research questions and models for researchers to replicate and adapt to their own writing centers on these topics.

Table 1

An Analysis of Wellness Research Studies

Study	Publication	Sample Size	Method 1	Method 2	Method 3
Degner et al. (2015)	Praxis	N=127	Survey	Autobiography	Descriptive statistics of survey data
Caswell et al. (2016)	Composition Forum	N=9	Multiple semi-structured interviews	Follow-up survey	Multiple rounds of Linguistic and thematic coding using NVivo
Perry (2016)	Composition Forum	Unclear	Written reflections		
Mack and Hupp (2017)	Praxis	Unclear	Survey	Journal accounts	
Green (2018)	Writing Center Journal	N/A	Storying/Critical Race Theory		
Johnson (2018)	Praxis	N/A	Theoretical lens (Cognitive Load Theory)	Shares body scan script	
Kervin and Barrett (2018)	WLN	N/A	Session notes	Appointment data	Informal observations
Featherstone et al. (2019)	WLN, Digital Edited Collection	N=42	Qualitative survey	Linguistic coding using NVivo	Additional reflections from participant sub-set (n=2)
Emmelhainz (2020)	WLN	N=8	Written reflections		
Concannon et al. (2020)	WLN	Unclear	Weekly mindfulness interventions schedule	Case study/autobiography	
Simmons et al. (2020)	WLN	N=18	Pre-post Biological sampling of saliva	Statistical analysis of changes in biological samples for significance	

The Need for Nuanced RAD Approaches to Wellness and Care Studies

[Richard Haswell defines](#) RAD research as "a best effort inquiry into the actualities of a situation, inquiry that is explicitly enough systematized in sampling, execution, and analysis to be replicated; exactly enough circumscribed to be extended; and factually enough supported to be verified" (201). RAD research, then, should be replicable, aggregable, and data-supported. While in 2005 Haswell advocated for this model of study design and analysis in the larger field of composition, [Driscoll and Perdue found](#) that roughly 33% of articles assessed in *Writing Center Journal* between 1980 and 2009 had some RAD qualities and only 16% fully fit Haswell's criteria. Driscoll and Perdue develop and share a scoring rubric to categorize peer reviewed research within a RAD framework. They identify seven specific metrics that characterize a fully articulated RAD research project: background and significance, study design and data collection, selection of participants/texts, method of analysis, presentation of results, discussion and implications, and limitations and future research. Much of these criteria derive from best practices in IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) research models from the sciences and social sciences, which articulate experimental design, data collection, data analysis, and the conclusions resulting from engagement with the scientific method. Publications in writing center studies largely lacked articulation of participant/text selection, study design and data collection, and method of analysis. Because of these key missing details (study design, data analysis, participant recruitment, etc.), most research in writing center studies is not replicable or aggregable. While Driscoll and Perdue's findings are largely in line with this chapter's review of research, there is another even more concerning finding that our two projects share: "the number of participants was not provided or could not be inferred from the text in 34.1% of the research articles"

(31). As Driscoll and Perdue note, and I reiterate here, the very basic yet critical detail of how many participants engaged in a research study is frequently absent from the scholarship in our field. In this review, five out of eight studies with human subject participants had clearly identified subject participant numbers and three studies, or 37.5%, did not, keeping in line with Driscoll and Perdue's findings.

The research methodologies of the studies I review here have some commonalities. Namely, very few studies put forth a method that is easily replicable by others. Indeed, none of these studies replicate each other even though some directly cite each other. Also, very few have a robust sampling size. Except for Degner et al. and Featherstone et al., most studies rely on incredibly small sample sizes. While the sample sizes are relatively low for Caswell et al. and Simmons et al. (Table 1), the data collection and analysis processes as well as claim-to-evidence likelihood in these studies are clear, though I would be remiss if I did not note that the former project is a book-length study; book-length projects provide authors opportunity to articulate their methods in more detail. Most of the other studies (Perry; Mack and Hupp; Emmelhainz; Concannon et al.) rely on written reflections from either tutors, administrators, or both. Other pieces rely on personal narrative, as well as pedagogical interventions in tutoring writing (Johnson) or function, in part, as a call for reexamination of the field and its priorities (Green). Kervin and Barrett make some reference to data to demonstrate the need for a mindfulness intervention but do not explicitly include coding rubrics or other instruments in the publication. And while specifications for publications such as *WLN*, which has strict 3,000-word length requirements, might affect how much space authors can dedicate to explaining methods, the methodology sections of studies in *Praxis* and *Composition Forum*, which allow more space for elaboration on methodologies, also include unclear sample sizes, unclear sampling approaches, and even unclear

survey instruments (Table 1). Of course, longer word count allowances create more opportunities for authors to specifically focus on study design, sampling, data collection and analysis. The relatively new *Digital Edited Collection* (DEC) series is one such forum. No matter the venue, however, when other forms of data (beyond personal narratives) are referenced in a study, clear and specific methods for participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis help the reader to understand what has been done and what conclusions to derive from findings. Specific methods are notably absent from several studies reviewed above.

Guidelines for Human Subjects Research on Wellness and Care

It is critical that researchers begin to grapple with *why* and *how* to do research on wellness and care in writing center contexts. Because of the nature of the current research, which is mostly focused on tutors' and administrators' experiences, sample sizes might, indeed, be relatively small because the writing center has a limited staff size. Localized studies are just as valid as multi-institutional ones; however, providing context for the research site (i.e., *why* study this particular phenomenon in this space?) is especially critical if data are gathered from one institution. Reviewing guidelines for conducting research within a small population, such as these from the National Academies of Sciences, would be useful to both designing and analyzing single site studies. Another possibility is to make

> **It is critical that researchers begin to grapple with *why* and *how* to do research on wellness and care in writing center contexts.**

a study longitudinal, which will allow researchers to collect more data, over time, from the population. Currently, except for Degner et al., few cross-institutional research studies exist on wellness and care in writing centers. Perhaps this is because of the unique and localized experiences and needs of individual centers and their staffs, but there are possibilities for more wide-ranging and inclusive studies that may have broader implications for the field.

Advice for Reporting Research Outcomes

- **Be explicit about** the **sample size** and **participant recruitment**.
- **Include** any **data collection instruments** (surveys, interview questions, reflective writing prompts, etc.) in appendices.
- **Provide details about how data was analyzed** in methods section, e.g., share how survey responses were coded and analyzed statistically; if reflective writing from tutors is analyzed, tell us *how* it was analyzed (was it coded using a rubric? Was coding normed or tested?)
- **Make sure the claims you make can be supported by the data** (e.g., if descriptive statistics have been calculated on responses from a small participant cohort and without a control group, these results should not be presented as

conclusive findings).

[Neal Lerner and Kyle Oddis](#) show that writing center studies do not "uptake" research evenly, insofar as the impact factor of a select number of citations is outsized in comparison to research produced in the field more broadly. Keeping in mind that replication is a best practice in many fields can help to guide researchers in how to develop their experimental design, research methods, and analyses. For example, though Mack and Hupp were referenced in the methodological exigency of other articles (Johnson; Concannon et al.), all three articles do not include sample sizes and research instruments, perhaps because the original study did not include these details. Without a sense of who is responding to surveys, it becomes difficult to assess if Mack and Hupp's findings (100% of those who participated in the poll reported positive outcomes from practicing mindfulness techniques) are valid. While Johnson and Concannon et al.'s studies are only loosely inspired by Mack and Hupp's study, a study that actually replicated Mack and Hupp's might end up with different findings, perhaps because of the local context in which the researchers are intervening with mindfulness tools in a writing center. Again, while design does not necessarily have to be identical between studies (local context can help to inform amendments to a survey instrument, as an example), replicability is critical to creating a larger or broader set of conclusions for the field and helps to push the conversation forward.

Of course, we are in a current moment of exploration regarding research on wellness and care. Many of the articles reviewed here identify a gap in tutor/administrator experience and aim to fill that gap with interventions and training, such as empathetic listening (Perry), mindfulness methods (Mack

and Hupp; Concannon et al.), meditation and reflective practice (Featherstone et al.; Emmelhainz), and other mindfulness practices (Johnson). One focuses on mindfulness interventions in student writer procrastination (Kervin and Barrett). Others, such as Degner et al., Caswell et al., and Green, address growing issues of mental health and burnout among tutors and administrators, as well as systemic racial inequity that plagues writing center praxis and scholarship.

As we move forward with research on this topic, it makes sense to ask what purpose or outcomes we intend our research to have.

Outcomes that Might Inform Your Study Design

When conducting research, consider your overall motivation and keep that motivation in mind as you design your study, instrument, and method of analysis. Though the provided list of motivations to conduct research is not comprehensive, it should offer researchers some insight into why one might want to conduct research on wellness and care.

- Offering **pedagogical interventions** in tutor training;
- Creating new **interventions in writing center administration**;
- Calling attention to a **systemic injustice or gap in our work**;
- **Studying a particular and emergent phenomenon** in our tutors/centers/clients/school;
- **Adding to** the set of **voices that speak on a particular topic** (i.e., changing the current conversations).

On Autobiography and Counterstories as a Research Methodology

Identity and personal experience are critical elements in the critique of systemic and local injustices. In "Writing Center Research and Critical Race Theory," Condon et al. offer a critical race theory approach to writing center studies. Of note here is the recognition of the "lived realities of the contact zone" and how "[. . .] deepening self-awareness, and awareness of the self to the social, is central to anti-racism" (35). Counterstories have

featured heavily in many social and political movements—the Civil Rights Movement, Queer Liberation Movement, Feminism, labor movements, and Black Lives Matter. Condon et al. note the importance of telling counterstories in the writing center. In telling stories that are counter to the dominant ones, we challenge lore-based and white supremacist assumptions about access and equity in writing centers. Counterstories interrogate structural inequity and they bring to the center voices otherwise marginalized in academic and other discourse.

Counterstories and storying can provide a necessary corrective to the sometimes-uncomplicated stories we tell in the writing center field about our labor. It is unsurprising to me that many of the articles (Concannon et al., Parsons, Green, Degner et al.) about wellness and care lead-in, rely upon, or otherwise braid personal narratives that run counter to lore-based assumptions about how tutors and administrators engage in their work. Yet many of these stories do not address issues of white supremacy, systemic racism, or other areas ripe for exploration (classism, sexism, ableism, etc.). Condon et al. are right that people of color are profoundly hurt by the deficits in the lore-based stories writing center scholars tell. The voices of people of color are largely left out of these conversations.

The counterstories that are being told in the reviewed research give us a lens into the critical role that labor critique might play in deconstructing writing center orthodoxy and systemic oppression. So many of these studies—particularly Degner et al. and Perry—document and examine tutors' lack of preparation and training for the emotional labor they regularly perform. These scholars' findings are often made tangible in the autobiographical moments within these texts, such as when we hear directly from tutors about their personal experiences with mental health concerns and trauma and how these issues relate to and inform writing center work. Yet absent from just about all of this research is an interrogation of

how austerity models in higher education, like the growing reliance on part-time labor, have affected and contributed to these wellness issues as they play out within and outside of writing center work. Furthermore, while many of these studies demonstrate that the lived experiences of writing center workers are plagued by mental health concerns, perpetual stress, and burnout, few studies identify or interrogate factors outside of writing centers that contribute to these issues within writing centers. Individual pieces (like Green's article) offer counterstories that reveal how racism exacerbates wellness issues in our field. In reading about the lived experiences of writing center workers, especially those from marginalized populations, I am struck by how critical braided narrative and storying are, then, to the

Individual pieces (like Green's article) offer counterstories that reveal how racism exacerbates wellness issues in our field.

scholarly landscape on wellness in writing center work. Tutors and administrators of color have used different narrative structures, such as storying and braided narrative to unpack systemic issues in writing centers, including issues related to wellness and care. Condon et al. provide a set of heuristics for how critical race theory can be engaged to produce writing center scholarship, which I hope future researchers of wellness and care will utilize to guide their work.

Autobiography is a critical element of meaning-making. Though many of the suggested questions and methods articulated above do not include first-person narrative, one way for tutors and administrators to enter into questions about wellness and care in writing center work is through keeping a journal that tracks experiences, impressions, thoughts, questions, doubts, frustrations, joys, etc. of writing center work and then conducting linguistic and thematic analysis on the journal entries. Another way to do this work, in the vein of

Grutsch McKinney et al., is to collect narratives from several writing center workers (particularly those whom we have heard less from in other scholarly spaces, such as undergraduate tutors, graduate tutors, tutors of color, queer and trans tutors, disabled tutors, etc.) and from there develop a more comprehensive and intersectional heuristic regarding writing center work. Autobiography and storying are ways to critically engage in this field of study.

This work is also personal and can affect our health, well-being, ambitions, and livelihood. Therefore, we ought to acknowledge the vulnerability of doing this kind of research even as the field works to include previously silenced voices in this kind of recuperative work.

We ought to acknowledge the vulnerability of doing this kind of research even as the field works to include previously silenced voices in this kind of recuperative work.

Asking Research Questions, Getting Answers

Up to this point, I have offered an overview of some of the critical research that engages with wellness and care work in writing centers. I now address topics that scholars may explore to continue this important and growing conversation.

As you design your research study, ask yourself:

- Why do I want to research wellness and care in writing centers?
- What am I noticing in the writing center that contributes to my interest in this topic?
- How do I want to contribute to the field?

Potential research questions include:

- What are the lived experiences that tutors bring to their tutoring work?
- How does stress—inside and outside of the writing center—impact tutor engagement with their work?
- Are there gaps in how we train our staff in wellness and care strategies?
- Do our policies reflect our philosophy and mission regarding worker wellness and care?

- What does self-care look like among different tutors?
- Do mindfulness strategies impact session outcomes and, if so, how?

Sample research topics on wellness paired with research methods

- **Use semi-structured interviews** to ask tutors about their lived experiences in tutoring work. Include at least a couple of questions about emotional negotiation, microaggressions, explicit bias, and other identity-focused challenges tutors may face in their work.

  - Option 2: **Keep a journal of personal experiences** in writing center work and develop counterstories that challenge writing center orthodoxies by sharing lived experience.

- **Disseminate a survey** that assesses work stressors related to WC work as well as stressors in daily life (student affairs may have a good

instrument that they use to assess incoming students); administer throughout a number of semesters to tutors.

- **Review current training offerings**, then **survey tutors formally or informally** to assess gaps in training needs related to wellness and care strategies. Focus groups might be useful for identifying gaps as well. This is the first step in a research program that implements and then assesses new wellness and care training interventions.

- **Conduct a discourse analysis of writing center policies** as articulated in tutoring handbooks, job ads, mission/philosophy statements, worker policies, etc. to assess how central wellness and care support are to writing center worker policies.

- **Assess** tutors' level of engagement with self-care/communal care through **interviews, surveys, observations**, etc. Findings can form the basis for establishing best practices as well as boundaries (Perry) for tutor-client engagement.

- **Assess** if mindfulness strategies impact writing center sessions: first, provide training on mindfulness strategies (see review of literature for ideas and examples); next, encourage tutors to implement these strategies in their sessions; then, determine and assess session outcomes. **Data can be collected by recording sessions and coding them**, **surveying** tutors and clients, and **interviewing** tutors and clients.

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On Being Kind to Yourself

Being intentional in how we design and carry out research studies on wellness—how we recruit study participants, and how we collect and analyze data—is critical to expanding our field's work and responding to earlier calls for research more in

line with many fields outside of writing center studies. It is also true that many of these research questions arise from personal experiences. Therefore, understanding one's subjectivity within one's research project is just as critical. These topics resonate so much with us that they compel us to push ourselves and our analytical tools beyond what might feel comfortable or sustainable. A word of caution here that listening to and analyzing the stories and experiences of others who both succeed and struggle with wellness and care in and outside of writing center contexts can be stressful. Be kind to yourself. As a researcher and as a human being who is invested in learning more about systemic sites of inequity in order to understand, challenge, and change them, it is important to recognize your own positionality in the research process; it is not easily compartmentalized, despite whatever method(s) you may select to conduct your study.

Postscript

What began as a relatively hopeful methods piece at the beginning of this publication process has over the past eight months or so taken on new urgency and, of course, nuance. A lot has changed in our world during 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic as well as the BLM protests that have occurred all over the United States and around the world have caused scholars and activists to examine and re-examine much of what we understand about labor, about equity, and about social justice. Of course, in all this movement, there is even more momentum behind research on wellness and care and doing such work within deliberately anti-racist frameworks.
While this chapter is a way to get hopeful researchers started on their experimental design and methodological development, there is still a lot of work to be done on wellness work as it relates to anti-racism work.

Methods pieces, by their nature, are outdated before they are even published. They often fail to fully capture the wide range of work taking place within a discipline. This is no less true for this piece, though the historical moment makes this outdatedness particularly noticeable. In summer 2020, *Praxis* published an [issue on "Well-Being."](#) Two pieces ([Dana Driscoll & Jennifer Wells](#) and [Genie Giaimo](#)) deliberately address issues of wellness regarding student-writer support and emotional labor as well as precarity in writing center work. Previously, in summer 2019, *The Peer Review* explored the concept of who is "welcome" in writing centers [in its own special issue](#). There, [Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison and Talia O. Nanton](#) use counterstory in ways that reference Green's work but, also, that uniquely engages in a complex dialogic that grapples with racism in the writing center.

This is all to say that wellness and care research is flourishing in writing center studies. Perhaps the growing demand to examine and dismantle exploitative and deliberately "unwell" systems in our discipline has resulted from the many ways in which precarity has seeped into our everyday lives (how we labor, how we socialize, how we move through public spaces, how we live) and as we face so many extractive systems endemic to late stage capitalism. Of course, for BIPOC, Trans people, people with disabilities and people from other marginalized groups, this precarity isn't new (quite the opposite: it is baked into the legacy of the United States and other Colonial powers). We are in a moment, however, where wellness work clearly intersects—as it has in the past—with social justice movements centered on racial and economic justice. We are hungry for systemic change, which, I hope, deliberate research and assessment work can help us to accomplish.

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2. Naming and Negotiating the Emotional Labors of Writing Center Tutoring by Kristi Murray Costello

Keywords: Emotional labor, writing center tutors, writing center administrators, tutor training

FLASHBACK to *the end of the spring semester.*

*The second-year writing center tutors, all **MA graduate assistants** , were grading student portfolios, planning graduation parties, and solidifying plans for and navigating anxieties about post-grad school life. The first-year writing center tutors had received their teaching assignments for the following year and were trying to figure out how to make ends meet over the summer. All of them had seminar papers and final projects looming over their heads. Typically, our Writing Center is a bustling, energetic, and comfortable space, but on this particular day in early May, with just one remaining week of classes, the stress was palpable, and the tension was thick in our writing center and, in general, at our midsize, Mid-South state institution. My cheerful hello was met with half-hearted*

*nods and exhausted "heys," and I overheard a tutor explaining to a desperate **writer** that we were booked for the remainder of the semester. As she said, "Listen, I don't know what else to tell you. I can't make appointments where there aren't any," she suddenly felt her colleagues watching and froze.*

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Introduction

Since the fall pre-semester training several months before, our **staff** , the Assistant Director, and I had conducted 5,000 sessions. We had led more than 60 workshops and informational sessions for engaged and some not-so-engaged classes and had compiled resources on myriad writing topics. We had provided tissues to crying writers, shared stress balls with freaked-out students, and some tutors had maybe even shown the door to an antagonistic student or faculty member along the way, without my knowledge. They had shown up for their shifts, clocked in and out, completed their notes, and participated in our weekly seminar meeting. They had done well in their classes, presented their work at conferences, studied for and passed their exams, and became members and officers of our department and university organizations. And this didn't even include their work and accomplishments as parents, aunts, uncles, partners, dog rescuers, community advocates, and friends. They are an ambitious and impressive bunch, and yet, I found myself surprised and, if I'm being honest, maybe even disappointed that in this moment, they weren't completing the aspects of the job that I didn't tangibly realize were requirements until the moment they were lacking—empathy, compassion, and kindness. The expectation

Writing center tutors provide services to students and faculty members and the success of their work is often predicated on connecting with others.

to not just do the job, but to understand and attend to the needs of others when their own needs are overwhelming, and to respond in kindness when they feel like snapping. The same kind of emotional labors I experience as a writing center administrator (WCA) when a colleague across campus calls to complain that a student came to the writing center and "still has errors in their paper." Often, I find ways to shift these kinds of initially cold discussions into warm ones ([Costello](#)); it's meaningful but often tricky and exhausting work, and, as a WCA, I know that emotion suppression and faking are just a couple of the **emotional labors** that can comprise writing center work.

In simplest terms, writing center tutors provide services to students and faculty members and the success of their work is often predicated on connecting with others. This means reading, anticipating, and adapting in real time to the needs—emotional and otherwise—of their clients, faculty members, and WCAs, which can result in emotional labor. As [Steven Maynard-Moody](#) explains in his foreword to *Emotional Labor: Putting the Service in Public Service*:

> all work is emotional labor, but some forms of work demand emotional connections with others... [some employees] must make emotional connections... to get their jobs done.... Other forms of work require holding emotions at bay.... Other jobs involve uncomfortable and unsettling encounters. (xi-xii)

Writing center work often includes navigating all of these factors, and navigating these factors is often complicated by tutors' concurrent statuses as students and workers/tutors. At

this moment, as I looked at my bright, hardworking, and wonderful but utterly exhausted writing center staff, I couldn't help but wonder if I had adequately prepared them for this aspect of writing center work, and I pledged to do more and better.

This chapter will detail why and how our writing center came to be a community of care that openly discusses and specifically aims to **support and prepare our staff for undertaking emotional labors** . After defining emotional labor and briefly exploring its emerging but incomplete characterization in the field, I will outline some of the emotional labors rooted within the tutor experience that can make writing center work difficult, exhausting, and frustrating as well as rewarding, inspiring, and enjoyable. I will illustrate how emotional labors are complicated by tutors' often **liminal institutional statuses** (as graduate assistants, interns, hourly workers, etc.), which is further compounded by race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, class, and other factors. In other words, tutors who are part of traditionally marginalized **cultural locations** experience emotional labors more intensely than individuals who are not in such locations. I will conclude with strategies that support tutors' emotional needs, encourage their self-care, and recognize and mitigate their emotional labors.

What is Emotional Labor?

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who is credited for originally coining the term *emotional labor* in 1979, defined it as the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (328). In 2004, Theresa M. Glomb and Michael J. Tews differentiated among three different types of emotional labor: genuine, faked, and suppressed (2-4). Sharon H. Mastracci et al. have since furthered the conversation,

illustrating how emotional labor "rang[es] from authentic expression of the worker's emotional state to requiring workers to don masks and display an emotion that they do not actually feel, such as when they must seem nicer-than-nice or, conversely, tougher-than-tough" and how "successful performance depends on it" (XV). In sum, emotional labor "requires workers to suppress, exaggerate, or otherwise manipulate their own and/or another's private feelings in order to comply with work-related display rules" (Mastracci et al. 6). Moreover, in this kind of work, they argue, one must build "emotional armor: the ability to gird oneself against one's own emotional response" (Guy et al. 5).

Key Takeaway

Though discussions of emotional labor have been a part of sociology, psychology, vocational behavior, public service, education, and other disciplines' scholarship for nearly forty years, conversations about emotional labor in writing center administration, for writing center tutors, in writing program administration, and in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies scholarship, more broadly, are more recent.

Though discussions of emotional labor have been a part of sociology, psychology, vocational behavior, public service, education, and other disciplines' scholarship for nearly forty

years, conversations about emotional labor in writing center administration (Caswell et al.; Geller and Denny; Grimm; Mackiewicz and Thompson), for writing center tutors (Nicklay), in writing program administration (Adams Wooten, et al.; Davies; Ferdinandt Stolley; Gillam; Hesse; Holt and Rouzie; Micciche; Phillips et al.; Reid), and in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies scholarship, more broadly, (Jacobs and Micciche; White; Worsham) are more recent. We have seen an increase in discussions regarding the emotional labor of writing teachers (Davies; De La Ysla; DeBacher and Harris-Moore; Dunbar and Baker; McLeod; Stephens; Zembylas), graduate students and graduate assistants (Restaino; Saur and Palmeri; Wynne et al.), and even department chairs (Payne). In 2016, *Composition Forum* published a special issue on emotion, and there have also been special issues of *WLN*, such as *The Affective Dimension of Writing Center Work* (Evertz and Fitzgerald 2016) and the *WLN Special Issue on Wellness and Self-Care* (Giaimo 2020), as well as this Digital Edited Collection (2021), which expands on the themes in the WLN special issue.

Critical Race scholars and others have been illustrating the emotional labors of people of color and more specifically the ways in which people of color are often called upon to perform compassion even as they are not given it themselves. Recently,

Inside Higher Ed and blogs, such as *Erstwhile: A History Blog,* have discussed the "exhausting emotional labor" of being a person of color in the academy (Randall para. 1). We also see these themes clearly in Aja Martinez's "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story versus Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra's 'Fit' in the Academy" in which she

Critical Race scholars and others have been illustrating the emotional labors of people of color and more specifically the ways in which people of color are often called upon to perform compassion even as they are not given it themselves.

shares about the emotional labor of being a Chican@ graduate student of color and the "pain, anguish, and... survivor's guilt" of making it in the academy (33). Similar themes are explored in Alexandria Lockett's "Why I Call it the Academic Ghetto: A Critical Examination of Race, Place, and Writing Centers" in which she explains how she "drew on an ethos of 'doing it all by [her]self' through [her] refusal to pursue any learning support resources," because she was "was triggered by the daily pressure of interacting with peers/colleagues who explicitly doubted the legitimacy of [her] admissions" (para 2; para 1). In "Moving beyond Alright: And the Emotional Toll of This, My Life Matters Too, in the Writing Center Work," Neisha-Anne Green explores the "honor" and "burden" of being "the first Black person to give the keynote address" for IWCA (15). She describes the things she carried into her presentation that her predecessors had not:

> I was carrying the hope and realization of the people in the room who looked like me. I was carrying the weight of the Black man who had walked up to me the night before to tell me he came to the conference because I was giving the

keynote. I was carrying the burden of having to, yet again, tell white folk it wasn't okay to intentionally or unintentionally leave people of color out of the fold. (Green 16)

Though contexts vary, imagine how many of our tutors—in addition to feeling the pressure of doing their jobs—may also feel pressure to be a role model/mentor/coach/friend/ counselor "carrying the hope and realization of the people in the room who [look] like [them]" (Green 16).

To our credit, writing center scholarship and training manuals have not fully neglected the affective dimension of writing center work. Scholars have discussed the impact of tutors working with stressed and anxious writers (Agostinelli; Bisson; Featherstone et al.; Mackiewicz and Thompson; Ryan and Zimmerelli) and navigating emotional sessions (Mills). However, what is too often missing is recognition of the complex emotional *labors* experienced by tutors on account of, but not limited to, these interactions. That is also not to say that scholars in writing center studies have not addressed components and sources of the emotional labor experienced by tutors, because they have: consultant guilt (Nicklay), censoring oneself during sessions (Sherwood), politeness (Thompson and Mackiewicz), working with difficult clients (Walker), and navigating pressures to perpetuate standard language ideologies (Saleem), to name a few. However, as Noreen Lape and Daniel Lawson point out in their respective articles, the "articles that address emotion most directly focus almost exclusively on either disruptive behaviors associated with emotion or on what may be considered negative affective dimensions (such as anxiety or anger)" (Lawson 20). Driscoll and Wells' recent article in *Praxis,* "Tutoring the Whole Person: Supporting Emotional Development in Writers and Tutors," sees emotions as critical to writerly development. Their research provides a nuanced framework of the affective

experiences of people who attend writing centers and found that while "generative" and "disruptive" feelings related to writing are easier for tutors to categorize and work through, some "circumstantial" emotions "appeared 'negative' in the short run, but could end up being beneficial for longer-term writing development" (19). Emotions in the writing center, therefore, warrant further exploration and attendant tutor training.

Though she also does not categorize the work as emotional labor, Jennifer Beckwith in her Tutor Column, "My Idea of the Writing Center: Through the Eyes of a Client Turned Consultant," discusses the ways in which a tutor's role is not confined to the writing center because they are also expected to serve as an ambassador for the center, writing, and writing centers, in general, outside the center. She further explains the ways in which tutors "educat[e] others," "creat[e] relationships with peers" and "eliminate, or at least decrease, the misconceptions and fears people have about writing centers in general" (26).

Though they too do not frame it as emotional labor, Anne Ellen Geller et al. discuss tutors' processes of *becoming,* which they describe as the process of learning and developing experience (59). In her chapter in *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration,* Kate Navickas furthers these ideas, coining the term *emotional labor of becoming* to describe the emotional labor that accompanies the negotiations of the intersections of disciplinary narratives, identity, and experience as one transitions into new professional identities. This can be particularly complicated for writing center tutors because, while they are learning and developing their identities as tutors and members of the broader writing center studies community, they are also often negotiating the tenets of the field with their own experiences and the expectations of others. More specifically, tutors often

recognize that faculty members across campus frequently expect them to reinforce a particular kind of literacy normativity "in the service of normative hegemony," and they soon recognize through experience tutoring and learning more about writing center best practices and threshold concepts that if they deliver on these tasks, they are perpetuating discourses that "condemn people for their identities and other ways of being" (Pritchard 28). As Navickas explains, "As the saying goes, you are what you do, and professional identities can cause emotional labor and struggle, especially if the identity conflicts with previous internal narratives, disciplinary narratives, or conceptualizations of one's sense of self and one's imagined professional identity" (Navickas 56). Our tutors are also often engaging in what Bruce Bowles referred to as the "immense pressure to 'close,' to get students to give the writing center a try," which can be exhausting as well as overwhelming, especially when the tutors are already negotiating their own overwhelming feelings (10). As Maynard-Moody explains, "all forms of emotional labor require subtlety and skill and take their toll in disengagement and burnout" (xii). In sum, writing center studies has done an admirable job of addressing the affective dimension of our work. However, the bulk of such sources and resources handle individual sources of labor, rather than how different work expectations compound and intersect or how they necessitate the need for self-care.

Why the interest in emotional labor and self-care, and why now?

The recent surge in scholarship regarding emotional labor in

the field seems to substantiate Erin Rand's argument that we are indeed experiencing an "affective turn" (161), which has left some wondering, why the interest in emotional labor and self-care, and why now? As Lynn Worsham describes, the twenty-first century has been "an especially catastrophic age characterized by unprecedented historical trauma" that contributes to an individual and cultural "pervasive and generalized mood corresponding to post-traumatic stress disorder" (170). Another possible answer lies less within writing centers and more in our field's intersection with economics and politics. Despite WCAs' often persistent and fierce advocacy, our writing center tutors are often in positions not so unlike those studied by Hochschild—hourly, liminal, and prone to having their job descriptions and expectations shifted with little or no notice at the whims of upper administration. I would also venture that writing center studies, in particular, may be now attending to the affective components of writing center work because there is at present a core foundation of scholarship and best practices for the processes of tutoring, training, and directing that enable us to think and study beyond the typical maintenance and sustainability of our centers.

However, though there is not space to fully address it in this chapter, perhaps a more interesting question is not *why now*, but, instead, why are universities suddenly joining in discussions about self-care? In her 2016 *Composition Forum* article, "Why Well-Being, Why Now?: Tracing an Alternate Genealogy of Emotion in Composition," Jill Belli explains that "Our field's attention to how emotions can be leveraged to produce better writing, pedagogy, and scholarship is happening in parallel with… efforts to institutionalize well-being in educational contexts" (para. 2), leaving some to wonder if these institutional pushes toward "self-care" are actually attempts by institutions to push the burden of care

back onto their employees, **absolving themselves of having to provide adequate resources and support** .

All in a Day's Work: The Emotional Labors of Writing Center Tutors

Though I have seen again and again the ways in which writing center tutors thrive and survive despite the emotional labors they perform in service of writers, our communities, and our universities, I also believe that we do them a disservice when we neglect to name and prepare them for the emotional labors of writing center work. As Guy et. al. explain: "To ignore this combination of analysis, affect, judgment, and communication is to ignore the 'social lube' that enables rapport, elicits desired responses, and ensures that interpersonal transactions are constructive" (8). In "Order of Discourse," Michel Foucault discusses his wish that lessons regarding discourse, particularly its inextricability from power, had been shared by his predecessors who assuredly were aware of such rules and realities (76). He shares:

> I should have liked there to be a voice behind me which had begun to speak a very long time before, doubling in advance everything I am going to say, a voice which would say: 'You must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any…. (51)

To this end, those of us who have worked as tutors have experienced the emotional labors of writing center work even if we have not named them. However, in not naming them and not explicitly discussing them and supporting tutors in their negotiation of these labors, we are withholding as Foucault's mentors had. Taking this one step further, if we can agree that

discourse and language are at the heart of social practices and processes then we can (and should) also agree that the language and discourse we use (or don't use) with our tutors, particularly in regard to their emotional labor, shape the social practices of the center and their becoming. Navickas defines the emotional labor of becoming as "aris[ing] when we must make decisions based on values that might conflict with our sense of identity" (59). How might this apply when we purposely shift typical narratives about the nature of writing centers and writing center work and what it means to be a tutor, worker, and student? Navickas explains that "The act of becoming is emotional labor precisely because becoming is always a negotiation between who you understand yourself to be (often understood in terms of the values we hold) and the realities we come in contact with (here, a professional position)" (60). So what if we shift the realities of our centers to address and support tutors' emotional labors?

In this piece when I refer to emotional labors, I am referencing the affective or feelings-based work that is part of successfully navigating tutor positions, specifically those expectations that are seldom included in position descriptions.

There are four considerations that foreground my list of emotional labors experienced and performed by tutors:

- This list is not comprehensive;
- Emotional labors and the experiences that

foreground them are situated, contextual, complex, and compounded by cultural locations;

- Emotional labors are not mutually exclusive;
- Emotional labors are not (or do not have to be) all negative (a distinction I'll expand upon later in this section).

The following list (Table 1) of emotional labors is more expansive, but not exhaustive, because it can't be. Informed by concepts of ecology and **ecocomposition** , emotional labors are in a constant state of development, flux, movement, intersection, and evolution. They develop in and are derived from a variety of personal, cultural, political, professional, relational, institutional, and systemic factors that are themselves situated, contextual, complex, and not mutually exclusive. Emotional labors exist separately and concurrently, individually and collectively, and emotions and emotional labors are complicated. As Sara Ahmed explains, "[E]motions are not simply "within" or "without" but … they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds ("Affective Economies" 117). Thus, emotional labors of writing center work are rooted within the person, the center (and its values/politics), the institution (and its values/politics), and the relationships therein. It is also affected by all other spaces, systems, and subsystems in which individuals are denied access on account of their race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and other considerations. As Guy et al. point out, "emotion work is as individual as cognitive work" (6). This means that some tutors may negotiate emotions and emotional labor more easily than others. As previously discussed, due to a variety of factors, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and dis/ability, some tutors will experience more

emotional labors than their peers, just as some WCAs will experience additional emotional labor than others. Additionally, because many of our tutors' work lives are inextricably intertwined with their personal lives, it is important to recognize that they are likely to perform emotional labors rooted within their center experience outside of the center. For

Emotional labors are in a constant state of development, flux, movement, intersection, and evolution and develop in and are derived from a variety of personal, cultural, political, professional, relational, institutional, and systemic factors that are themselves situated, contextual, complex, and not mutually exclusive.

example, if a tutor is known as being positive and encouraging in the center, they may feel pressure not only to behave as such while working, but also in their classes and maybe even at social gatherings with colleagues. Therefore, WCAs should not separate the many facets of our tutors' lives from the work they perform in our writing centers; as WCAs, we should recognize and validate for our tutors that they carry the labors they perform in other spaces with them everywhere they go. It is for

this reason that the list of emotional labors below is more capacious than what may commonly be considered emotional labor. Unlike much of the scholarship in emotional labor that predates my own, I do not always precede emotional labor with the verb "perform," opting occasionally for other verbs, such as experience, fearing that always leading with the verb "perform" may inaccurately and misleadingly insinuate a level of control or agency not felt by the laborer. Finally, it is also important to note that naming emotional labors does not create them, nor are emotional labors self-generated or the byproduct of

oversensitivity or other theories rooted in gaslighting or other rhetorics used to minimize the experiences, emotions, and emotional labors of others.

Table 1

A List of Emotional Labors That Tutors (and Administrators) May Feel in Doing Their Work

Emotional Labor	Emotional Labor Defined
Becoming	Balancing internal and external pressures to perform with feelings of in-betweenness while one is developing as a tutor, writer, and professional.
Belonging	Navigating the often-complicated relationships and roles with, within, and/or without other departments and programs, and the tensions that can develop as a result.
Caring	Feelings connected to their investment in their writing center and clientele, often described as caring labor or Caritas (Guy et al. 5).
Censoring	Reframing or downplaying one's genuine emotions or feelings in order to maintain professionalism.
Masking	Hiding one's genuine emotions or feelings.
Performing	Performing emotions (i.e., empathy, compassion, kindness, enthusiasm, politeness) perceived to be "expected" or preferable when they are contrary to what is actually being felt, similar to what Glomb and Tews refer to as faked (5).
Status-Switching	Navigating ever-shifting roles and expectations of varying degrees of power and powerlessness.
Complex Support Networks	Negotiating multiple roles, relationships, and expectations within a small group of individuals.
Contextual	Labors stemming from the limitations, resources, situatedness, and spaces of an individual center, institution, and/or community.
Discovery	Derived from increased understanding of oneself, the institution, academia, and their intersections.
Inferiority	Feelings of inadequacy and insecurity that can shake one's confidence and spill into other aspects of their academic and personal lives, also referred to as Imposter Syndrome.
Invisible Labor	Unseen, unvalued, and/or underappreciated labors.
Liminality	Balancing expectations to accomplish powerful things without having power and/or not feeling comfortable wielding one's power due to power dynamics, which bears some resemblance to what Foucault refers to as procedures of exclusion (52).
Otherness	Navigating oppressive and othering spaces, practices, and discourses as a person outside dominant cultural location/s, such as race, ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, gender, age, and sexual orientation.
Situational	Feelings or emotions that stem from specific interactions and circumstances of the work.

Note. This list of emotional labors was co-drafted with my partner, Liam Costello, LCSW (licensed clinical social worker). If combined, "Censoring and Masking" could be considered what

Glomb and Tews' refer to as suppression, though I felt it was important to divide them into separate units (5).
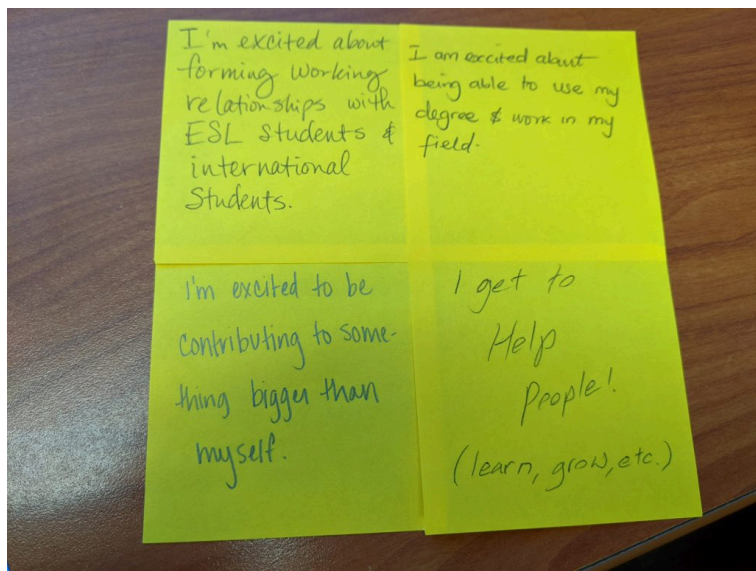
Fig. 1. Yellow sticky notes on which new tutors have written things they are excited about in regard to tutoring, which illustrates the positive emotional labors of tutoring

Though it can be easy to focus on the emotional labors that make tutors' positions difficult or frustrating, there can be upsides to some emotional labors (Figure 1). In fact, the emotional aspects of this work are precisely what make writing center work so rewarding and personally fulfilling– the sense of pride we get from "knocking it out of the park" with a difficult session or helping a student in distress navigate a difficult situation or assignment. The feelings we have when we're recognized for our work. The sense of community that develops during long days and down time. These many and varied, often invisible and unnamed, emotional labors—the

uplifting, deflating, disarming, exhausting, empowering, and mobilizing—combine with the labors outlined in our position descriptions to substantiate the need for writing centers. The positive emotional labor that we engage in helps us make arguments for our viability, helps us build reputations as caring, comfortable spaces that keep students utilizing our services, and keeps us—both tutors and WCAs—returning to work each day. These emotions can also inspire and push us towards more revolutionary, anti-racist, and inclusive approaches to tutoring and advocacy work.

Our Center's Move Toward Recognizing Emotional Labors

FLASHBACK **to** *the end of the spring semester.*

The tutor's face reddened in embarrassment and possibly shame. "I'm so sorry," she said to me before turning back to the student to explain the situation again but with more sensitivity.

"It's okay," I said to the tutor, "we're all exhausted."

She let out a breath of relief.

*   *   *

This time, I was able to step in and take a session, but I knew that my taking on additional sessions wasn't going to help with the larger issue—during the times that the writing center is busiest and our clientele is the most stressed out, anxious, and in need, our tutors are also at their busiest, most stressed out, and in need. As I went back to my desk, I wasn't angry—I was concerned. I knew that I needed to reach out to

the tutors. I thought about the first writing center I worked at and how I loved working there most of the time. However, as each semester drew to a close, we could expect a series of signs to be posted around the center reminding us to minimize the amount of time spent on breaks and to check email submissions between face-to-face sessions. We could expect scolding stares from the director or the administrative assistant if we were laughing with our colleagues or talking about anything non-work related with our clients. We would often also receive an email reminding us of the importance of being on time and being kind to our students, but I do not recall being reminded to be kind to our colleagues or, even more importantly, to ourselves. I better understand now how hectic and stressful this time of the semester was for the director and the administrative assistant, but I also remember how tense and toxic the center was for the tutors during the time most of us needed support and community the most.

I drafted an email to the tutors (See Appendix A: Email to Tutors for full email). In it, I acknowledged how busy and stressed everyone was, reminded them of the importance of being a thoughtful colleague, and encouraged them to care for themselves. I wrote, "we all need to take care of ourselves (in as much as that is possible during graduate school) in the ways that work best for us, such as making sure we're eating, drinking, and sleeping, taking breaks from work where we talk about things other than work, getting outside on nice days (try the LimeBikes!), making time for friends, family, and family-of-choice, and, of course, setting aside time for ourselves" adding "I know from experience that this seems to be the time of the semester when we all need these reminders, encouragement, and self-care the most so I wanted to reach out to you." Then I extended a challenge:

If every tutor responds to this email before tomorrow (Friday) at 5 p.m. with one tangible thing you are going to do over the

course of the weekend or next week to be a better colleague, tutor, or employee and one thing you are going to do to be good or better to yourself, we will close the center, and I will bring in breakfast, lunch, or dinner for everyone.

I also let them know that we would have our first (optional) detoxing/de-stressing narrative meditation for campus tutors (writing tutors and other tutors across campus, including the Math Center and Athletics) before the center opened on Study Day and got to work planning it (Figure 2). I signed off by saying, "If there are other things we can do to help make the hard work you do a little better or easier, don't hesitate to let us know. Thank you for all you do."

Fig. 2. Tutors, students, and staff participating in a narrative meditation de-stressing workshop.

Within the 24 hours of my email to the tutors, which let them know that I saw, understood, and valued what they were doing and encouraged us all to make space to care for ourselves and each other and cut ourselves some slack, every tutor had responded. The responses were overwhelmingly positive, kind, and inspiring. A tutor vowed to see a movie she'd been wanting to see before it left the theater, one planned to read for fun for 30 minutes over the weekend, another planned to limit the time he spent reading and commenting on his students' blogs to fifteen minutes each, and yet another pledged to use five minutes of their hourly ten-minute-break to walk the first floor of the library and fill up her water bottle, noticing that she was getting stiff and dehydrated during some of her shifts and long days on

campus. A tutor planned to get to work at least 15 minutes before their shift so they could give the student desk workers a short break, another promised to clean their leftovers out of the refrigerator, and several shared their intent to be more thoughtful of their colleagues and the writers who trust us to read their work.

   As I mentioned before, this was an insightful, impressive, and empathetic group; to some extent, I expected these responses. What I did not expect, however, was the aftermath of my email. The tutors began sharing their goals with each other and on their social media accounts. They began holding each other accountable and asking questions about each other's well-being on a more regular basis. They even posted a similar prompt on our writing center Facebook page and encouraged students and faculty to consider how they were going to engage in self-care over finals week. We covered the outside wall of the Writing Center with bright, encouraging Post-it notes for students and passersby to grab that said things like "you are enough" and "you can do this." Though I cannot be exactly sure what led them to so quickly and firmly latch onto the concept of emotional labor and the practice of self-care, it seemed as though it was because they felt seen, heard, and understood and wanted to pay forward those feelings to others. After this experience, the tutors, the Assistant Director, the Graduate Assistant Director, and I worked to integrate more recognition of and discussions of emotions, emotional labor, and self-care into our daily practices and developed additional training regarding navigating emotional labor and self-care into our pre-semester orientation and the weekly staff course.

Strategies for Recognizing and Supporting Tutors' Emotional Labor

As WCAs, we need to be prepared to provide both proactive and reactive or adaptive strategies for recognizing, supporting, and mitigating the emotional labors performed by our tutors and staff. WCAs should also recognize and remember that these approaches must not substitute for improved working conditions or addressing inequalities that lead to or exacerbate emotional labors. Our first priorities as WCAs should always be to improve diversity, accessibility, and labor conditions within our centers and universities and address other obstacles that face our centers, tutors, and clientele. And, concurrently, as we strive to make our centers more inclusive, diverse, and equitable, we can work together to transform our centers into communities of care, spaces that validate emotions and lived experiences and prioritize mental health and wellbeing.

The most impactful step we took in our center was engaging in what Donna Strickland refers to in *The Managerial Unconsciousness in the History of Composition Studies* as "tweaking," defined as "an operative approach to management" that "leaves nothing on the table" (120-121). Strickland calls on us to "notice and investigate our emotional stances toward our work, our beliefs about what constitutes a successful program" (120-121). Though her work specifically addresses writing programs, not writing centers, her encouragement to interrogate the values that inform what we do and how and what makes a good program can serve as a useful heuristic for WCAs looking to transform our centers (121). Hence, instead of isolating the mission and goals of a writing center to focus only on the work that happens during sessions, writing centers can expand our goals and definition of what constitutes a successful writing center; for us, a successful writing center is not just one that provides valuable services

to the campus and supports our clientele, but it is also one that prioritizes care for tutors and fosters emotional health alongside professional and intellectual gains.

We furthered this work through introducing and discussing **different types of emotional labors** listed above (Table 1), such as tutor fatigue, consultant guilt, and impostor syndrome, at the pre-service training.

During the first new-staff meeting, I asked the tutors to consider:

- · What Are You Nervous About?
- · What Are You Excited About?
- · What Questions Do You Have?

During the first new-staff meeting, I asked the tutors to reflect on their feelings about tutoring. Then, I asked them to write responses on Post-it notes, and, if they felt comfortable, post them on the whiteboard under the corresponding heading. We worked together to group similar responses (Figure 3). Much of what the new tutors were nervous about—not knowing an answer, looking "silly" or "dumb," being too helpful or not helpful enough to writers, and balancing their schoolwork, assistantship, and home life—were shared among all of them, which helped to level the playing field and initiate a sense of support and community. It was similarly reassuring for some of them to see they had the same questions. And finally, sharing what they were excited about helped them also focus on the

positive parts of the job and provided a nice balance to addressing their emotional labor, concerns, and insecurities.

Fig. 3. Tutors engage in an activity where they write on sticky notes what they are excited about, nervous about, and concerned about in regards to tutoring.

Finally, once tutors were comfortable discussing their tutoring questions and concerns, they chose a couple topics from each category to discuss in small groups. I encouraged them to not only come up with solutions to their concerns but also to consider how they might work to productively and healthily negotiate them. Over the course of the semester, the tutors and I returned to discussions of emotional labor and self-care, and they wrote three short reflections about their experiences in the center. At the end of the semester, I brought the same Post-its back in and asked the tutors to reflect on the exercise, their semesters, and future training needs. Though I did not

specifically ask them to reflect on the inclusion of emotional labor and self-care, their reflections strongly suggest that the trainings were well received and that the tutors looked forward to **expanding the work** and paying forward the lessons they had learned to the next cohort of tutors.

Though proactive strategies are important, it is also important to listen and be ready to adapt and provide opportunity, space for discussion, and support of tutors' emotions and emotional labors, as needed. At times, we have closed the center for an hour to provide a meal and hold a staff meeting when there is something to discuss. We have posted signage that establishes the policies of our center, including the 10-minute per hour break for our tutors. We have scheduled optional meditation or yoga classes at particularly stressful periods in the semester, and we more elaborately celebrate National Tutor Appreciation Week, being sure to encourage tutors by letting them know what they are doing well and by attending to their emotional and relational needs, such as providing space and time to talk and laugh with each other, as opposed to simply providing food (though food is nice too). The Assistant Director and I also work with our center's Graduate Assistant Director, a year-long position held by an experienced tutor, to listen, understand, and respond to not just the professional needs, but also the personal and emotional needs of our staff through anonymous surveys, monthly check-ins, and open office doors.

As WCAs, the Assistant Director and I also work to respond with education, programming, and initiatives, and we endeavor to listen and amplify the voices of the tutors and lend credence to our shared emotions and emotional labors. For example, when our university considered discontinuing assistantship opportunities in our department during the interim and summer sessions, the Assistant Director and I listened to the tutors and provided space and opportunity for the tutors who wished to do so to write a letter making their

case for how the lack of summer funding would impact their lives. We then combined quantifiable justification for why the positions were needed with their letter and pushed back against upper administration. We were successful in preserving summer funding opportunities, but, importantly, we succeeded in a way that showed the tutors that they are heard, supported, and fought for.

WCAs wishing to support this work may find, as I did, that there is vulnerability to engaging in real discussions about tutors' emotional labor, in part because there will inevitably be things we can do better as well as things that we find difficult to change. Emotional labor work is best followed up with advocacy and activism, which is not always comfortable. In fact, in *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers,* Linda Adler-Kassner expresses the need for "a commitment to changing for the better here and now through consensus-based, systematic, thoughtful processes that take into consideration the material contexts and concerns of all involved and a constant commitment to ongoing, loud, sometimes messy dialogue" (33). Similarly, Susan Miller Cochran pointed out in her 2018 CWPA keynote that compassionate intentional administration is equal parts vulnerability and resistance. Thus, naming and recognizing emotional labor are important parts of the process, but WCAs should have a concurrent focus on supporting and mitigating emotional labors by striving for better diversity, accessibility, and working conditions.

A Call to Name Emotional Labors and Prioritize Self-Care

Bringing emotions, emotional labor, and self-care to the forefront of our training, support, and consciousness directly

contributed to improvement in our work lives, our personal lives, and our writing center. More specifically, it led to us challenging ourselves to do and be better, helped us feel understood and appreciated, and ultimately enabled us to create a more open and communicative environment with less conflict, better work-life balance, and a renewed sense of responsibility—not only in our work, but for supporting one another. As Tony Scott argues, "When we articulate, we do; we act upon ourselves and our environments" (30). Thus, as WCAs and writing center staff make plans and set goals for their next semester, I hope they will be educating the writing center tutors about the emotional labors of tutoring writing and providing support for negotiating them.

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Appendix A

Email to Tutors

Dear Writing Center Colleagues,

   It is getting to be that time of the semester when you're (who are we kidding, WE'RE) exhausted and swamped, so I'm writing to remind all of us that it is even more important during these times that we remember to be a good colleague, which includes taking turns seeing students without making a fuss, taking reasonable breaks between sessions, and answering the phone when there's no one else available to do so, and a good employee, pushing ourselves to do the less visible, but no less important parts of Writing Center work well, such as taking our time with writers, creating good session notes, clocking in and out, showing up to shifts on time, and helping our colleagues when they need it. And of course, being a good colleague extends beyond the center walls and includes being professional and courteous to our student workers, consistently ensuring that we're helping to make each other's work days easier and better– even when, perhaps especially when, they have the awkward task of assigning us a session. Just as important, we all need to take care of ourselves (in as much as that is possible during graduate school) in the ways that work best for us, such as making sure we're eating, drinking, and sleeping, taking breaks from work where we talk about things other than work, getting outside on nice days (try the LimeBikes!), making time for friends, family, and family-of-choice, and, of course, setting aside time for ourselves.

Maybe you already do all of these things, have continued to do all of these things, and that not one element of your performance has been compromised as this semester gets more hectic and workload heavy, but I know from experience that this seems to be the time of the semester when we all need these reminders, encouragement, and self-care the most so I wanted to reach out to you.

If you've read this far, you'll be glad you did: if every tutor responds to this email before tomorrow (Friday) at 5 p.m. with one tangible thing you are going to do over the course of the weekend or next week to be a better colleague, tutor, or employee and one thing you are going to do to be good or better to yourself, I will bring in breakfast, lunch, or dinner for everyone (whatever the consensus is) on the day that works the best for the most people. We have also partnered with the Red Wolf Center to provide a detoxing/ de-stressing meditation just for campus tutors before the center opens on Study Day. I hope you will join us.

If there are other things we can do to help make the hard work you do a little better or easier, don't hesitate to let us know.

Thank you for all you do.

Best,
Kristi

Appendix B

In-Text Hyperlinked Notes

MA graduate students: In our program, first-year MA graduate students work in the Writing Center and second-year graduate students teach one class and have four hours in the Writing

Center to make space for more experienced graduate students to mentor their peers.

Writer: In this chapter, I refer to those who utilize our services as writers as opposed to clients or tutees.

Staff: Though our staff was mainly composed of graduate students from the English MA program, we also often had 1-2 undergraduate writing studies interns and 2-5 MA students from other disciplines. During this particular semester, our staff was made up of a director (me) with one course release for managing the center, one assistant director with one course release (8-10 hours), eight full-time MA graduate assistant student tutors (18-20 hours), three part-time MA graduate assistant student tutors (4-8 hours), four WAC/WID embedded graduate assistant tutors (18-20 hours), and two undergraduate writing studies interns (5 hours).

Emotional Labors: I refer to the emotional labors—not labor—of writing center work to emphasize their plurality and to avoid the essentializing that can result as a consequence of combining our labors into a singular entity.

Support and prepare our staff for undertaking emotional labors: Though this work was over the span of five years and was expanded and improved upon with each incoming cohort, for the ease of the reader and to emphasize the collective efforts of this work, I do not distinguish among center cohorts.

Liminal institutional statuses: As Harry Denny and Beth Towle explain of writing centers, "We always already are liminal creatures" (para. 6).

Cultural locations: Cultural location is a term used by Krista Ratcliffe and Rebecca Rickly in Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition Studies to describe the nexus, interplay, and intersections of one's race, ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, gender, age, and sexual orientation as it relates to one's identity and subject position.

Though contexts vary: You may also want to check out Dwedor Morais Ford's "HBCU Writing Centers Claiming an

Identity in the Academy" and Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan's Writing Centers And The New Racism: A Call For Sustainable Dialogue And Change.

Absolving themselves of having to provide adequate resources and support: For additional considerations of this issue and information about how WCAs can advocate for ourselves and our staffs in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, check out Genie N. Giaimo's "Laboring in a Time of Crisis: The Entanglement of Wellness and Work in Writing Centers."

Ecocomposition: See Bonnie Devet's "Redefining the Writing Center with Ecocomposition" for more discussion of writing centers and Ecocomposition.

Different types of emotional labors: The list of different types of emotional labor has expanded since the initial writing center training and will likely/hopefully continue to expand and develop.

Expanding the work: Like the tutors and their desire to expand their tutoring practice, I also plan to expand on these findings through coding the WCCs responses to this activity and others like their reflections throughout the semester in a future article.

3. Imposter Syndrome in the Writing Center: An Autoethnography of Tutoring as Mindfulness by Benjamin J. Villarreal

Introduction

When I first started to realize that the amount of stress I was feeling was not normal, it was because of a little bookmark I had picked up at a campus health fair. One side had a list of common signs of stress, and the other had a list of things to do to calm oneself.

I still remember two of the tips because I used them often. The first was timed breathing: breathe in for four seconds, hold for two, and breathe out for five. I did this a lot once I realized that when I felt stressed my breathing shortened. It helped, kind of. The second tip: when feeling stressed, list five things I'd accomplished recently. It also kind of worked.

Some Ways to Manage Stress

- Engage in timed breathing
- List a set number (e.g. 5) of recent accomplishments

The bookmark became a talisman that I used to keep my place in whatever I was reading at the time, so that whenever I would open the book and get to work, I saw it and remembered the tips it offered—in the middle of class, on the subway, on the couch. Eventually, I stuck it under the glass top of my desk, so the five tips would be there looking back at me if I started to become stressed while working. And I decided I could stop being stressed, because I had five tips to walk through—easy-peasy!

Unfortunately, I had yet to realize that "tips" for fighting stress only work once you have some idea about what the underlying causes are. I had yet to notice, consciously, that my most stressed moments were when my bookmark was nowhere near me, when I was getting ready in the morning or trying to fall asleep at night. And I had yet to recognize that I often couldn't sleep because I was

Unfortunately, I had yet to realize that "tips" for fighting stress only work once you have some idea about what the underlying causes are.

having or on the verge of having panic attacks (lying in bed,

short of breath, the room spinning), let alone that I had been having them in some form since high school, if not earlier.

What I eventually learned is that I am most prone to stress when I feel like I am not occupied enough. And this realization led me to finally visiting campus mental health services, from where my bookmark came. I realized this in August of the fourth year of my doctoral program at an Ivy League university. August was always rough. The summer session at the college where I was an adjunct was over, the Graduate Student Writing Center (GSWC, a pseudonym) where I was a writing advisor was closed, and the pool where I taught swim lessons cut my hours as summer camps came to an end. And while the financial strain of all that was stressful, it was nothing compared to the anxiety I felt that I was accomplishing nothing, that I did not belong, that I was an imposter.

> The purpose of this autoethnography is to reflect on and elucidate for others how the GSWC became a personal space for practicing mindfulness that ultimately fostered a sense of belonging in me (a Chicano and first-generation college graduate), which in turn helped me cope with imposter syndrome, the sense that I didn't belong at the institution.

That understanding came much, much later. That August, I thought I was just worried about money. I was driving my partner crazy with incessant pacing and hand-wringing, and I figured I needed some additional tips that weren't on my bookmark. And that's pretty much what I told the intake-therapist; I just wanted some new ideas for managing my stress. She must have thought that was quaint because I spent the next few months digging into the roots of my stress,

discovering that tips for managing it wouldn't mean anything if I didn't know what was really causing my anxiety. A few years later, packing to leave school for a tenure-track position, I found the bookmark amidst the piles of papers and notes that had accumulated on my desk and chuckled at it before tossing it in the trash. Like everything else getting chucked rather than packed, I felt like I could let go of that way of thinking, that my mental health could be solved by a list of suggestions that could fit neatly on a bookmark. The root sources of my anxiety are the subject of another paper, but suffice it to say, the idea of just needing tips to deal with stress seems so silly to me now.

The purpose of this autoethnography is to reflect on and elucidate for others how the GSWC became a personal space for practicing mindfulness that ultimately fostered a sense of belonging in me (a Chicano and first-generation college graduate), which in turn helped me cope with imposter syndrome, the sense that I didn't belong at the institution. Finally, this autoethnography interrogates the choices I eventually made as a coordinator, redesigning the space in an attempt to foster that same sense of mindfulness and belonging for other students who shared or seemed to experience the same anxieties I felt.

To do this, following a discussion of autoethnography and some relevant literature, this chapter is organized into three vignettes: the first a sort of prologue and the other two broken up into my time as a writing advisor and then coordinator at the GSWC, with analysis and interpretation of both. These sections should not be viewed as strictly chronological but as overlapping timelines of my work at the GSWC.

Autoethnography

That I have chosen autoethnography as a means of conveying my research only seems to inflate my imposter syndrome.

Unaware that such an approach even existed or that it "counted" as academic writing when I was introduced to it as an option, it made me feel both elated and suspicious. I asked the same questions my students now ask—isn't that just personal bias? How is that generalizable if it's just your experience? How do you verify what's been written?

I offer my students the answers I've come to with mentors and on my own. Autoethnography allows one to confront one's own bias; the point is not to be generalizable but specific. And the autoethnography's verified by its readers and whether they share that feeling and experience or can at least understand those feelings and experiences. The piece I go back to most often for this is Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner's "[Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject](#)," which they also write as a personal narrative, exploring the ideas the chapter addresses by writing about their conversations with one another, students, and colleagues about writing personal narratives as a method. It's a wonderful piece that I find helpful and grounding whenever I'm feeling doubts about autoethnography.

What I don't tell my students is that there are days when I don't believe these answers. I experienced several of those days when writing this chapter: "Who cares about one privileged doctoral student's anxiety? I shouldn't have even approached this topic till I interviewed my colleagues 'cause I bet I was the only one who felt like that! I'm just outing myself that I don't really belong in the academy because a) I wrote a whole chapter about feeling that way so it's probably true, and b) I'm doing non-generalizable narrative research that's only recently begun to be taken seriously, and even then only by those who also do it!" But I don't tell my students about these self-doubts.

And that's part of the larger problem this chapter hopes to address—acknowledging our imposter feelings.

And that's part of the larger problem this chapter hopes to address—acknowledging our imposter feelings.

Ellis and Bochner suggest autoethnography might be one way of accomplishing this, explaining, "By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life" (737). In the case of autoethnography, that "particular life" is the author's own. Ellis and Bochner further explore variations on this, including the "literary autoethnography," in which "the text focuses as much on examining a self autobiographically as on interpreting a culture for a nonnative audience" (740). In other words, such research is about the author trying to understand themselves and their place in a culture to better understand that culture.

"The goal," Ellis and Bochner explain, "is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue" (748). They further note that the author, hopefully, can better understand themself, as such reflection should raise questions like, "What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?" (746) Sharing that understanding, the author creates a space where readers can also better understand as they enter the conversation around that experience. Concerns about generalizability are addressed by readers, as "they determine if [the narrative] speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (751). In other words, while autoethnographies allow the author to better understand themselves within the culture they study, they hopefully also help readers understand those within the

culture as well. Further, if readers are already steeped in the culture, hopefully the autoethnography validates their own experiences and offers other ways of interpreting those experiences.

While autoethnographies allow the author to better understand themselves within the culture they study, they hopefully also help readers understand those within the culture as well.

For my part, I share my stories about imposter syndrome, graduate school, and writing centers in hopes that they resonate with others working in and around the same circles by offering them a new way of seeing those spaces. My own experiences in these spaces have been validated by those I have worked with in them, so by delving into my experiences here (rather than, say, interviewing others for their stories), I hope I can better understand how they, as well as others I work with in these spaces (e.g., colleagues and my own students), continue to influence me now.

Finally, as this was not a subject I planned on writing about as a doctoral student, I now rely primarily on my scattered journal entries and own memory as the primary means of reflection and interpretation. For that reason, this chapter is purposely written as my story in the GSWC and not the story of the GSWC. Though they are intertwined, the larger narrative would require more voices to tell—voices I am now, hopefully, better prepared to hear, having completed some of the work of interrogating my experiences. To this end, I have left out details of the GSWC, the people there and at Ivy University, deidentifying them as much as possible and weaving multiple people together where possible (in this regard, the pronoun "they" is used throughout as both a gender-neutral singular pronoun and a plural pronoun).

A Review of Relevant Literature

The seeds of this chapter were planted in small observations I made about myself and the GSWC starting from my first days as an advisor there. But just as I did not then have a name for imposter syndrome, I did not have a name for a lot of the ideas that were rattling around in my head. When I took over as coordinator after three years, I made reading as much writing center research as I had the time and budget for a priority. As a result, the research that led to me putting these ideas together is a mixed bag.

Perhaps fittingly, this is less a "literature review" and more a discussion of the research that helped me make sense of my experiences. Some were suggestions I stumbled upon in the WCENTER listserv; others were dropped in my lap like those in the call for papers for this piece. I went looking for research on imposter syndrome once I knew there was a name for what I was feeling. I begin with a broad discussion of imposter syndrome and then narrow my discussion to the ways marginalized students might be particularly affected by feelings of inadequacy. Finally, I discuss mindfulness and how it fits within discussions of writing center studies.

But first, a definition: in their landmark 1978 piece "The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women," Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Ament Imes define what they call the "imposter phenomenon" as "an internal experience of intellectual phoniness" (241); Elizabeth Cox's TED-Ed lesson "What is imposter syndrome and how can you combat it?" provides a quick look at Clance and Imes' research, as well as more current research.

Fig. 1. Still and link to Elizabeth Cox's TED-Ed lesson "What is imposter syndrome and how can you combat it?"

While Clance and Imes' work looks at high-achieving women and the reasons for their perceived lack of qualifications, despite all evidence to the contrary, the imposter phenomenon has now been labeled a syndrome and is understood to be prevalent in academia. One of the most interesting parts of the article, however, is a footnote on the first page: "The question has been raised as to whether or not men experience this phenomenon…We have noticed the phenomenon in men who appear to be more in touch with their 'feminine' qualities'" (Clance and Imes 241).

But times have changed since 1978, and a quick search on *The Chronicle of Higher Education* shows a number of articles summarizing advice for addressing imposter syndrome and related issues, aimed not only at women but at men at multiple levels of academia (from students to faculty). One such piece, Sindhumathi Revuluri's 2018 "[How to Overcome Impostor Syndrome](#)," offers tips such as "Compare like to like" (meaning, for example, that a new graduate student shouldn't compare themself to another who is about to graduate) and "Think

about the factors that could contribute to feeling like an impostor."

Elaborating on this second example, Revuluri cites the 2013 research study by Kevin Cokley et al., "An Examination of the Impact of Minority Status Stress and Impostor Feelings on the Mental Health of Diverse Ethnic Minority College Students." Cokley et al. studied 240 ethnic minority college students, finding that while the degree to which different ethnic minority college students felt minority status stress and imposter feelings varied, "both significantly correlated with psychological distress and psychological well-being for all of the ethnic minority groups" (91). In other words, ethnic minority students are prone to imposter syndrome and may be more likely to experience mental health issues because of it.

Similarly, Georgann Cope-Watson and Andrea Smith Betts' 2010 autoethnography "Confronting Otherness: An E-conversation between Doctoral Students Living with Imposter Syndrome" mines the researchers' own emails as data. A key finding is that what is often perceived as "merely self-doubt" experienced by a few may be how imposter syndrome is traditionally minimized by the academy and society. By way of example, the researchers note that:

> Parallel to the essentialist concept that assumes women are the family caregivers is the patriarchal concept that women will assume the role of primary caretaker of the family and the children. These "old norms" (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 18) operate in ways that make it difficult to be both a mother and an academic. Bell (1990) recognized that sex-role expectations of our culture frequently give women conflicting messages about achievement making it difficult to internalize success. (9)

Drawing on Clance and Imes, they conclude that women who cannot juggle both family and academia with "ease" (qtd.

in Cope-Watson & Betts) end up feeling that they are not suited to being scholars. And while Cope-Watson and Betts write specifically about women, this does suggest that any scholar who does not meet familial or cultural expectations of success may feel that they must not belong.

For this reason, a key component in pushing back on imposter syndrome is mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as the "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally."

A key component in pushing back on imposter syndrome is mindfulness.

Being able to reflect "non-judgmentally" on reasons for feelings of inadequacy (e.g., not meeting familial expectations), particularly in the here and now (e.g., expectations as a scholar), may lay bare the conflicting senses of identity contributing to imposter syndrome. As this relates to writing center studies, Jared Featherstone et al. describe the mindful writing advisor in the "The Mindful Tutor":

> In the writing center, a mindful tutor would notice when planning, fantasies, and commentary are compromising their attention and use an attentional anchor, such as the sensation of their feet touching the floor or the movement of their breath, to stay present and focused on the client's words. When self-doubt arises, the mindful tutor acknowledges and accepts this mental pattern but does not let it interfere with the process of helping the client with a writing assignment. With this reduction of mental noise and ability to self-regulate attention, a tutor can remain focused on the collaboratively established goals of the writing center session.

The key takeaway here lies in that attention to the task in

front of a tutor can help mitigate imposter syndrome they may feel during the session.

Early Days

By my second semester of doctoral work, I was adjuncting at a community college across town, then racing back for classes and work at the GSWC. And I was drowning in reading. I have never been a quick reader; even in my English Literature MA program, I languished behind my peers. I often felt like it was all I could do to finish the weekly reading in time for class, never mind having an interesting analysis to share. Even that was difficult; often, unable to finish whatever novel we were discussing before class began, I resorted to reading a plot summary so that it wouldn't be obvious I hadn't read the ending. I hated doing this, but I also didn't really know what else to do or how else to keep up with the work. (I later learned I was reading "wrong" because I was trying to read everything, and my professors helped me develop better reading strategies.)

I felt that way again in my doctoral program. I drifted through that first semester, alternating between excitement about what I was learning but defeated to find out that I seemed to have learned it so much later than others, who were now two or three steps ahead of me. And it wasn't just that they seemed to understand the material better than me; it was like their whole lives had brought them to this place, to this moment. The classroom was full of people who'd been on championship academic teams, published articles, poems, essays, and already had solid employment in our field. And this felt true even of the peers in my cohort, all of whom constantly spoke up in class with meaningful contributions, week after week. And here I was, some Chicano kid (I also soon realized I was one of the youngest people, if not the youngest, in my program), whose

parents hadn't graduated college, reading and writing about things my peers all seemed to know more about. And I felt this way despite that: my dad's work had enabled me to attend private schools K-11; I'd worked multiple jobs to pay for college, applying for every scholarship I could; I was hired by my masters institution after graduation. Yet I didn't feel remotely in same league as my peers.

A day or so before Christmas, I turned in my last assignment. My seminar professor had given the class an extension, first to the last day of exams, then Christmas Eve, then December 27th, and finally offering us an incomplete and a whole year to finish it. At first, I thought this was a joke, but when my peers chuckled not from humor but relief, I was worried. I looked at my own work, which I knew wasn't amazing but was also, I thought, almost done. I'd certainly have it finished by the original due date. But the more time the professor gave us to work, the more I felt I had to work on it. All that extra time meant they expected that much better work, right?

I later learned that my program stressed the practice of the writing over the product. This became clear when another professor explained that their expectations for final papers on existing research were different from their expectations for new projects. But that first semester, I was distraught.

In a moment of frustration, anger, exhaustion, I don't know what, I decided I wanted to be done with the project before Christmas. A couple of days in a row, with my other assignments finished, I left my desk only to attend campus holiday parties for the free food and to walk my dog. Once I had turned in the assignment, I had completed my last shift (I forget at which job), and I had nothing to do but celebrate until I went back to work in a week, I cried tears of relief and disappointment with myself. The first semester was over.

Writing Advisor

When I first applied to the GSWC, it was as an office assistant. I'd seen the job listed under work study positions and sent in my materials. I had been in my doctoral program less than a month and was still trying to cobble together a meaningful paycheck. I'd moved to school at the end of the summer and managed to find steady employment as a lifeguard and swim instructor. I'd been asked for an interview to teach English as an adjunct at a nearby university before moving, but they'd filled the job by the time I got there. Then summer camp ended, and my hours at the pool were cut.

So I was very excited when I went in to interview to be an office assistant and instead was offered a writing advisor position, for better pay. The supervisor saw that I had lots of writing center experience from my masters institution and that I'd helped revise our tutor handbook. Plus, I had an MA in English and was getting my doctorate in English Education; I would later learn that this was an anomaly. Ivy University had over 80 graduate programs across the disciplines, and the cross-section of writing advisors reflected this. The GSWC wasn't housed in an academic department, and the coordinator's job description was more administrative than research based. So, they were interested in what I would bring to the position given my experience and research interests.

Still, I was a little uncertain; aside from my MA peers, I'd only worked with maybe one or two graduate students, and whether that was once or over multiple sessions, I can't remember. The supervisor reassured me that working with graduate students wasn't all that different from working with undergrads: read their work with them; stick to higher-order concerns like rhetoric, structure, and organization; don't edit, but listen for the kind of help they need. And if their concern lies outside of your field, say so.

I was still unsure, but largely speaking, I found they were

right! The one major difference was that most grad students seemed to want to visit, with only a few coming, grudgingly, at their professor's insistence. I went to several of the Saturday morning workshops on specific writing topics that other writing advisors ran as part of my training. I learned about concept mapping and the common features of academic writing across the graduate curricula. But aside from field/discipline-specific questions, I found I could help most writers who came in, especially once I really familiarized myself with APA style and formatting, having only ever used MLA in the past.

It helped, too, that I had a lot of down-time that first semester. Later I realized that the other advisors had their regulars, writers who came to see them at the same time and same day weekly or bi-weekly. As the new guy, I didn't see many writers that first semester. Once or twice a shift, someone (usually who'd never been to the GSWC before) would have an appointment, and being the only free advisor, I'd work with them. Otherwise, the regular writers only came in when they knew they could work with their usual advisor. When not working, we were pretty much free to spend the time however we wanted, and this turned out to be kind of a blessing.

I used this time to catch up on my own work, play a mobile game when I couldn't read anymore, or just doze off, often whether I wanted to or not; at the time, I wasn't sleeping well or all that much. I was happy to be getting another paycheck, but I also felt like I wasn't really earning it. In a given shift, one of my coworkers might see three or four writers to my one. My supervisor, to their credit, assured me those days were numbered once new writers visited and connected with me. Eventually, the supervisor also redirected some of their regulars to me, and I worked with some of those writers for years. But that first semester, I was worried they weren't going to hire me back. Why pay someone you don't seem to need?

When I first started working in the GSWC, I also realized that there was very little I knew about writing in other fields. My supervisor had warned me not to give advice on things I couldn't, that my job wasn't to be an expert in the writer's field—that was the writer's job. Mine was to help them develop or revise what they had already written or brainstorm new ideas they could write about. I got really used to saying, "That's a question for your professor."

When I first started working in the GSWC, I also realized that there was very little I knew about writing in other fields.

Despite that, I quickly realized I could still help, even if only with sentence-level features. I was able to recognize when evidence was provided for a claim but failed to explain how it supported the claim; when a summary was missing vital details; when an introduction did not match the body.

The first time I heard the words "imposter syndrome" was in an Introduction to an Academic Writing workshop my supervisor ran. I was attending these workshops as all new advisors did so that our advice was more or less on the same page. While many attendees, myself included, expected a crash course in the "rules" of academic writing, there were too many programs and fields for those rules to be true even among half of the attendees. Instead, the workshop was more about strategies for the kind of writing that graduate school required—lots of it, done quickly and well.

When the coordinator jokingly defined imposter syndrome (I think, simply as, feeling like you don't belong, will be found out, and shunned), it was like lightbulbs went on around the room. Around me, writers nervously chuckled and/or scribbled the words down in their notebooks. I immediately thought of my MA peers and feeling like I was just pretending I belonged there—sure that, at any moment, my professors were going

to realize what a mistake they'd made admitting me. And I realized I felt the same way now in my doctoral program. Now I knew its name.

Eventually, somewhere during that first year, I started to figure out that I was helping graduate students, some of the brightest and most brilliant minds in the world, improve their writing. By the end of my first year, my supervisor invited me to our monthly workshops not as an advisor-in-training but to think about how I might lead the same presentations. In my second year, I was asked to co-present, and by the end of that year, I was leading them myself.

I'm not sure when I realized that I was not only presenting to twenty to thirty students from different programs and even different countries but that I had answers to their questions; when I responded to their questions, I felt like I'd arrived. Over the next few years, I was asked to give more presentations (including at student orientations, a conference for minority graduate school applicants, and a seminar in the library's education think-tank).

At the same time, I felt more confident working with writers one-to-one. They brought in such fascinating research that I couldn't help but be absorbed in it. And in helping them find their best way of presenting it, I learned about things like the social studies curricula of other countries, urban food deserts, and therapeutic interventions for movie characters with mental health issues. People started to recognize me: students, faculty, staff. They would stop me in the halls, on the sidewalk walking my dog, introduce me to whoever they were with. People knew me and knew I helped with writing.

Interpretations

I'd already known for a long time that teaching is one of the only things I do where I feel total presence on a regular basis.

No matter what concerns, worries, and frustrations I'm feeling, usually within a few minutes of class starting, my attention and thoughts are on the students in front of me, on the material. I noticed this for the first time when I had to teach while knowing that after the class, my partner and I would be receiving life-changing news, the waiting for which had consumed our attention for a week or more. But once that class began I started in on the day's lesson, it was like that anticipation was put on hold. I didn't think, worry, or even consider it, so much so that when class ended, I suddenly remembered the news, and my heart was off racing again.

After a couple of years in the GSWC, I started to notice the same thing would often happen when regularly working with the same writer. After finding out how they were doing, what they were up to outside of work, and sharing the same, we would dive into their draft, and I was in it.

This was long before I knew about or understood mindfulness. Now, I look at my teaching, and particularly my writing advising, and see those moments as practicing a kind of mindfulness. Featherstone et al. describe "attentional anchors" as key to maintaining mindfulness during tutoring. For me, the attentional anchor was the writer's work. What had once caused me to doubt my place became the thing that grounded me: being surrounded by the brilliant, inspirational work of my peers. But the same happened when working with groups of writers, as well.

I would go on to lead the Introduction to Academic Writing workshop (or some variation of it) myself dozens of times before leaving the GSWC, and it remains my favorite regular presentation. In many ways, I think adapting my supervisor's version and then revising it for myself became the first act of writing this chapter. I still discussed things like reading strategies and basic citation and creating deadlines, but I also tried adding elements that would normalize the kind of self-doubt instilled by my imposter syndrome. Many of these

additions were simply gifs and memes or jokes spoken aloud in between slides or when answering questions, but they seemed to get good responses (both in the moment and in evaluations). And whenever I brought up and described imposter syndrome, I saw the lightbulbs go on, eyes widen, nervous chuckles, and mad scribbling; I'd passed on the name of the thing. Knowing it makes it less scary.

And despite my own imposter syndrome, my work for the GSWC became a space that affirmed my own belonging. By working mindfully with other writers, I could see them grow as scholars, which affirmed for me that I did indeed belong there among them. And this newfound confidence spilled into my other work, my teaching and my research, so much so that I even defended my dissertation in the GSWC. I also didn't want to monopolize that feeling; I wanted to share it. But I'm no longer sure that sharing it should have been my goal or that it was my place to do so.

> **And despite my own imposter syndrome, my work for the GSWC became a space that affirmed my own belonging. By working mindfully with other writers, I could see them grow as scholars, which affirmed for me that I did indeed belong there among them.**

Coordinator

The summer before the fourth year of my doctoral work, I was promoted to the position of coordinator of the GSWC at Ivy University. I was excited but also immensely stressed about the coming fall. Despite how far I felt I'd come in terms of my work and belonging, the imposter syndrome returned. I felt like I wasn't really the best person for the job—just the only person there to do it. That August, I finally went to campus mental health services. It helped, almost immediately, to just

talk about the things that worried me so, and to have them validated. And by mid-fall, I felt like I was seeing academic stress in a whole new light; I knew, too, that I wasn't the only one feeling it. And this revelation about my own academic stress added to my desire to make the GSWC not just a space where I felt safe and affirmed in my work but where the rest of the staff and visiting writers did too.

From even my first days as a writing advisor at the GSWC, one of my immediate concerns was space. I'd come from a writing center where tutoring occurred almost entirely in open spaces. There were cubicles at the back of the room, but most of the tutors, myself included, preferred discussing writers' work at the coffee table or the large desks. When I arrived at the GSWC, I quickly saw that each advisor had an office that was unofficially theirs, shared with another advisor on alternating shifts. Not wanting to throw off the harmony, I took the only unoccupied room. It had a table and chairs, but it also served as a storage room, with wire shelves on two walls. And the room was small enough that if someone entered without taking off their bag first, they were likely to get caught on something: the door, a shelf, a chair. Because one of my concerns as a new coordinator was space, I turned to the literature on writing center studies. One of the first books I picked up was Jackie Grutsch McKinney's *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*.

Grutsch McKinney's work blew my mind (so much so that I'm still a little mortified by how I gushed when I later met her at the Conference on College Composition and Communication). One of the first things Grutsch McKinney challenges is the narrative of writing centers as comfortable spaces. While I understood her point when I first read the book, our center felt so far on the other side of the continuum that I worried visitors were embarrassed to be there; closed doors and hushed tones were the norm. The story the space told, as Grutsch McKinney puts it (21), was that the center was clinical, and remediation

was something that should take place behind closed doors. When we tried 15-minute walk-ins in the library (in other words, when we brought tutoring to students), no one talked to us in public. I knew I wanted to redesign the space in response to this, but I also didn't want to ignore Grutsch McKinney's warnings around the "cozy home" (20). Importantly, she pushes back on some of the writing center's most time-honored stories, such as: "writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing" (6). In doing so, she argues not only that such stories limit what writing centers can be but that some users may want or need their writing center to be something different.

Equipped with Grutsch McKinney's lens for analysis, I looked to the advisors, my supervisor, faculty, and writers at my university for what story the GSWC told. Grutsch McKinney's book pointed me to James A. Inman's "[Designing Multiliteracy Centers: A Zoning Approach](#)," which demonstrates what writing centers can borrow from city design by breaking the space into "zones" dependent on what users will do in them. Like Grutsch McKinney, Inman pushes back on the narrative that writing centers need "round tables, art, plants, couches, and coffee pots" (Grutsch McKinney 21) without consideration for what purpose they serve.

> **Inman concludes with a "methodology" for "designing center spaces":**
>
> - Make a list of important uses of your center;
> - Review a blueprint or floorplan of your center, and make decisions about what uses should be supported where;
> - Present your plan to stakeholders, soliciting support and ideas for revision;
> - Once a final plan has been approved, implement it consistently; and
> - Keep an eye out for necessary revisions to the plan, which should also be approved by stakeholders. (28)

Combining Grutsch McKinney's ideas with Inman's, I knew that going forward, what I didn't want was for visitors to the GSWC to feel embarrassed to be there. That became the root of our redesign. Grutsch McKinney and Inman offer reasons for rethinking how writing centers design their space in order to better serve their users, including those users with imposter syndrome.

In addition to physically redesigning the space, I also wanted to change and add to the programming and retrain the staff. My hope was that all of this would make the GSWC a space where writers didn't feel bad about visiting and staff felt like they were growing while helping their clients grow. The easiest of these was training; the majority of the staff had actually

graduated and left right before I took on the coordinator role, which meant I got to hire and train a new staff almost from scratch. I learned that we nearly always got more applications than we could take on, so I was able to not only hire experienced writing advisors but people who were invested in the work of helping others too (without divulging individual advisors' programs, many were from helping and educational fields).

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the features of your most satisfying tutoring experiences.
2. In what ways might a writing center's space and layout factor into positive tutoring experiences?

We discussed the features of the most satisfying advising experiences (in which both advisor and writer seemed to get a lot from the session) and how to redesign the GSWC and our protocols to create space for more sessions that would be satisfying in the same ways. This included an end to closed-door sessions; we also got rid of extra stuff that had accumulated in the various offices: fake plants, unnecessary shelving, extra desks and chairs. We tried to turn the "waiting area" into a space that encouraged conversation over tense silence by opening it up: again getting rid of unneeded stuff, adding a coffee pot, and painting one wall with blackboard

paint. We used this blackboard wall for meetings, but also added regular prompts where writers could share their feelings about writing, what they were working on, etc. Because doors were no longer closed and the waiting area had more space, it became a hang-out spot where writing advisors and students checked in with one another between sessions. But we also kept a small table in the corner of the waiting area where someone could work quietly, away from the couch and coffee maker, if they wanted; here we also put up magnetic poetry, and eventually, it became commonplace to find a writing advisor sitting there contemplating word choices on a slow day. We also added new programming to address specific concerns, such as how writers could direct their sessions. It didn't happen overnight, but the GSWC changed a lot that year.

One of the things that made me happiest was coming in on Friday afternoons. I often didn't need to be in on Fridays; it was our slowest day to begin with, and we often had cancellations or no-shows. If I did go in, it was usually just before or after visiting my partner who worked in the campus library, a 5-minute walk away. When I did, I would frequently be greeted by excited conversation and laughter heard down the hall, the writing advisors hanging out in the waiting area, sitting on the couch, chairs, even on the floor, some lingering even after their shifts had ended. Sometimes, they would be laughing or commiserating over something said by a politician, a meeting with an advisor gone poorly, or stress about schoolwork. Regardless, this always made me happy.

We tried hosting a *Scrabble* night, hoping to bring in some new faces. No one showed up. But the staff and I sat around eating the snacks we'd ordered, playing a giant game of *Scrabble* on the floor. Somewhere in there, we began to realize that we were a group of hardcore tabletop gamers, and I'm not talking *Clue* or *Monopoly*. Thus began plans for our first staff game night at a local board game bar, which also began

the GSWC's obsession with *The Resistance* (Eskridge), a game in which players form a guerrilla organization and try to take down a dystopian state. The catch in this game is that some of the players are double-agents, trying to sabotage the resistance (literal imposters). Each round is a game of finger-pointing, clever lies, and general frustration. But they loved it. (They also loved a weird children's game called *Unicorn Glitterluck*, but I'm not going to touch that.)

For months after, the staff referenced the rounds we'd played. They immediately began planning our next staff game night, which became a once-a-semester occurrence, usually around finals. We also started holding our monthly meetings off campus, the advisors taking turns leading them, in hopes that both would create space for ideas that might not come to light otherwise. A few of us who were already working on our dissertations even formed our own writing group, taking turns sharing sections and then meeting to discuss them, or just meeting and all writing silently but together. The GSWC became its own little academic support group. I felt like I'd played a part in bringing the group together by creating a space I had needed but that hadn't existed when I first started working in the GSWC.

Interpretations

One of the things I realized when working with graduate writers was that many (if not most) seemed to be as full of self-doubt (if not more) as me. Somewhere along the line, I realized my own imposter syndrome couldn't just be addressed by helping other graduate students feeling the same way. My imposter syndrome went back to my earliest days of grad school (probably undergrad too), though I didn't know it then, of course. But in trying to interrogate my imposter syndrome and how it influenced me then as well as continues to influence

me now, I have to acknowledge that I may have created a pitfall for myself: did I create a writing center space in which the staff and writers felt like they belonged (combating their potential imposter syndrome) or did I create a writing center space in which **I** felt **I** belonged? These questions were something I was concerned with even then. And now that concern has grown.

Question for Discussion

- Do you feel a sense of belonging in your writing center?

But these changes seemed to work. After redesigning the GSWC, walk-ins became so popular that we often had to turn people away. Writers stopped asking to close the doors; conversations started and ended in the previously silent waiting area; writing advisors started asking each other for help. The feedback we received on anonymous surveys of individual sessions and evaluations of workshops (which I checked weekly with an almost obsessive concern) largely suggested that the main critique was that we didn't have enough availability.

However, I won't claim there's a causation or even a correlation between our redesign and the increased usage and positive feedback; there are simply too many other factors to consider, from changes in funding, our university as a whole, global events that found their way into writers' work, or even just an increased social media presence by the office that

housed us. What I will say is that the changes in the community made me feel like I had accomplished something — like I had made a writing space that people wanted to visit and where they felt affirmed as writers and scholars, as opposed to leaving the center embarrassed.

Did I still make the GSWC a "comfy space" despite Grutsch McKinney's warnings? Well, I did add a coffee maker, put up less abstract art, and throw out fake plants, but we were kind of stuck with the soft couch and round tables. The people, though, were different. Sure, we added a blackboard covered in affirmational messages that staff and writers added to and doodled on, but would the old staff have used it? One of the things that seems absent from Grutsch McKinney's chapter on writing center spaces is the staff as "users" of writing centers. While, of course, the visiting writers are our key pedagogical concern, many tutors are also students. Shouldn't we consider what's best for them as well?

In their piece "[Opening Closed Doors: A Rationale for Creating a Safe Space for Tutors Struggling with Mental Health Concerns or Illnesses,](#)" Hillary Degner et al. argue for just that: "centers have ethical obligations to 1.) create environments where tutors, as well as students, grow and 2.) recognize mental health concerns or illnesses as part of the status quo, and not as conditions that are abnormal." They urge the importance of staff training in recognizing mental health concerns both in themselves and among visiting writers, as well as knowledge of campus services.

The GSWC wanted to start such initiatives, but I was not fully able to begin implementing them before my time as coordinator ended. We discussed these matters in staff meetings, and I endeavored to make clear that their mental health was just as important as the writers they worked with — and that they should let me know if they were feeling overwhelmed. That some took me up on this, asking if someone else could take their sessions on difficult days or if we

could discuss a particular session that they felt had not gone well, suggests not only that it was important to have those conversations but that staff felt comfortable doing so.

I now realize, however, that I often did this to the detriment of my own well-being, such as taking on another advisor's sessions when I was already feeling overwhelmed. My therapist at that time helped me see this, and it was around this time that it became clear that more formal mental health awareness training (as opposed to just conversations during staff meetings) was necessary.

Though Degner et al. mention the importance of such training in 2015, back then, I was mostly unaware of where to get it. I knew of a colleague at another writing center who held a kind of social work-based training for their staff, and we tried but were unable to piggyback on this. And unfortunately, like many of the plans I had for myself and the GSWC, it fell by the wayside due to lack of time and other seemingly more immediate concerns.

Taking this back to the question of whether I created a space in which the staff and writers could feel a sense of belonging or just a space in which I felt I belonged, I suspect it was a little bit of both. That evaluations of not just my work but the staff's were so consistently positive, that open conversations were happening for seemingly the first time, suggest to me that my efforts were well-received. But I'm not sure I didn't just create a space that worked for me that happened to work for others as well. In short, I was not, as Beth Daniels puts it, "careful of literacy narratives that make us feel good" (qtd. in Grutsch McKinney 25).

Conclusions

I accepted a tenure-track position at my MA alma mater still all-but-dissertation (ABD), thanks to a loan-for-service state

program for minority doctoral students that my alma mater had sponsored me for. This in itself — that I did not go through the stressful academic job hunt so many of my friends faced — was another source of imposter syndrome. To battle the feeling of imposter syndrome, I had to constantly remind myself (and be reminded by others) that I had been through a stressful period too: not only had applying for the loan-for-service program been difficult, but I had to apply for it at least three times before receiving it.

So when I discussed the possibility of leaving graduate school to start a job as a tenure-track professor with my advisors, it was with trepidation. The plan was to finish my dissertation and defend that fall, anyway, but working full-time in a new job as an academic while finishing the project seemed like a bit much. Wouldn't it be safer to stick around, wrap things up, and let "the real world" hold off for a year? My advisors politely, and rightly, disagreed, gently kicking me out of the nest.

I moved late that summer, just a few days before the start of the fall semester. And the combination of starting a job I didn't feel like I deserved, both because I hadn't yet completed my doctorate and because I'd been offered a job that hadn't required the stress-inducing application and hiring process I knew my peers had or would struggle through, should have brought back my imposter syndrome in force. It didn't. Thankfully, completing a dissertation while working full-time leaves one less time to overthink things, and I graduated the following May. And while I wish this were a victory narrative, that's hardly the case.

There were no anime lines to demonstrate that I'd powered up beyond such self-doubt, no freeze-frame as I triumphantly pumped a fist in the air holding my diploma as proof that I did, in fact, belong after all. Sadly, it doesn't work like that, as much as I like to imagine taking over as coordinator and hiring a new staff was like my own personal team-building montage set to an upbeat 80s pop song. If anything, the imposter syndrome

isn't even different now. I'm still struck with moments of self-doubt: that I tricked my way into my job, that my colleagues who were once my professors are giving one another knowing glances when I speak up in department meetings. The difference is that I'm better at recognizing those moments of self-doubt through mindfulness, spotting them trying to sneak in, and non-judgmentally confronting them. I also know that to do this I need to take care of myself; if I don't get enough sleep, food, or exercise, the moments last longer. I write strictly for the purpose of checking in with myself, of being mindful. And I'm back in therapy.

Unsurprisingly, when I was asked to submit this chapter, the imposter syndrome hit me like a dodge ball to the gut. When I initially read about the call for papers on this topic, it was so near the deadline that I gave it little thought beyond, "I've been working on something like that," before submitting. As such, in many ways, writing this has been one of the more difficult tasks of my academic career thus far. I originally proposed it as a Tutor Column, but the editors asked me to expand it into a chapter for this digital edited collection. The task was daunting, if only because what was initially conceived as a 1500-word reflection on the practice of tutoring as validating was now intended—as part of an edited collection—to be more than four times that length, requiring more research and much more introspection. And while the words themselves flowed fairly easily, returning to the work has been panic-inducing.

Receiving the e-mail from the editor a few months after submission (and again with each round of review) felt like the bill had come due, like I was finally going to pay for my crimes against the academy — premeditated perjury of qualifications. Perhaps it hit me so strongly because I was expecting it. I was about half-way through my first year as a tenure-track faculty member with my doctorate in hand (no longer ABD), and I felt like I was just waiting to be found out.

I thought:

"Am I representing this feeling accurately?"

"Is that what **really** happened or just what I remember?"

"What if my privilege as a male academic renders my experiences as a Chicano academic meaningless?"

"So many people definitely have it way worse than me! What if they think I'm appropriating their imposter syndrome for my own gain? Am I?!"

And even if I can often answer these questions for myself (some just by returning to the methods of autoethnography), there's the inevitable "What if I don't even have imposter syndrome, and I'm just vaguely unconfident in my accomplishments?" This, too, can spiral quickly into "Have I even accomplished anything worth feeling like an imposter about?" (@BenVilla4Real)
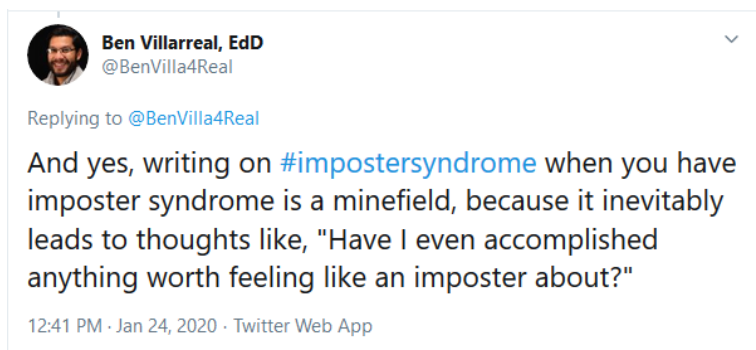
Fig. 2. Screenshot of author's Tweet about Imposter Syndrome.

On the days these thoughts have gotten the better of me, at best I've not been able to even look at this chapter, and at worst, I've strongly considered just pulling it, writing the editors and saying, "Thank you but I've decided not to publish at this time." But the thought of having to write that email is enough to stop me from doing it.

Thankfully, when these feelings started to resurface at the beginning of another academic year (August, again), I recognized the sense of anxiety that came with them and got myself back into therapy, which I had left when I moved and put off because I felt pretty well-adjusted. (Just writing that now makes me roll my eyes.)

Over the next few months, I started unpacking my imposter syndrome, realizing it was a source of a lot of my anxiety and not just another way my anxiety manifested like I had assumed. Further, while some of my imposter syndrome could be seen as class-related (and I'm sure it is), just as much, if not more, is likely rooted in my Chicano-identity. I see this more concretely in light of Cokley et al.'s research. But that journey of realization could be its own autoethnography.

So when my gut told me to politely but immediately decline the offer to submit this chapter, I was able to hold that thought and take it to my therapist, who promptly suggested I check out Brené Brown's *The Gifts of Imperfection*. My therapist suggested that my imposter syndrome in this instance was urging me to decline because of my fear of making myself vulnerable. Sharing this story might be helpful, might connect me to others who can relate — meaning I'm not an imposter but one of many who feel this way.

If you're familiar with Brown's work, you likely recognize one of her main tenets explores how vulnerability factors into imposter syndrome (36), and even if you're not, you've probably seen her decade-old TED Talk "The Power of Vulnerability," which is still on TED's list of "Most popular talks of all time."

Fig. 3. Still and link to Brené Brown's TED Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability."

Reading Brown's work has helped me write this, so much so, I wish I had discovered her sooner. Much of what Brown writes about relates directly to imposter syndrome, and her chapter on perfectionism is very relatable and helped me remember that as I write my autoethnography I'm writing to no one's experience but my own and that doing so authentically requires I acknowledge that I'm not perfect. Trying to pretend otherwise is where imposter syndrome starts to grow (56-57).

In their book, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber adapt Brown's ideas into a definition of academic shame:

Academic shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we aren't as smart or capable

as our colleagues, that our scholarship and teaching isn't as good as that of our colleagues, that our comments in a meeting or at a speaker event aren't as rigorous as that of our colleagues, and therefore we are unworthy of belonging to the community of great minds. (87)

Neither Berg and Seeber or Brown refer to this as "imposter syndrome," but its roots are the same — the fear that one is not enough.

Brown argues that mindfulness is key in managing this kind of perfectionism (60), something I felt woefully unpracticed in. But now I realize I did take time for this during my doctorate, and these memories echoed back to me: I had a yoga instructor who included short meditation into their practice; a mentoring teacher who began our class with "Writing for Full Presence" (C. Brown) and who gave us a chance to gather our thoughts and emotions before jumping into discussion of the material; and most importantly, my work in the GSWC, in which my constant affirmations that a writer's work was never perfect but always in progress, and that that was okay. And now, those bookmark tips do kind of help: the breathing helps when I notice my shortened breaths, and listing recent accomplishments keeps me from feeling like I haven't occupied my time.

The point of sharing this is to show that facing imposter syndrome, like all mental health (and all health, really), is an ongoing process. Mine did not go away when I graduated, just as working in the GSWC didn't take it all away. But working there mindfully and supporting others with many of the same doubts was a start in my own support system, even if, for better or worse, I didn't realize it at the time. This is not to say that working at a writing center will help everyone (or even that working at my writing center helped everyone), only that it helped me, so much so that I cannot imagine having completed my doctorate without it.

Near the completion of the first draft of this chapter, I was asked to again step in to run a writing center, this time, the first one ever where I worked. I felt confident and qualified to do so, more so than when I took over at the GSWC, perhaps because of this work. Without interrogating my choices as coordinator here, I might have gone into that new center determined to recreate the GSWC — ill-advised not just because of what I have learned since then (both about myself and writing center administration) but because of differences in who I am trying to serve. At the GSWC, I tried to make it a space for the tutors I worked alongside, reconciling what I had needed as a tutor with what they were telling or showing me they needed; it would have been wrong to simply take that and expect the new tutors I managed and trained to need or even want the same things. For that reason, I'm glad this chapter evolved beyond the scope of my initial plans — to simply reflect on the ways that helping graduate writers with their writing affirmed that I belonged there among them. Reflecting on how tutoring as a mindful practice led to my sense of belonging has given me a model for trying to make sure other graduate student tutors feel like they belong, as well.

Imposter syndrome, along with other mental health concerns, will likely continue to prevail in academia, and reflecting on my own has, I think, given me a new way of understanding these concerns. Further, sharing my experience — as difficult as writing this has been — is necessary in breaking down barriers that serve as the foundation for such self-doubt; while research like that done by Degner et al. is indeed necessary, so are individual stories that "encourage compassion and promote dialogue" (Ellis and Bochner 748). My hope is that this chapter accomplishes that in some small degree, so that we might all see writing centers as places of mindfulness for those who visit and work there.

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4. The Hidden and Invisible: Vulnerability in Writing Center Work by Lauren Brentnell, Elise Dixon, & Rachel Robinson

Keywords: Vulnerability, emotion, social justice, trauma, identity, embodiment

> It's often uncomfortable to be vulnerable with others, especially within public spaces.

Introduction

It's often uncomfortable to be vulnerable with others, especially within public spaces. Witnessing others' vulnerabilities and being vulnerable ourselves asks us to extend empathy that might make us feel uncomfortable. Further, vulnerability is a privilege not always extended to everyone. As white people, we acknowledge that **vulnerability** doesn't look

the same for everyone and may even be dangerous for certain populations, such as people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Throughout this piece, we consider what Richard Marback means when he says, "vulnerability requires more of us than empathy" (7), and what working with empathetic vulnerability might require of us in the writing center. What does it mean for us, and for more inherently vulnerable populations, to push past empathy into a space of authentic vulnerability? Does this look different in writing centers? Writing centers are often idealized as successful and happy academic spaces (Grimm; McKinney), which contributes to the promulgation of a welcoming facade. However, writing center scholars often know that the concept of welcome is much more complicated and freighted with the emotional labor of consultants and directors (Caswell et al.; Dixon & Robinson).

> **As white people, we acknowledge that vulnerability doesn't look the same for everyone and may even be dangerous for certain populations, such as people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community.**

When the three of us came together to write about being vulnerable in writing center work, we didn't realize how we each independently approached the writing center space as one that simultaneously welcomes and rejects visible acts of vulnerability, particularly when enacted by tutors, administrators, and staff members. To be clear, writing centers are often described as "caring" spaces that resist traditional impersonal hierarchical structures and welcome vulnerability, but they also tend to be described as academic spaces that prioritize professionalism. Thus, vulnerability *should* be present in our interactions with clients but also *shouldn't*, because we're **professionals**. However, painful moments that

require—or demand—visible vulnerability are often unpredictable; people do not schedule writing center appointments around these moments. Instead, moments of vulnerability present themselves in the "everyday" of the center: in our conversations, in our sessions, and in the ways we interact with the writing center space itself, and they are, sometimes, not pleasant or "welcome."

Traditionally, writing centers are marked as comforting spaces, often with touches of "home" like plants, coffee makers, and couches (McKinney). These comforting touches of home (hopefully) help to make the writing center an open, welcoming hangout space for consultants and writers alike. In this space, ordinary moments take place through social interactions but also in the mundane interactions with *objects* in the center. [Gellar et al](). call for writing center directors and scholars to "remain open to everyday moments" in the center (56), suggesting readers consider the everyday chats between consultants during their breaks and the meaning made in created and found objects such as magnetic poetry (Figure 1), internet bookmarks, and unshelved books (56). Indeed, they argue that seeing the everyday in these artifacts is one way to uncover what means and what matters in our writing centers" (58).
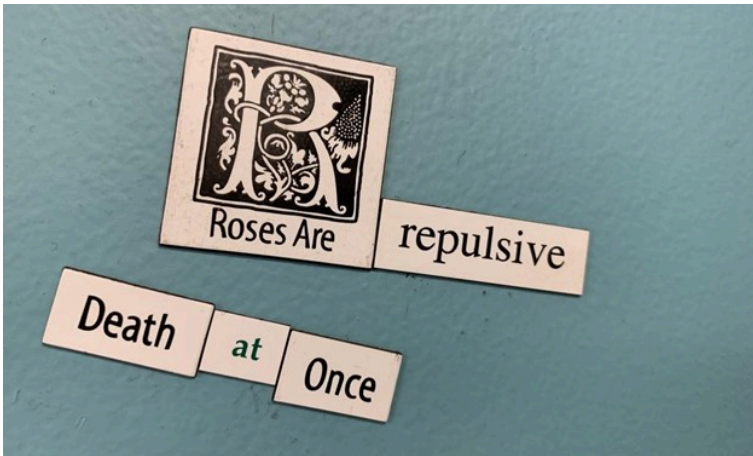
Fig. 1. Magnetic poetry on a blue background that says: "Roses are repulsive / Death at once."

For us, evidence of vulnerability is present in the objects left behind in the center: in neglected plants left to die on the tables (Figure 2), in the magnetic poetry constructed to describe a client or consultant's grief or apathy, in the toys and crayons broken and pulled apart after an anxiety-riddled session. Photographs of such evidence of everyday vulnerability are scattered throughout this article and are intended to illuminate how inanimate objects can reveal deep—and sometimes negative—feelings.

Fig. 2. A dead, brown plant in a blue pot sitting in front of a writing center schedule posted on the Writing Center table.

Because we—and many of those we work with—have painful, difficult moments on a daily basis, we argue for the importance of discussing, exposing, and integrating vulnerability into our everyday writing center work, even as we know this practice is more difficult for some populations than others.

Marback argues that while we often see vulnerability as something to be hidden or overcome, we should instead reorient to seeing vulnerability "not as a weakness but as a

strength, an attitude of care and concern that connects us to the world and to each other" (1). This approach sees vulnerability not as something to be hidden away in order to create a "positive" community space, and not, even, as something everyone gets to choose. Instead, it is something to be safely discussed, even when it is uncomfortable. Vulnerability can help to create a community more attuned to all bodies within it, which is (supposedly) at the core of writing center work. In exposing, discussing, and exploring vulnerabilities, we can begin developing **social justice-oriented practices in a writing center**.

Throughout this chapter, we interrogate what it means to be vulnerable consultants in the writing center. Vulnerability can feel like a loss of control, an irrational response that makes us ashamed, particularly in the academic spaces where we work and rely heavily on rationality as a guiding principle. Instead, we see vulnerability as "emotional involvement," which "demands from us an acceptance of greater risk than is demanded by empathy" (Marback 7). While empathy is frequently integrated into our work as writing center consultants, vulnerability demands more. We're often empathetic to those who come to us for help—we take time to understand their writing, why they are writing, the struggles they are having. But vulnerability asks us to also be forward about our own struggles, which can leave us feeling exposed and uncomfortable in interactions with co-workers and in sessions. **We are not calling for everyone to always be vulnerable**. Instead, we advocate for allowing space for vulnerabilities not to be seen as shameful when they do come forward at work.

This chapter is presented in three parts. First, Lauren, a former consultant at The Writing Center @ MSU (Michigan State University), discusses the need for care-based responses within the writing center to both spoken and silent vulnerability. Then Elise, former interim assistant director at The Writing Center @ MSU and current writing center director

at University of North Carolina at Pembroke, presents photos she took of objects in MSU's center that mark consultants' and writers' unspoken vulnerabilities. These photos are peppered throughout the chapter to give a sense of the vulnerabilities that people (including ourselves) express within the writing center in non-verbal ways. Next, we have Rachel's stories. Rachel, former interim assistant director and current graduate coordinator at The Writing Center @ MSU, writes of having to publicly and vulnerably live through her grief while continuing with the important, everyday tasks of writing center work (Figure 3). Finally, we conclude with strategies for creating and discussing vulnerable moments in your own center.
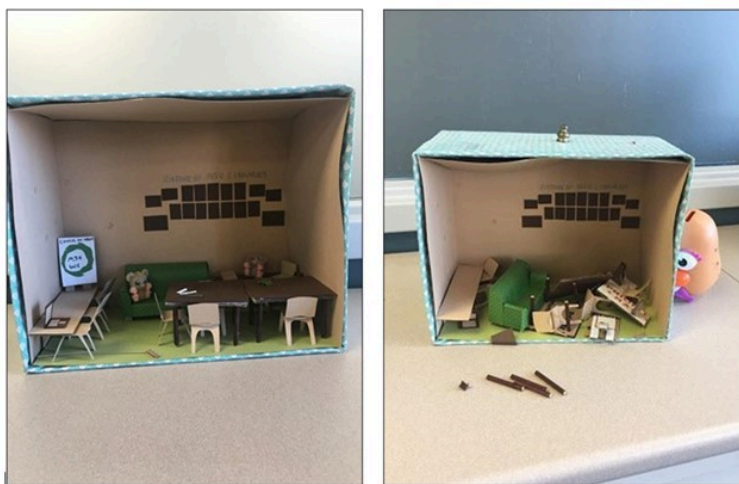
Fig. 3. Two pictures of a diorama made out of a cardboard box that has been made to look like a writing center with paper and cardboard chairs, signs, tables, and couch. In the photo on the right, the diorama is very messy, with chairs and couches upended, and a Mr. Potato Head peeking behind it. The other photo (left) shows the diorama in a neat and tidy state. This diorama sits in the MSU writing center and is continually, and mysteriously, "messed up" by an unknown consultant, and then put back together by Elise.

In Lauren's research with trauma survivors, she advocates for care-based practices in all areas of our work, including research, teaching, writing program administration, and, of course, writing centers. Care-based practices include:

- Prioritizing the building of safe and open communities (Craig and Perryman-Clark; Herman; Yergeau)
- Promoting empathetic listening (Dolmage; Laub)
- Reflecting on positionality and relationality (Cedillo; Craig and Perryman-Clark; Powell et al.)
- Sharing power and flattening hierarchical governance (Guarino et al.; Tuhiwai Smith)
- Rebuilding networks of trust and care through **care-based practices** (Herman; Morales)

What we've learned from this model of care-based practices is that vulnerability is an active practice, one that we have to train both speakers and listeners to handle. Experiencing vulnerability is scary precisely because it is seen as weakness. We often hide our shame, our worry, our anger, our depression, and our grief from others because we fear the risks associated with being open. Likewise, we often fear being taken

advantage of, being shunned, or being viewed as "difficult." Many of us may not have a choice in that vulnerability; certain positionalities including race, sexuality, ability, class, and nationality are inherently more vulnerable than others, so these experiences and feelings may be heightened.

For listeners, vulnerability is scary because we don't always know how to handle someone else's pain, particularly when we aren't trained as counselors. Even empathetic listeners can mess up by responding in seemingly dismissive ways that make vulnerable speakers feel unheard and unimportant. Therefore, engaging in the work of vulnerability means working to understand how we can make safe and open communities for both speakers and listeners to work together, trust each other, and care for everyone.

This leads us to a series of questions:

- Why is vulnerability in writing centers important—what benefits are there to being vulnerable and acknowledging others' vulnerabilities?
- Where are these moments of vulnerability in writing center work?
- When do we share our vulnerabilities, and when do we hide our vulnerabilities?
- What is the difference between vulnerabilities that we feel as the result of life experiences and vulnerabilities that are part of our embodied

> identities?
> - How do we navigate vulnerabilities with both empathy and action?
> - What does it mean to be "vulnerable," and does it look the same for everyone?

As part of responding to these questions, we take time to share our own vulnerabilities. While we reflect on these stories of vulnerability, we also relay ideas for how vulnerability can be integrated into writing center work, and how we can better respond to vulnerabilities as listeners, consultants, and co-workers. We hope to start a conversation on the vulnerabilities that we take into the writing center, as well as the vulnerability that the writing center as a space and practice puts on us. We conclude our chapter by providing activities for and examples of modeling vulnerability in your own writing center.

Lauren's Story

Because it is mid-February in Michigan, I leave my apartment earlier than usual to make sure I have time to clear the snow off my car, navigate the half-cleared Michigan roads, and battle for a parking spot on campus before the lots are filled (a feat even more impossible in the cold, with more students driving rather than walking in the frigid temperatures and some spots taken up by the snow piles). Today, I am lucky and find a parking spot immediately, so I have time to grab coffee and arrive at my shift early. To pass the time before my appointments arrive, I log onto social media.

The first post I see notifies me that a friend of mine has **died**.

Immediately, I text a mutual friend to confirm the details. We quickly share stories and memories of our deceased friend and our frustration that we must mourn our friends before we are 30. Frustratingly, this is not the first time either of us has had to deal with death during the year—with the death of people our own age, other millennials who we probably just saw on Instagram or Snapchat the day before. Then, my appointment walks in, and I start a 4-hour writing center shift, where I have to shove aside my feelings and work with the writers who had scheduled appointments with me.

After my shift, I don't get to fall apart—I'm on the job market, and I have an interview planned for the afternoon. So, I stay in the writing center, hoping the relatively public space will help me keep myself together until after I have to answer interview questions about my teaching and research and service—all of which, funnily enough, deal with issues of trauma and care and vulnerability. I'd love to be able to actually enact my research practices with the search committees, to be able to share the details of my life with them, to answer their call with "I just found out my friend died unexpectedly, and this is exactly why I do the work I do" instead of with a "hello," but I know that doing so would probably mean that **I don't actually get that job**. After my interview, I finally message some people in my program to say that my friend died and that I've been holding those emotions back all day.

Once I allow myself to feel these emotions, I think about the writing center as a space where I'd been forced to hide those feelings, to perform invincibility, to put on the mask and pretend nothing was going on for the writers who came in for help. Because I was trying to make sure I was caring for the writers I was working with, the mask of professionalism I wore meant that I was failing to care for myself and my emotions. In this way, the writing center felt like a space where I wasn't allowed to be myself or to feel my own feelings.

But I then consider why I lingered in that space for an hour

after my shift instead of going home, and I wonder if it is more complex than that. While I did not speak my vulnerabilities aloud, the writing center was still the space where I felt safe and comfortable in that moment, where I wanted to be in order to remain calm before an interview—it was a space of vulnerability, even if it was a silent vulnerability. The forced professionalism of the writing center, which felt stifling at first, ended up becoming a comfort to me as my shift ended. Because I knew I had to maintain my composure for the interview coming up, I found myself drawing on the writing center as a way to dwell in my emotions without being overwhelmed by them. I confessed what I was going through to a few other consultants who were there at the time, and who asked me how I was doing. They, in turn, offered their sympathies and support in ways that I needed. While I was silent about my feelings while working with writers, in the moment where I was no longer asked to act as a consultant (when my shift was over), I was able to start speaking my vulnerabilities.

Much of my work deals with silent vulnerabilities. Sometimes, this means considering how we can come to speak vulnerabilities and how we speak and story trauma, which carries many vulnerabilities. More recently, and for this project, I have become interested in how we as writing researchers, teachers, administrators, or consultants can support those who are vulnerable, whether we are aware of these vulnerabilities or not. In other words, the writing center may be a space for emotional vulnerability, a **healing space** as well as a consultation space. I've often found myself in the position of being a healer for writers who see themselves as "bad writers" or who don't believe they can complete an assignment, but rarely have I felt that the center was a healing space for me. Indeed, the writing center seems set up to be a healing space for writers rather than tutors, as we often discuss how to navigate the feelings of those writers. What Elise, Rachel, and I

consider here is how it can also be a potential healing space for those of us who work here.

To be clear, sometimes the writing center feels like **another abuser**, one that asks me to hang my vulnerabilities away at the door in order to work, invalidates my fears and worries, asks me to be professional and sees emotions as hindering that. In this way, writing centers mirror the institutions they are part of, the university settings wherein we are often asked to be students, faculty, and other professionals before we are asked to be people. But I believe that we do not need/have to feel this way in the center. This possibility can only be recognized as we open space for vulnerabilities, to not ask people to hang them at the door, to empathize with each other but also train our consultants to take action to help those who are vulnerable.

In my experience, writing center staff/administrators often pretend we're not on fire. We put up images of "happy" writers and consultants on our webpages and tout our successes, but we ignore the failures that are all around us, including everyday feelings of depression, anxiety, and loss, or the general feeling of just being overwhelmed that many of us experience at some point (Figure 4).
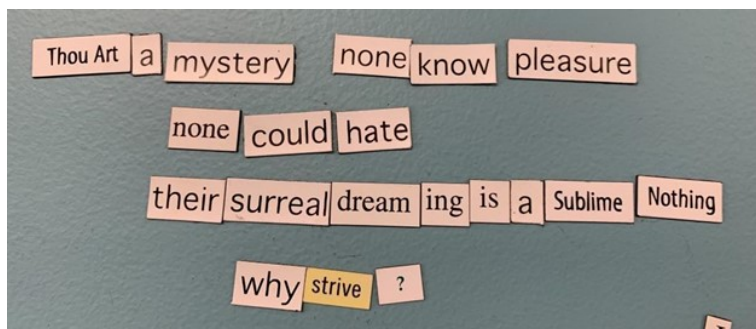
Fig. 4. Magnetic poetry on a blue background that says, "Thou art a mystery none know pleasure / none could hate / their surreal dreaming is a sublime nothing / why strive?"

But exposing vulnerabilities actually makes us a safer, and more honest, community. The writing center does not need to be a space that makes everyone "happy." In trauma studies, we teach that rebuilding trust is often the exact opposite of making things "happy": because trauma survivors know that happiness is often a façade, regaining trust is rooted in being open and honest about both personal vulnerabilities and institutional failings (Herman; [Smith and Freyd](#)). I believe that the writing center (like many other institutional offices) has often failed survivors in its reticence to address trauma within its walls. Michigan State is in a particularly vulnerable moment in the wake of **Larry Nassar**, so the reluctance of any space to recognize sexual violence is an issue for all departments to consider. We cannot skip reflecting on our failures, to expose our own vulnerabilities instead of hiding or defending them. We don't need to just put the "happy writer" stories on the writing center websites—we also need to put the things that show the bad, from the mundane struggles that writers may go through the recognition that writing centers exist within institutional settings that are often filled with harassment, discrimination, and violence.

Tell people how to address discrimination and make space for them to do so, because these stories emerge within the writing center spaces. Provide anti-harassment and intervention training to consultants as part of job training, because many of us who work here and the writers that we work with will experience these at some point. Acknowledge that a large amount of violence occurs within the universities most of us work for and work to address that problem within the writing center, providing university and community-focused resources for both ourselves and the writers who come to us with these stories to utilize.

Elise's Story

Since 2007, I've worked in four different writing centers as a consultant, coordinator, and now interim assistant director. My experiences in each one have been different, but one constant has always remained: they have always been a place where messy things happen. Since writing centers often become a kind of hub for consultants to hang out, the writing center has served as a backdrop and setting for many everyday life moments for me. And I'm a grad student, which means I've **seen some shit**. Thus, writing centers have been a backdrop not just for my happy life moments, but also some of my darkest times. In undergrad, I used my job in the writing center as an excuse to avoid my abusive boyfriend. I've also been sexually harassed at two different writing centers, by both a man and a woman. I had a miscarriage in 2017, and the center was a setting for many conversations about my grief. I've had arguments. I've **cried**. I've hidden. I've experienced trauma in the writing center. It's these everyday moments I want to discuss here.

Arguably, Geller et al.'s (2007) discussion of everyday moments hearkens to the positives of the center, to the way we all like to think of our centers: hubs of fun chit-chat, snack-eating, stimulating consultations, hilarious haikus composed in magnetic poetry, delicious treats left out for all. Of course, most, if not all, writing centers have these moments. But they also have other kinds of moments: moments where consultants and writers disagree or end sessions early; moments where a consultant quietly puts together an angsty poem on the magnet board (Figure 5); moments where no one remembers to water the plants (Figure 6), clean out the coffee pot, or throw away the dried-up markers; moments where our pain and vulnerability are only made visible through the traces we leave behind (Figure 7).
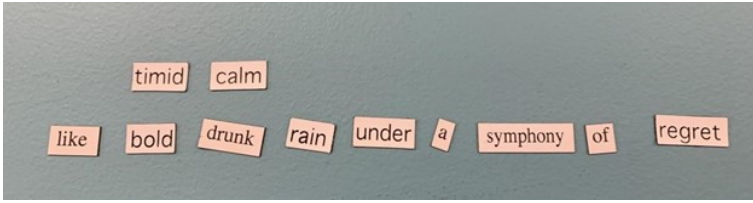
*Fig. 5. Magnetic poetry on a blue background that says, "Timid calm /
like bold drunk rain under a symphony of regret."*

Fig. 6. A dying, neglected geranium plant with brown and green leaves sitting on the windowsill of the writing center.

Fig. 7. A green, squishy stress ball toy that looks like a monster with googly eyes, lying on its side, faded, dirty, germy, and broken on a table on the writing center.

If the writing center is to be conceived of as a homey space, I think it's only natural for us to think about the "dark" things that happen in home spaces: sexual harassment, death, abuse, tears.

When you have a miscarriage, you're confronted with a lot of positive narratives about trying again, having a rainbow baby, or the notion that your baby is safe in heaven. None of these narratives brought me comfort or solace. Instead, I found the push for constant positivity to be hollow and stifling. In addition, after my miscarriage, I lived through the interminable wait for **Michigan State's Office of Institutional Equity** to make a decision about a sexual harassment case (the setting of which was the writing center) that I filed. We often discuss the positivity to be found in an end result of a case like this, but what of all the negative feelings accompanying the weight (and wait) of it all? Where does that leave me or anyone else experiencing negative feelings in a writing center space often advertised as comforting and happy?

I find myself often seeking comfort under the blanket of bad

feelings I have been so often encouraged to recover from or get over. Instead, I have found myself deep-diving into darkness as pure resistance against all the hope-filled narratives of rainbow babies, second chances, and babies in heaven. Last year, in solidarity with queer scholars like [Lee Edelman](), [Ann Cvetkovich](), [Jack Halberstam](), and [Heather Love](), I found myself holding on to my failure, my depression, my empty womb, my childless future, my traumatized body and spirit. Love argues that "'feeling bad' has been a crucial element of modern queer experience" (160) "given the scene of destruction at our backs" (162). Queerly reaching out into the writing center space, I looked (and continue to look) for evidence of some kind of solidarity in my own personal darkness. I have found that a reveling in the negative has often been my only **queer comfort**. Indeed, according to Cvetkovich, "it might. . . be important to let depression linger, to explore the feeling of remaining or resting sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived" (14). Thus, if we are to consider the everyday moments of the writing center, it is important to think about the negative, sad, and dark everyday moments that occur in the center as well.

> Over the years I have collected photos of the dark, painful, and sad everyday moments of the writing center evidenced through people's interactions with objects here (Figures 8 & 9).

Fig. 8. A jumble of cords, boxes, and miscellaneous technology in a very messy, neglected tech cabinet.
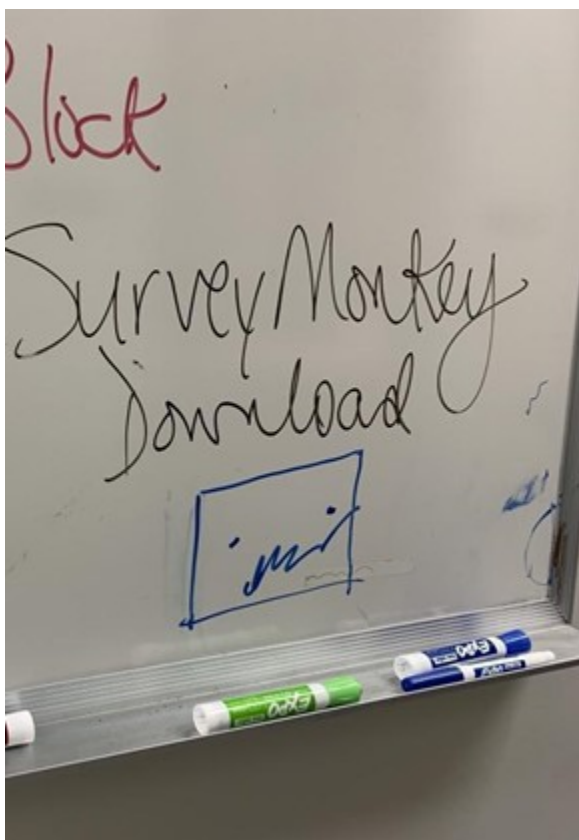
Fig. 9. A whiteboard that has "Survey Monkey Download" handwritten on it. Below the writing, a rectangle with two dots for eyes and a squiggly mouth is drawn below, looking very melancholy.

I found depressing poems constructed on the walls, neglected plants, broken chairs, leftover and ruined works of art, old abandoned toys, and more. If Geller et al. call for writing center scholars to "remain open to everyday moments" in the center (56), I argue we need to make sure we're attending to the dark, heavy, sad, and angry moments as well. They have just as much a place in the center as happy ones. In examining the

dark everyday moments of the center evidenced through our interaction with objects in the center, I believe we can develop a better understanding of our consultants' and writers' states of mind. In addition, examining the objects of our offices and other workspaces within the center can help us to name some of the vulnerabilities we have likely been trying to repress or ignore. For instance, as I walked around taking photos recently, our writing center director asked me to take a photo of the yet-to-be unpacked boxes in her office, evidence, she said, of a lack of time due to a difficult semester (Figure 10).

Fig. 10. A stack of four orange and black plastic bins sits next to a messy bookshelf in our director's office. These boxes are yet to be unpacked after seven months.

Taking time to attend to the hidden and invisible acts of vulnerability in the center can open up space for writing center staff to begin conversing about how and why we might be

hiding our negative feelings in the center, or how our space might reveal what negative emotions or actions are present in our workspace. Such conversations allow us to begin cultivating an understanding of a center that is not always a positive space, but a much more complex community.

Rachel's story

During a recent session with one of my regular writers, I noticed that she was paying particular attention to the **tchotchkes** on the table in front of us while getting ready for the session. This writer is a graduate student and former consultant herself, so this attention perplexed me, since these items seem very natural in this space. Suddenly, she turned to look at me and said with complete seriousness, "What's with the tissues on all the tables? Is this for if we cry?" (Figure 11).

Fig. 11. A felt board sign in Rachel and Elise's writing center office that says "CRYBABIES WELCOME" with a heart between two frowny faces in the middle.

The tissues aren't a new addition to our tables, so I was struck speechless for a moment.

"I mean, do they think we're gonna start crying during sessions or something?" she said, and forced a laugh.

But then I noticed something. Instead of dismissing herself with the same nonchalant tone with which she brought up the conversation, she used the tissues on the tables as a way to

segue into a disclosure of how she is handling the stress of the semester—one of her final ones for her doctorate—describing how she feels like she can't display her emotions in academia as a Black woman, and mentioning some challenges in her personal life. I sat. I listened. Then, she turned to me, and she sincerely asked how I was.

What a can of worms, I thought before I contemplated whether I should be honest with her, or give her the routine "I'm okay" answer that I'd been giving everyone lately.

I paused while she stared at me, waiting, and I decided I was safe.

I decided to be vulnerable.

I started working in writing centers in 2002, and I've held the gamut of positions from peer tutor to administrator. Along with all the joys that writing centers have brought to my academic and personal lives, like meeting lifelong friends in nearly all of the four centers in which I've worked, what I think about more often is how my 17-year writing center tenure has been punctuated by moments of implosion and forced vulnerability. These moments occurred when the façade of my strictly-orchestrated life fell apart in ways that were publicly unavoidable, and in ways that forced me to embrace my vulnerability in the writing center despite my position—a somewhat unwelcome gesture in a fairly emotionally-charged space.

Two implosions have left the greatest marks on my writing center life. In 2013, I was serving as the assistant director of a writing center at a moderately-sized southeastern university. I started work there in 2010 after leaving a lateral position as a way to shake up my life and, I thought optimistically, provide the change needed to save my failing marriage. Little did I know then that simply moving states and jobs doesn't change your life. Alas, in the summer of 2013, I got divorced, and as sometimes happens with divorce, I decided to return to my maiden name. I remember sitting in my office one day, tissues

in hand and tears streaming down my face, as I talked to my program assistant and dear friend. I was trying to figure out how to tell my staff that I was no longer going by the name they all knew. I had a new/old name. For me, it felt like a welcome return, but the majority of my staff didn't know what was going on in my personal life, and I worried about the best way of relaying such intimate information. Of course, throughout this process, I couldn't hide my face; daily, I carried around on my body all I was going through with my puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks, and I'm sure my staff knew something was up.

After days of worry, I decided on an email simply and straightforwardly telling the staff what I was going through and what happened, to potentially head off any gossip that might occur. I chose to allow my colleagues into my life when I could have thrown up the walls around me even higher. Of course, my staff was empathetic, understanding, and welcoming of the new me; however, what I learned throughout this experience is that when we work in writing centers, we're taught every aspect of how to care for our writers when they have meltdowns in our spaces, but we are rarely told **how to care for ourselves when this happens** . The needs of writing center tutors, administrators, and staff are made to feel secondary to the writers' needs and desires, and I wonder if that's how it should be.

Countless guidebooks and writing center training manuals show us what empathy toward a student looks like, but, perhaps ironically, they only relay one dimension of the friendly conversation that is encouraged in writing centers. Martini and Webster, in their introduction to *The Peer Review* special issue "Writing Centers as Brave/r Spaces" make note of the absence of guidance, particularly in guidebooks and manuals, for actually moving through the writing center space when they say:

Although these guidebooks often recognize the power

dynamics at play (i.e., between tutor, writer, and instructor) and may acknowledge that not all writers are the same (i.e., offering advice for working with multilingual writers, adult learners, writers with anxiety, basic skill levels, or disabilities), most of the advice is prescriptive. Little, if any, attention is paid to how practitioners might *act* in response to intersectional identities or to the complexity of power dynamics across difference.

What, then, do we do with our complex emotional needs and those of our staff in writing centers?

The second implosion happened in January of 2018, when my mother passed away. When it happened, thankfully, I was with her and my father. I'm close with our administrators in the current center where I work, and upon her passing, they sent out an email to our entire staff and departmental faculty telling them what happened. Similarly to when I needed to tell my staff about my name change in 2013, my personal life was again the subject of a staff email—this time, though, not of my own choosing, and not coming from me. While the email, and my own subsequent Facebook post of the obituary, meant that my close friends could reach out to me during this time, it also meant that I had to deal with the "sympathy stare" when I returned to school one week after her funeral: colleagues, classmates, and professors who had no idea what to say to me or what to do with my sadness, and just stared at me with unwanted sympathy in their eyes. I found myself meeting the stare dead-on in defiance or getting caught smiling and nodding to the sympathetic friend, a way to reassure them that I was, indeed, **okay** .

As prepared as I thought I was to handle what happened in a space where the source of my grief didn't happen, I was not. Every time someone would lovingly ask me "How are you?" or do a double take at me in the center, or look away when I caught them staring at me, I fought back tears and the urge to run away. Sometimes I didn't win the fight, and I just let the tears come. Many times I simply sat at a **window-facing table**

in the main consulting area of the center and cried openly as I stared out the window. Most people were scared to talk to me and skittish around me; rarely did anyone know what to do with me in this public space; writers handled me with kid gloves when they saw my face. I didn't know what to do with myself, either, but I figured if there was ever a time to cry in the center, this was it. Right on time, though, the deep, shaming voice inside me quietly said that I needed to get it together at work, that this wasn't the place, that I should save my crying, emotions, and vulnerabilities for closed doors, that my emotions and my vulnerabilities were unwelcome in this space.

Particularly in unwelcome spaces—like academia, conferences, or anywhere public—vulnerability can be seen as a weakness rather than a kind of strength illustrated through an emotive action or experience (like tears, laughter, or anger). However, one can choose to see the act of vulnerability in unwelcome spaces as a diffraction of sorts: vulnerability breaks apart traditional (heteropatriarchal, academic, etc.) norms and expectations while stitching together the fragmented, emotional pieces of oneself that have been shattered by an event. The diffraction provides us with a new way of seeing ourselves. It shows us that "there is no moving beyond, no leaving the 'old' behind" because it requires us to be honest and in touch with ourselves in ways that encourage us to remember the 'old' of our desires while living in the new" (Barad 168).

Most days, I don't know if I'm ready to live with the new yet, but I am okay with sitting in the muck of my current state, even when it makes most people around me uncomfortable. This means that some days I need to cry in the center. I need to use the tissues at the table without shame or worry. I need to be visibly vulnerable with the people around me.

As I sat with my returning, graduate student writer that day and looked at the now-very-obvious tissues on the table, I

made a decision. I leaned nearer to her and whispered, "Do you know what's been going on with me this semester?" I never really know the best way to broach this topic now, so I tiptoed.

"No," she said, taking a sip of her coffee, "What's going on?"

"My mom passed away in January."

"WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU EVEN DOING HERE?!" she exclaimed.

I gave her a weak smile and said, "I'm not really sure," as I grabbed a tissue from the box (Figure 12).
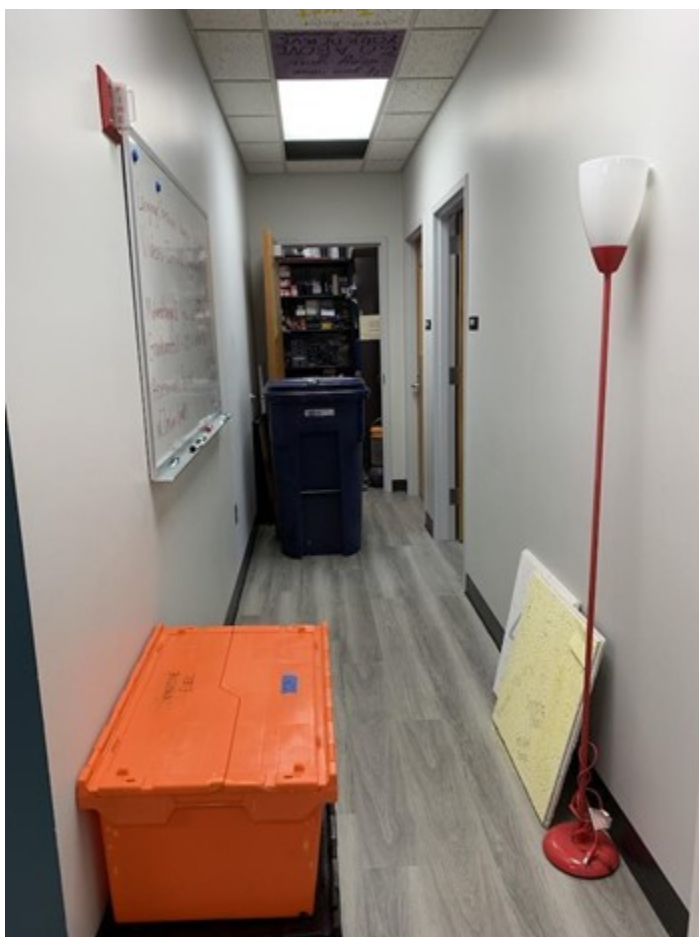
Fig. 12. A large shredding bin, two ceiling tiles, and a broken lamp line an abandoned, messy hallway with an open supply closet in the center.

Conclusion

In our own experiences, our vulnerabilities showed up in unexpected ways while we had to continue doing the everyday

work of the writing center. Sharing these experiences in this chapter is a step toward what we would like to see writing center scholars continue to do: see and mark their centers as spaces where vulnerability is enacted on a daily basis. We conclude, then, with strategies for enacting and discussing vulnerability in other writing centers, based on some of the care-based practices central to Lauren's work.

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked:

- What benefits are there to being vulnerable, and to acknowledging others' vulnerabilities?
- Where are these moments of vulnerability in writing center work?
- When do we share our vulnerabilities, and when do we hide our vulnerabilities?
- What do vulnerable moments mean, and how do we navigate them with both empathy and action?
- What does it mean to be "vulnerable," and does it look the same for everyone?

Below, we share three ideas for how vulnerability can be integrated into writing center work, and how we can better respond to vulnerabilities as listeners, consultants, and co-workers:

Cathartic Worst-Case Scenario Dump

There are multiple ways to enact a cathartic worst-case scenario dump. The first is by teaching your consultants to approach their anxieties about the writing center head-on by naming them, walking through their worst-case scenarios and working backwards through them. During trainings, consultants could work through their worries about sessions by running through worst-case scenarios with each other and considering how they might respond if such events happen.

One worst-case scenario for a consultant might be working with a writer who brings in a paper that is offensive (e.g., one that makes discriminatory comments based on race, gender, sexuality, or ability). During a cathartic worst-case scenario dump, consultants could first name their fear for this session: that the writer brings in an offensive paper and they do not know how to address these offenses. Then, others would validate this worry while also discussing strategies and solutions. This allows the consultant to find a support system within the writing center for handling these kinds of moments—so that if a moment they fear were to arise, the consultant has both strategies and support around them.

Another way to perform the cathartic worst-case scenario dump is during actual writing center sessions. Specifically, consultants can be trained to handle writers' anxieties by having mock sessions where the writer brings in a work with a major writing worry. Then, the consultant can ask the writer about their worst-case scenarios and help work through those with them.

For example, if a writer came in with clear anxieties, the consultant might pause a session to ask about their worst-case scenarios (e.g., "I won't finish this paper in time and will fail the course"). Then, the consultant can help address the writer's vulnerabilities directly by working through them: "Let's help you brainstorm some ideas for this paper and create a timeline

so that you can get something written and turn it in on time." This allows the consultant to use the writer's vulnerabilities to create a conversation, rather than stall it. By acknowledging their vulnerabilities, consultants show empathy but also make a plan of action that writers can put into place.

In both cases, the cathartic worst-case scenario dump is meant to allow consultants or writers to share their vulnerabilities and worries while also giving them support to work through these worries in community with others.

Crying as Praxis

Consultants are often taught how to handle writers' emotions during sessions. Some writing center guidebooks teach us that one of the many hats we wear is that of counselor. We are told that during sessions where writers have extreme emotional reactions we should "offer support, sympathy, and suggestions" and make sure we're offering students access to the appropriate campus resources (Ryan and Zimmerelli 7-8). What is often left out of these scenarios is what happens when the *consultant* is the one having extreme emotional reactions. In these cases, we suggest that consultants be trained to handle themselves and their emotions with the same care and sympathy in which they would treat a writer, and to name those things when they happen during sessions or in the public spaces of the center. In other words, if a consultant feels like they might need to cry, don't encourage them to rush out of the center to a private space; allow them to sit in the open and cry.

We understand that everyone handles their emotions differently. As writing center practitioners, we're trained to understand this concept in sessions with writers (Ryan and Zimmerelli; Gillespie and Lerner). What we're suggesting here is that consultants could also be trained to feel comfortable

enough to step out of sessions, ask for space or time off, or openly share their stories with people they feel safe with when they have emotional reactions in the writing center space.

Training consultants to be sympathetic and caring of themselves is not easy. There are no simple steps or heuristic, and for some, approaching sessions without the comfort of an invisible mask will feel impossible, or even unsafe. However, when administrators and other senior writing center staff model emotional vulnerability during sessions and in their everyday work, the ethos of the center will shift to one where reciprocal emotional sympathy is accepted and the center will start to feel like a space that is *safe enough* for others to test the crying waters when they need to.

Training consultants to be sympathetic and caring of themselves is not easy. There are no simple steps or heuristic, and for some, approaching sessions without the comfort of an invisible mask will feel impossible, or even unsafe.

Let us offer a point of clarity here: modeling emotional vulnerability does not always have to mean crying in public. For some, this can be an unsafe public act. Instead, we're advocating for consultants to feel comfortable expressing their emotions (in healthy ways) in the center. This could be through tears, but it could also be in heartfelt conversations, expressions of frustration, or giggle fits.

Capturing Evidence of Everyday Vulnerability

Activity

- In a writing center training class or during a writing center staff meeting, ask consultants to take a few minutes to walk around the space of the writing center, taking pictures of objects that leave evidence of consultant or writer vulnerability (perhaps using the photos in this chapter as an example).
- After writers have taken their photographic evidence, have them share their findings with each other in groups (Figure 13), making note of what they think the photographs say about the feelings of the people who made them, and why they might be feeling this way.
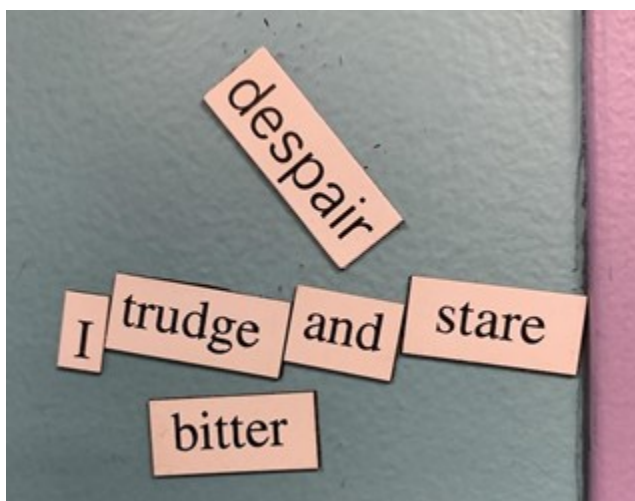
Fig. 13. A magnetic poem against a blue and purple background that says "Despair / I trudge and stare / Bitter."

Key Takeaway

This activity can act as a way into a larger discussion on how consultants are feeling, how their feelings exist in relation to the evidence of vulnerabilities in the room, what the tenor of the writing center as a whole might be, and why they think these vulnerabilities show up in these ways (Figure 14).

RESPONDING TO VULNERABILITY
In the Writing Center

WORST CASE SCENARIOS

Address consultant anxiety by practicing worst case scenarios.

Train consultants to do the same practice with anxious clients.

CRYING AS PRAXIS

model vulnerability

create space for public feelings

CAPTURE EVIDENCE OF VULNERABILITY

Fig. 14. An infographic explaining our three ideas for how vulnerability can be integrated into writing center work.

* * *

We can't guarantee that your center will become more vulnerable if you enact the strategies we have shared, but we do hope that these practices might allow you the space to see where vulnerabilities can show up among consultants in your writing center. By creating deliberate opportunities for vulnerability in these ways, and in other ways, we believe that the writing center can become a more empathetic and responsive space. In addition, we believe that our deliberate act of sharing our own vulnerabilities as consultants and administrators can help start a conversation about the emotions of our consultants, instead of merely discussing the emotional needs of the writers who utilize our center. We—writing center administrators, consultants, and writers—come to the center with emotions and vulnerabilities; being invited to share these experiences can create more community.

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Appendix A

In-Text Hyperlinked Notes

Vulnerability: We acknowledge here that public vulnerability comes more easily to us than to some of our colleagues and friends of color. There are many types of vulnerabilities; some vulnerabilities we all experience through individual life moments, but different embodied identities may also present vulnerabilities due to discrimination, harassment, prejudice, and other forms of violence. Two of us (Elise and Lauren) are members of the LGBTQ+ community, and Lauren is disabled; these identities do affect when, and if, we can be vulnerable in certain situations, just as our privileged identities that we have as white people make us less vulnerable.

 Professionals: From Lauren: It's also worth noting here that the standards of professionalism are rooted in sexist, racist, neurotypical, and ableist notions of emotional distance, and that instances where we show vulnerability (often coded as a feminine act) are seen as not fitting for the workplace.

 Social Justice-oriented practices in a writing center: We draw from the work of writing center scholars like Harry Denny et al. and Karen Rowan and Laura Greenfield, who claim in their own ways that writing centers can be third spaces where issues of race, gender, sexuality, language, class, and ability are meaningfully enmeshed in writing center conversations. We believe that writing centers, because of this liminal, third-space existence, are also spaces for those conversations to turn toward a social justice orientation.

 We are not calling for everyone to always be vulnerable: It is the onus of the non-marginalized populations to create a safe enough space for these consultants to feel willing and able to discuss their vulnerabilities openly.

Care-based practices: For more discussion on care-based practices within university contexts, see the Two-Year College Association-Pacific Northwest's 2019 newsletter, which outlines and discusses applications of trauma-informed values within institutional settings.

Died: From Rachel: Fortunately or not, for many of us, like Lauren and me, the writing center is often the space we're in when alerted to bad or troubling news. The space then becomes filled with the (sometimes hidden) emotions of people experiencing this news.

I don't actually get that job: From Elise: What I love about this is that you did get a job that values your vulnerability and trauma work. You get to be yourself there, be vulnerable in an academic space, and the students and faculty are better there for it.

Healing space: From Lauren: Here I use healing in a broad sense, recognizing the complexity and weight of the term. Many people prefer not to use "healing," because it suggests that the vulnerability is a wound or a weakness to be covered up and disappeared, rather than something natural we use to learn and grow. I appreciate the idea of healing (-ing, not -ed) as a process rather than a state of being, however, and use the term to describe the interactions that we have with vulnerabilities and the process we go through to accept, work through, and live with these emotions.

Another abuser: From Elise: I certainly feel this, especially in this piece I wrote about sexual harassment and bisexuality a few years ago.

Larry Nassar: Larry Nassar is an American convicted serial rapist and sex offender, former USA Gymnastics national team doctor, former osteopathic physician, and former professor at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine.

For more information, visit https://www.michiganradio.org/post/timeline-long-history-abuse-dr-larry-nassar

I have seen some shit: From Rachel: Haven't all of us

graduate students seen some shit (some more than others, perhaps)?

Cried: From Lauren: The three of us also write about the specific act of crying in a forthcoming book chapter called "Crybabies in the Writing Center: Storying Affect and Emotion." In it, we discuss crying as the same kind of vulnerable act we are calling for here, but also consider how crying comes with specific and complex power dynamics (who is crying and to whom?). But ultimately, crying, like many other forms of emotional vulnerability, presents opportunities to discuss social justice literacy, to form relationships and communities, and to reflect deeply on the emotions within our writing processes.

Michigan State's Office of Institutional Equity: "MSU is committed to creating and maintaining an inclusive community in which students, faculty, and staff can work together in an atmosphere free from all forms of discrimination and harassment. File a Report Now."

For more information, visit this link: https://oie.msu.edu/

Queer Comfort: From Rachel: I think you're right in that many times people disregard negative feelings in times of misery, grief, and discomfort to instead seek out "positive vibes" in an attempt to feel better, but I'm really glad you pushed against this and sat in your discomfort and sadness for a little while. I think it ultimately helped you deal with your trauma on a deep level.

Tchotchkes: Yiddish term for a small group of items that are decorative and/or otherwise disposable.

How to care for ourselves when this happens: From Lauren: This reminds me of the idea of vicarious traumatization, or the act of being traumatized by prolonged exposure to other people who are traumatized. This often occurs with therapists or emergency service workers, who are taught that their first priority is to the person they are responsible for rather than to themselves. Similarly, in our "professional" settings, we're

taught to think of ourselves as workers, consultants whose job it is to help the client, our writers. But what happens when we put ourselves aside in favor of caring for the other person?

Okay: From Elise: I remember this time very distinctly because I saw those smiles and stares as invitations to talk with you about your mom and your grief. While many people were avoiding you or giving you a "sympathy stare," this is when our relationship began to evolve into a very close friendship.

Window-facing table: From Rachel: I now affectionately call this my "grief table" in the center.

5. Cultivating an Emotionally Intelligent Writing Center Culture Online by Miranda Mattingly, Claire Helakoski, Christina Lundberg, & Kacy Walz

Introduction
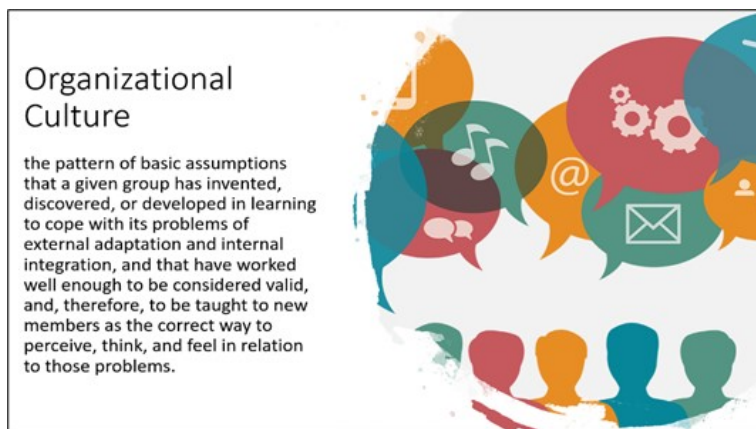
Fig. 1. Visual rendering of Schein's definition of organizational culture.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is commonly understood as an indicator of one's ability to identify and respond to emotional behaviors within oneself and others. This emphasis on individual competency can obscure the significant ways group members' EI shapes and defines organizational culture. Organizational culture resists overt articulation, asserts Edgar Schein in *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, but manifests concrete expression through individuals' shared behavioral and attitudinal reactions (Figure 1). Organizational culture finds expression through the values and underlying assumptions groups of individuals draw upon when they encounter similar situations and problems within an environment. For example, when tutors feel comfortable expressing uncertainty about emotional or stressful appointments and are compassionately recognized for their student-centeredness and desire to enhance their instructional approach, it reveals a piece of that center's

organizational culture. Likewise, if staff are encouraged to stay informed on current writing center scholarship but lack time, energy, or confidence to apply these principles to their work, it reveals important information about whether tutors are flourishing within that center's culture. These emotional responses and the underlying values and assumptions that inform them are central to an organization's culture. When expressed and reified across individuals' common experiences, they reflect an accepted understanding of how that organization culturally reacts to the stress and success of daily interaction. Staff members' emotional responses to their work, environment, and team dynamic reveal how a center's culture is collectively understood. As such, cultivating EI also cultivates a healthy organizational culture.

In this chapter, we examine EI's role in creating a healthy writing center culture, where staff feel confident responding to what [Arlie Hochschild](#) would call the emotional labor of writing center work. Specifically, we focus on how a year-long EI training series enabled our team to identify the emotional challenges of writing center work and how we could healthfully manage this labor through a culture of connectedness, empathy, and trust. By taking this approach, we combine the practice of understanding individual emotional intelligence with organizational culture theory's concentration on collective behavioral response to draw attention to a new way of understanding EI's importance and application to writing center work—one that is rooted in its impact on organizational culture.

We start our chapter with an examination of how organizational culture has been defined in writing center scholarship and theory before turning to highlight the often-overlooked role EI plays in organizational culture. We reflect on the organizational challenges our center faced when it doubled in size and became fully remote, the context in which our training emerged. We demonstrate how EI was essential

to our staff's ability to process larger organizational changes that impacted our team's connection and communication. We then move to outline our training's overall design and progression—a twelve-part series scaffolded to increase tutors' awareness of the individual, interpersonal, and organizational applications of emotional intelligence—as well as its concentration on key EI attributes needed to engage with emotional labor's different layers, such as self-perception, interpersonal communication, adaptability, decision-making, and stress management. We close with an evaluation of our training's impact on our staff's understanding and use of EI while keeping an eye to what these responses reveal about our center's organizational culture. We highlight important developments in our team's connectedness, including increased empathy, trust, and intention to assume the best in others, and tie this growth to both the shared training experience and our larger organizational efforts to make EI a foundational feature of our writing center culture. In conclusion, we advocate for a continued commitment to understanding writing center work and labor through the lens of EI and organizational culture.

Throughout this chapter, we aim to contribute to the growing research on wellness and self-care in writing center work through special attention to EI's application in online settings. Genie Giaimo, for example, acknowledges awareness of self-care practices in writing center communities is growing but notes that existing studies, like those dedicated to mindfulness and mental health (Mack and Hupp; Degner et al.), are few and far between. We seek to address this gap by calling attention to EI training in online environments where clear communication and effectively reading others' affects are especially challenging and can produce additional emotional labor for students, staff, and administrators alike. Beth Hewett and Rebecca Martini highlight similar concerns about writing program administrators and tutors feeling less prepared for

online than face-to-face work. [The Conference on College Composition and Communication](#) has stressed the need to **train and develop** the professional writing community for effective online writing support (Figure 2).

Fig. 2. Title Image for CCCC's A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI).

In the wake of COVID-19, this need to understand the emotional labor of online writing center work has become more expansive and immediate, as institutions continue to grapple with how to support their students and staff within remote environments. Central to this call for training is the question of how writing centers cultivate online environments where tutors feel connected and thrive emotionally. Our EI training series is valuable for online educators, online writing centers, and in-person writing centers as it promotes the development of skills central to writing center work—emotional understanding, empathetic communication, and interpersonal relationship-building—while also exploring responses to the emotional labor of this work. We demonstrate how any writing center or educational forum can use EI tools to cultivate a healthy organizational culture online.

Writing Centers, Organizational Culture, and Emotional Intelligence

Writing center scholars have assessed organizational culture through various means but with little focus on how culture comes to be expressed and felt through emotional intelligence. In the writing center community, like many organizations, culture is often passed down through lore, storytelling, and anecdotal accounts that reveal the local context of individual writing centers (Briggs and Woolbright; Nicolas; Harris). Culture also emerges through resistance to narratives, like those that perpetuated norms around standard English, organizational status within an institution, tutors' pedigree and pedagogy, and student demographics (Harris), giving rise to an understanding of writing center culture as existing within the noisy margins of negotiation and innovation (Boquet; Carino; Fischer and Harris; Heckelman; Pemberton). Institutional context, including physical location and departmental ties, along with center-specific resources, ranging from external-facing mission and vision statements to internal training procedures and reporting tools, have been key intersection points for local expressions of writing center culture (Boquet; Carroll; Griffin et al.; Grimm; Hall; Malenczyk; Nicklay), whereas professional publications, conference proceedings, and listserv conversations call attention to unofficial trends within the professional community (Griffin et al., Grimm; Lunsford and Ede). Additionally, collaborative research supports emergent views of the writing center community through empirical data that unites the local and national cultural context of centers (Babcock and Thonus; Griffin et al.; Valles et al.). Despite this

Despite this thriving conversation of writing center culture, significant attention has not been paid to how writing centers define their culture and, specifically, how a center's emotional health or its employees' individual emotional intelligence impacts the community's culture.

thriving conversation of writing center culture, significant attention has not been paid to how writing centers define their culture and, specifically, how a center's emotional health or its employees' individual emotional intelligence impacts the community's culture.

The gap, in part, is due to a struggle to define organizational culture and the means through which to understand it. Organizational culture, according to Schein's definition, lies in the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs that arise from responses to shared experience of leadership, team members, and new employees. It, however, has been similarly identified as conveyed through organizational rhetoric, including the way organizations use external-facing mission statements and marketing or recruitment information as well as internal-facing training materials and daily institutional communications to influence community members' feelings and behaviors ([Hoffman and Ford](#); [Ihlen and Heath](#)). Organizational rhetoric is a critical piece of organizational culture, but we argue that exclusive reliance on its messaging limits understanding of the work environment it creates and individuals' ability to navigate the emotional labor associated with exchanges within this space. We likewise acknowledge that organizational storytelling offers an alternative to organizational rhetoric, as community members pass down institutional wisdom and cultural norms specific to an organization through personal

anecdotes and accounts (Gabriel). However, we have found that storytelling also must be scrutinized regularly to ensure the underlying values and beliefs speak to the conditions and environment in which individuals emotionally labor (Table 1).

Table 1

A Comparison of the Varied Modes and Effects of Organizational Rhetoric, Storytelling, and Culture

Concept	Mode	Purpose/Effect
Organizational Rhetoric	external (e.g., mission and value statements, marketing and recruiting materials) and internal (e.g., training materials, organizational announcements) communication	influences member behaviors (Hoffman and Ford; Ihlen and Heath); inspires confidence, trust, or integrity in an organization (Eubanks; Brown et al.; Fisher)
Organizational Storytelling	personal stories and anecdotes; informal conversation; mentoring	generates consensus and identity formation, encourages problem-solving (Eubanks; Brown et al.); exposes gaps (Condon)
Organizational Culture	underlying assumptions; espoused beliefs and values; artifacts (e.g., organizational communications, structures, and processes)	leads to shared community experience, understanding, problem solving, and unified vision (Schein)

Schein's definition of organizational culture draws attention to how organizational culture is interlaced with community members' emotional experiences. Though Schein describes culture as "an abstraction," he reports that "its behavioral and attitudinal consequences are very concrete" (8). Organizational culture must be examined iteratively, as culture lies in the underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs that arise from responses to shared experiences of leadership, team members, and new employees. Though Schein's theory of organizational

culture relies on individuals' emotional responses, he emphasizes that these behaviors are equally reflective of groups in which employees participate, particularly as they become reiterative responses to routine interactions. Cultivating or changing an organization's culture thus starts with understanding ourselves as individuals and as a community. Individuals' varied emotional responses across team or project work versus one-to-one client interactions can highlight different layers of cultural expressions, just as involvement in a professional organization can cultivate a shared emotional understanding of an individual's daily work. By taking the time to examine how staff regularly use emotions in response to daily tasks, team interactions, and professional activities throughout writing center work, writing center professionals can gain a more robust understanding of writing center culture and how it stems, in part, from emotional health and wellness. We, in response, demonstrate how discussing these principles of emotional intelligence and organizational health can build upon a center's culture and connectedness.

Self-Awareness	• Ability to identify and understand one's emotions, moods, and drives, and their impact on others
Self-Regulation	• Ability to control and redirect disruptive moods and impulses • Propensity to withhold judgement and think before acting
Motivation	• Passion for work beyond money or status • Propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence
Empathy	• Ability to understand the emotional makeup of others • Skill in treating people according to their emotional reaction
Social Skills	• Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks • Ability to find common ground and build rapport

Fig. 3. Image of Goleman's Five Components of Emotional Intelligence.

In that regard, emotional intelligence plays a vital role in our ability to understand a center's cultural makeup and how administrators and tutors can positively impact the health of its culture as it evolves. Emotional intelligence helps members of an organization navigate changes to their environment and community in an emotionally healthy manner (Figure 3). Currently, individual tutoring sessions are the primary site where EI discussions come into play. Tutors must be adept at evaluating and responding to students' emotional needs and the impact of those needs on writing, while adjusting their own emotional responses to guide and instruct with wellness in mind. Rebecca Jackson et al. similarly recognize the emotional labor administrators endure through the training, development, and mentoring of individual staff. Yet, thinking about EI through the lens of organizational culture enables us to see how emotional health and wellbeing factors into staff's ability to respond to fluctuations in a center's development. EI plays an essential role in helping members of a center negotiate variations in staff, tutoring offerings, and daily operations as well as more widespread changes stemming from budget cuts or turnover in institutional leadership. It has been a foundational tool in the response to COVID-19 for educators and administrators looking to understand and mitigate the added emotional labor associated with working remotely. Writing center work does not stop when these cultural and organizational shifts occur; it requires staff and administrators alike to employ EI as a means of responding to them. Investing in EI training will not eliminate the emotional labor associated with these fluctuations within a center, particularly as centers adjust to tutoring in the time of pandemics and administrators face increasing pressure to streamline services on reduced budgets. However, it can better prepare staff to communicate their emotional needs and employ greater self-care when such events do arise.

Resources on EI's importance and impact during COVID-19 pandemic

- Yale News: Using emotional intelligence to combat COVID-19 anxiety
- Berkeley Greater Good Science Center: How to support teachers' emotional needs right now
- Johns Hopkins School of Public Health: How to lead in emotional intelligence in the time of COVID-19

Specific to our purpose, we draw attention to the way EI better equips staff to handle the emotional labor unique to online writing center work. We see this use of EI as both a gap in the existing research and a significant need within the writing center community (Jackson et al.; Noreen Lape) as centers increasingly turn to online tutoring to extend and enhance their services. Online tutoring, especially asynchronous tutoring, often heightens the challenge of assessing and responding to students' emotional needs, as expressions of stress, frustration, excitement, or indifference are harder to detect. Staff must adapt to a tutoring environment where students' affect and its impact on their writing may be

Advancing a team's emotional intelligence enables a more intentional and concrete articulation of organizational culture to emerge, thereby creating the space to discuss culture's impact on individual health and a center's wellness.

unknown or less apparent. Tutors likewise may struggle with the daily routine of an online workspace where their own emotional needs may be hidden from immediate view. We have found both in our regular practice and through our training series that the emotional labor of online writing center work extends well beyond individual tutoring sessions. It is also interwoven throughout online project work, team meetings, daily email communications, and ongoing professional development and training opportunities—each of which, in a remote environment, is mediated through technology. Though beyond the scope of our initial training series, we acknowledge how online environments pose additional challenges for members of multicultural, queer, and gendered communities, as they already advocate daily for equal recognition of their identity and unbiased understanding of their emotional needs. While emotional intelligence cannot eliminate emotional labor's challenges, it is a means by which individuals and team members can attune themselves to recognizing and expressing emotional wellness within safe, inclusive environments.

A healthy writing center is an organization comprised of emotionally intelligent individuals and communicators, but this process ultimately starts with the culture that staff generate and reproduce through their understandings of and reactions to shared experiences. Advancing a team's emotional intelligence enables a more intentional and concrete articulation of organizational culture to emerge,

thereby creating the space to discuss culture's impact on individual health and a center's wellness. We, for this reason, designed the following training series as an exploration of how emotional intelligence underwrites our ability to support a healthy staff and generate a healthy organizational culture.

Context for the Training

Our emotional intelligence training emerged, in large part, out of a need to revisit the connectedness of our team after numerous shifts in our organizational structure and culture. The impact of these changes remained unprocessed in terms of our staff's emotional wellbeing. The Walden Writing Center experienced significant growth in 2015. Our director's proposal to grow the center and provide salaried positions to create more opportunities for students to access our services was granted, resulting in a doubling of the staff. The writing center is now a robust operation comprised of a director, four associate directors, eight managers, seventeen writing instructors, and seventeen editors. The large staff maintains two primary services: the paper review service and the form and style service and a multitude of additional services, such as webinars, course visits, residencies, doctoral writing assessments, and chat, email, and social media offerings. It was challenging to maintain connection for a large staff with varied roles. Two years after this growth period, our center shifted from a partially to a fully remote team, which further altered our team's dynamic and communication.

These changes significantly influenced our center's organizational culture, but it took time to discern the emotional impact on staff's wellbeing. While our center always worked asynchronously, some employees had to adapt quickly to working as a fully remote team while others never had the opportunity to experience the team's face-to-face dynamics. All

staff now had to overcome the constraints technology places on communication and find new means of connecting with one another, similar to what many experienced in response to COVID-19. This challenge to connection and the lack of sensory input needed to interpret social learning and emotion impacted our organizational culture. More importantly, it called for thoughtful inquiry into what our culture became through this growth and transition to a fully remote experience.

To understand this impact, we had to revisit where emotional labor existed in our work. Walden writing instructors review twenty papers a week and must complete appointments within two days. Our live chat offers instantaneous support, our email service promises a twenty-four-hour response time, and our course visits feature daily responses to student questions. Throughout, staff are expected to be present and attentive to students' needs, execute quality work that promotes learning, and be knowledgeable of supporting resources—all of which set high standards for responses that require high emotional intelligence. Furthermore, because our support is primarily written communication, there is always a historical record. Public accountability, while motivating, can also create anxiety around the mode of communication. Each of these factors—deadlines, high expectations, and public accountability—involves emotional labor and can create employee fatigue, stress, and feelings of disconnection. While much of this emotional labor was present throughout our work prior to any organizational change, staff had experienced these challenges differently, having been a previously smaller, hybrid team and, therefore, had varied methods for coping. For example, prior to the 2015 expansion, most staff worked in an in-person office setting and, similar to a small start-up team, created several of the services our center now maintains. Staff could easily turn to those around them for support, encouragement, and approval. When the writing center doubled in size, many original staff were promoted, and more

remote employees were added. Promoted staff adjusted to newly developed positions within a growing organizational structure, and the team as a whole adapted to communicating and collaborating as a group in various locations. The center was no longer in a start-up period and rather was established and in need of being maintained. Staff experiencing different stages of institutional culture and the center being in a new stage of development strained our team's shared experience and common understanding.

The expansion of staff and the fully remote transition, in turn, were not merely organizational changes; they marked shifts in our organizational culture. We had to rediscover what connectedness looked like as a larger, fully remote team and found it required additional forms of emotional labor. With miles of physical distance between our staff and technology obscuring individuals' affect, emotional health easily became overlooked. Connection and authentic communication across a large team and in a remote environment requires vulnerability, intentionality, and risk-taking (Wang et al.), with risk-taking being as simple as speaking up during a recorded meeting or as daring as being forthright in communicating emotional needs. EI became a way to process and understand our center's organizational changes, but it also built upon common skills needed in writing center work, including emotional understanding, empathetic communication, and interpersonal relationship-building. It became a way to recognize the gaps in our team's connection and provide staff with the tools needed to navigate emotional wellness across a large team within a remote environment. Our writing instructor team thus launched an EI training series in 2018, as part of broader healthy organization initiative, and with the goal of fostering an emotionally healthy work environment.

Emotional Intelligence Training

Our objective was to enhance staff's EI skills, expand staff connectivity, and cultivate a healthy writing center culture. We focused on common interpersonal as well as student-facing situations, incorporated reflection, and reapplied concepts over time (see activities in the Appendix A).

Our EI series was a required training for our writing instructor team, which at the start of the training consisted of nineteen writing instructors. The training occurred once a month for the entirety of 2018. Each session was facilitated through Skype and was an hour-long training consisting of lecture, activity, and discussion.

We explored EI themes based on interests beneficial to our team while also incorporating topics from formalized EI trainings, including:

- interpersonal and self-perception,
- interpersonal relationships and empathy,
- adaptability and decision-making,

- general mood and self-expression,
- stress management,
- and emotional understanding and management regarding goal setting (Gilar-Corbi et al.).

Below, we break down each session chronologically. There is also thematic overlap between sessions as our goal was to scaffold trainings where we could expand our understanding of EI across our team and our organization as a way of cultivating a healthy writing center culture.

Training 1: We began our training with an explanation of EI and its benefits to individuals within shared community work environments. We first gauged staff's understanding and use of EI through a survey before providing an introduction to EI. We then discussed staff's results on the Meyers Briggs personality tests in order to begin understanding ourselves better.

Training 2: We next reviewed common email scenarios to understand our emotional responses and illustrate EI "[use] in everyday situations" (Hodzic et al. 145). We shared fabricated emails of various tones, syntax, and subject matter with our team, and then discussed individual interpretations of and reactions to each email (Figure 4, Appendix A). This exercise led to a discussion about communication preferences and strengthened awareness of how people might interpret content differently. This training was especially pertinent, as email is vital to our daily communication.
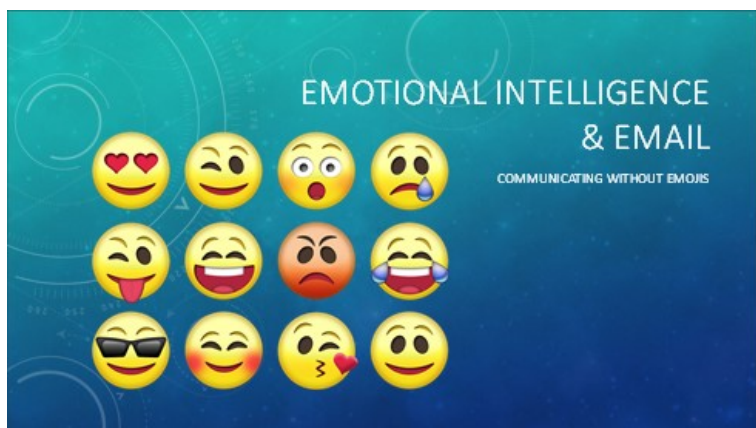
Fig. 4. Figure showing title slide of EI Training 2 PowerPoint.
Emotional Intelligence and Email Presentation Supplement.

Training 3 and Training 4: We continued to scaffold our ideas as trainings progressed from examining EI's application to the self and to others. In the first of two trainings, we focused on defining emotional regulation and applying it to ourselves. The following month, we expanded our conversation to discuss differences between intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional regulation and ways to engage perspective-taking (Hofmann et al.).

Training 5: Having considered emotional regulation in connection to ourselves and others, we felt it important to address our goal of feeling connected as a large, remote team. We brainstormed ways our remote team could use EI techniques to create sincere connections, particularly for those seeking deeper, more frequent interactions at work. We examined our use of Yammer and Skype to continue building and practicing EI through additional synchronous and asynchronous interactions with our colleagues.

Training 6: Our sixth training focused on unconscious bias and its impact on our daily work with students and each

another. The discussion expanded on EI's tenets of understanding the self and the importance of perspective-taking. Additionally, the topic of unconscious bias aligned with our center's diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, as we discussed results from the [Harvard bias test](#) via Project Implicit (Figure 5) that participants completed prior to the session.

Fig. 5. Project Implicit logo.

Training 7: In our seventh training, we discussed the emotional labor of our daily work (Hochschild), including the toll of working remotely. We focused on common scenarios we find challenging (e.g., students who come to us upset or insist on immediate answers to complex questions) and ways to mitigate the effects of emotional labor. This training enabled us to revisit our experience as a remote team and identify the shared values we espouse in response to the emotional labor of writing center work.

Training 8: In our eighth training, we practiced reflective writing as a way of learning about ourselves, our center, and our roles as writing center professionals (Table 2, Appendix B).

Table 2
Responses to Reflective Writing Prompt and its EI-related Themes

What aspects of emotional intelligence does it take to be a successful writing center professional in an online, asynchronous environment?	
Reflection	Theme(s)
I think that we need to be exceptionally empathetic, always considering what others are going through and how information or feedback or messaging or emails may be received. In addition, we need to be able to read through the lines and be aware of our situations and contexts...Since most communication is done asynchronously, it can take time to go back and forth, so patience helps.	empathy, self-awareness, patience, intuition
I think intuition and empathy are crucial for asynchronous work: you need to have a strong sense of what students' needs are based only on their papers and what they say (and don't say) in their appointment forms, and you have to rely on this mental model of the student to give them meaningful feedback.	intuition, empathy
Patience and trust—patience in knowing that students' may not always catch on to writing feedback where they can revise from feedback and apply that to future papers. This relates to trust in terms of trusting that students are working to the best of their ability to apply feedback from one review and transfer that feedback to future reviews.	patience, trust
Having successful EI online requires thoughtful review of language and messaging sent to students and each other, it also involves reflection on mood, awareness of different triggers or conditioned responses, and above all strong communication and vulnerability with our colleagues in order to build trust and create a supportive, understanding environment as well as building our own skills. It also requires being aware of what recharges us and what makes us feel connected to our work and what brings us joy and finding ways to work those in to our schedule even outside work.	strong communication; reflection, self-awareness, vulnerability, trust, self-motivation, connectedness
It takes a lot of self-driven intention, intention to reach out to colleagues to get to know them and not feel alone. It takes intention to see people and get out and talk to people.	self-motivation, connectedness

Training 9: For this session, we explored having open conversations around mental and emotional health at work and the benefits to our remote team culture. We discussed ways to share our mental states with others and the added support, connection, and wellness this type of candid communication could create for our team.

Training 10: Our tenth training centered around a chapter of Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen's book *Thanks for the Feedback*. We discussed the text's concepts of baseline response and emotional swing in order to establish how to create stronger emotional balance in response to stimuli (Appendix C). This session involved optional in-depth sharing of personal struggles, experiences, and challenges, which

further enhanced a shared understanding of our remote work experience and our connection as a team.

Training 11: Toward the end of our series, we focused trainings on ways EI impacts our center's vision, goals, and culture. We created personal vision statements to apply what we learned about ourselves through the EI training into specific, achievable actions aligned with our center's goals and desired team culture.

Training 12: For our final session, we reviewed our year-long training series and completed an EI survey like the one administered at the year's beginning to gauge progress and change. We wrapped up our training by reflecting on practices we could employ moving forward to continue building EI as individuals and as a team.

Assessment

We wanted to provide staff with meaningful EI training that enhanced our shared understanding of remote writing center work, expanded our team's connectivity, and fostered a healthy organizational culture. To assess our training's impact, we issued two surveys at the year's beginning and end and offered additional feedback opportunities after individual sessions. By gathering feedback throughout the year, we hoped to understand what our colleagues found helpful, measure our training's impact on individual levels, and provide an outlet for critical considerations in pursuing future training initiatives. We also used feedback to develop and adapt sessions to meet our team's unique needs.

We issued the first survey in our initial training session. Thirteen out of nineteen staff members who attended the training completed the survey. The survey included a mix of scaled and free-form answer questions. We inquired about instructors' understanding and use of EI at work, its

importance and frequency within online environments, and EI strategies they currently applied in their work. After the training's completion, we re-issued the same survey to understand if and how instructors' EI changed over the year and again received thirteen submissions. In the second iteration, we included additional reflective questions asking respondents if the trainings raised their EI level, impacted their EI understanding, and eased use of EI online as well as what aspects of EI were still challenging.

There are several limitations to our training series' results. One consideration is our survey's sample size, which included nineteen writing instructors at the year's beginning but only eighteen at its end. While thirteen participants responded to each survey, we cannot guarantee the same thirteen staff responded to each survey. Regardless, this response rate provided a representative sample of instructors knowledgeable of the training and its impact. We also recognize that email and Skype presentations are important aspects of our daily communication. Our staff value regular discussion of communication within these platforms and this could predispose individuals to evaluate the training favorably. Lastly, our training's engagement was bolstered by required attendance and our administrative leadership's investment in additional health initiatives beyond our training series throughout the year. We recognize these results may not be reflective of other writing centers and complicate our ability to apply conclusions widely. We do, however, believe our results provide a baseline for further research and demonstrate success potential for other organizations looking to implement similar training sessions.

Below, we provide an overview of staff's feedback and its implications on the value of the training series. In the first survey, staff generally defined emotional intelligence as an awareness of one's own and others' emotions, and the ability to change behavior and reactions in response to that awareness.

When asked to reflect on how they employ EI in their workday and what strategies they use, staff responses can be summarized in these ways:

- empathy in student interactions,
- emotional labor required to understand students and other staff clearly,
- emotional regulation practices,
- reflection before responding to students or co-workers,
- and work to employ vulnerability in interactions.

These responses demonstrate that staff had a sense of what EI entails, which is likely due to the nature of writing center work as a helping profession.

Maintaining and measuring EI effectively, however, are difficult tasks. Therefore, it is unsurprising that responses varied widely in management of EI online. While the majority of participants noted that their EI was higher or much higher than the previous year (Figure 6), there are instances where a respondent considered their EI lower, which could stem from the difficulty of mastering EI as a lasting trait. Negative responses may indicate staff resistance to the trainings, or a disagreement regarding EI's place in writing center work. However, for the majority of the responses, EI training seemed to create a greater awareness of EI's depth and complexity, as well as its application to daily writing center work.
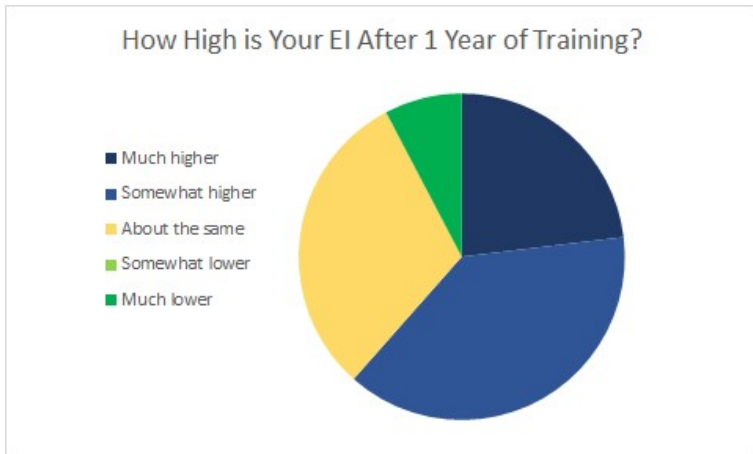
Fig. 6. Figure showing survey results for staff's self-reported EI growth at training's end.

Reflecting on our trainings' impact, staff commented on emotional awareness of self and others but also reported using that awareness to enhance our team's connectivity, empathetic communication, and interpersonal relations. Staff reflections, which we elicited periodically over the course of our training, included expressions of "connecting on a personal level" to colleagues and a strong sense of teambuilding. Though staff explained that it was difficult to connect with others in an online environment in general, they noted that the training helped them feel able to be vulnerable as well as more comfortable offering "positive feedback and encouragement but also coaching feedback" because all staff had been engaged in EI training throughout the year. Finally, respondents disclosed feelings of self-discovery and connectedness to their work:

I have grown so much in my awareness of myself and my interactions with my colleagues and team online. I have realized that I need to put the work in to make my

appreciation and reactions apparent to others while also realizing when I need to take a break or step back and reflect before responding. I feel fuller, more connected to my colleagues.

Respondents acknowledged their emotional and nonverbal reactions had a significant impact on their ability to understand, communicate, and connect with others in a positive manner, demonstrating growth in self-awareness, emotion management, and interpersonal communication. These responses, however, also showed the value of EI training as a team building activity. Staff consistently noted how the training helped them understand their shared work environment and foster connectedness as individuals and as a team.

In addition to staff's self-reported survey results, we asked our administrators to provide their impressions of our training's impact. One administrator expressed the belief that the trainings positively impacted staff in our online workspace and mitigated some potential negative impacts of online work. Another administrator found that staff showed improvement in "responding to challenges and interpersonal conflicts," "regulating their emotional responses," "clarifying assumptions," and "assuming the best" of others' intentions (Figure 7). These responses support facets of a strong team culture and healthy organization in addition to demonstrating EI qualities important to writing center work.
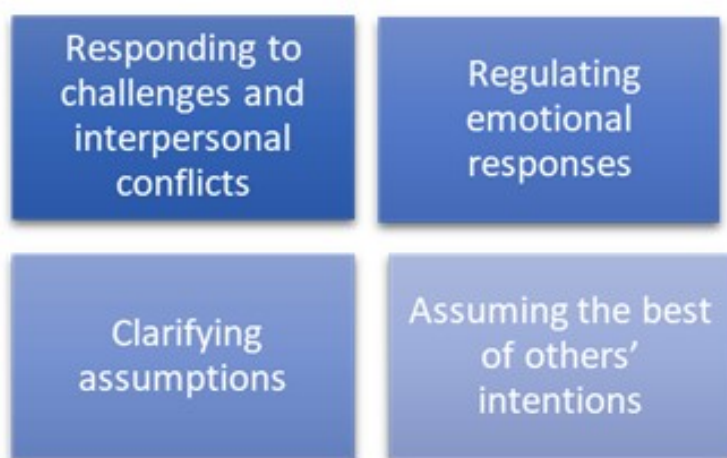
Fig. 7. Figure showing visual breakdown of administrators' reflection on EI trainings

Overall, our staff's and administrators' responses indicate that these trainings were valuable for cultivating emotional awareness and enhanced connection as a team. Staff noted, as a result of our training, improvements in their reactions to and interactions with others as well as feeling confident in employing greater empathy, openness, and intentionality in our online work environment. Importantly, respondents tied these developments to knowing our entire team engaged in the same conversations about emotional intelligence and health, thereby calling attention to positive growth in our organizational culture. Staff were able to acknowledge the emotional labor common in writing center and remote work, identified experiences and values that united them, and expressed being better equipped with the tools needed to thrive within these environments. These results indicate that our EI trainings were beneficial to staff's emotional wellbeing and our goal of building a healthy organizational culture.

Conclusions and Future Considerations

Through the year-long training series, the Walden Writing Center staff worked to advance their EI as individuals and as a team working in a remote environment. As leaders of this project, we created regular training content with the goal of fostering a healthy workplace through increased opportunities for EI growth and enhanced team connectedness.

In developing these trainings, we noticed important implications and gaps in the existing research on EI and its application to writing center work. First and foremost, we recognized a need for EI-specific training for writing center staff. EI is intertwined with wellness, as EI addresses healthy ways to manage and respond to the emotional labor of writing center work and is essential to helping tutors find balance amongst their commitment to student development, the emotional strain of challenging sessions, and their own self-care. However, EI remains underutilized in trainings and research within the writing center community. Lape, for example, examined tutor training manuals for ways to cultivate EI in her staff's daily practice and overall team culture only to find that these guides focused "far more on cognitive than affective skills," despite EI being "no less important than knowledge of discourse conventions and the writing process" (1-2). This broader characterization of EI training in writing communities was reflected in our team's practice as well, with our pedagogical and professional development trainings focused on cultivating staff's writing support and feedback-related skills through peer workshops, shadow reviews, and journal clubs.

Moreover, though we employed regular wellness meetings to discuss mindfulness and other self-care techniques, staff struggled to manage emotions associated with both their daily work and communication within a remote environment. The results of our trainings revealed an increase in staff's self-

awareness of their own EI as well as its application to their work through enhanced adaptability, decision-making, and empathy. Our training series also demonstrated EI's impact on team connection and provided an outlet for our center to cultivate a healthy online writing center culture where staff can feel confident navigating the challenges of their work and thrive emotionally. We, for this reason, see an opportunity for EI to become an integrated component of writing center training and pedagogy and suggest that there should be additional research about EI's influence on tutor preparedness and team culture.

> **We also discovered the vital need for research and training for writing center staff working in online or remote environments.**

We also discovered the vital need for research and training for writing center staff working in online or remote environments. According to the most recent report from the [Writing Centers Research Project Survey](), out of 202 responding centers, 132 reported that they offered online or virtual services. The previous report recorded 114 out of 193 centers offering these services, indicating an increase from 59% to 65% of centers at least partially operating online in a single academic year. These offerings could be higher as centers continue to determine how best to respond to COVID-19. Despite this rise in online writing services, little research has been conducted on effective training for writing center staff working online. [Rebecca Martini and Beth Hewett]() highlight a specific shortage of scholarship, offering practical advice for online tutoring and training rooted in theory.

Our training was supported by research that established EI's value in the workplace and as a set of learned skills that could be grown over time. Specifically, Sabina Hodzic et al. found that long-term trainings with clear action steps fostered the

strongest EI growth for employees. We also recognize the need to expand research into EI's impact on psychological safety for all members of our diverse community, which was beyond the scope of our initial training series but is a vital need in remote environments. In an attempt to apply this research to our own workplace and address potential gaps, our center elected to continue regular EI trainings throughout 2019.

We conclude that EI trainings are a worthwhile investment in developing and supporting writing center staff, as it helps to manage the stress of work and create a healthy organizational culture. EI training is particularly valuable to online workspaces where it can be difficult to foster a strong team culture. We found that EI training enhanced interpersonal communication and connection and that members of our team felt more thoroughly equipped to handle the emotional labor and remote nature of our writing center work. Moreover, our series enabled us to examine and then demonstrate how EI training benefits those throughout the writing center field, including administrators and staff faced with the challenge of effectively and healthily translating face-to-face writing center services to online environments.

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Appendix A

Main Focus: Emotional Intelligence and Email Communication

Context: As an online center, email is a primary form of communication we deal with daily but can be sources of added anxiety, stress, confusion, and emotional labor. This exercise was designed to create the space for staff to discuss their emotional response to various communication styles and identify their own preferences for expressions. This exercise could easily be adapted to role-playing communication from students or between staff members in an in-person environment as well.

Length: 1 hour

Presentation: To begin, introduce common complaints associated with email communications. We used examples from Shirley Taylor's *Email Etiquette: A Fresh Look at Dealing Effectively with Email, Developing Great Style, and Writing Clear, Concise Messages,* including:

- Vague subject line and/or message
- No greeting and/or no sign off
- Sloppiness (e.g., treating email like text messages)

- Tone (e.g., unfriendly, directive, chatty)
- Being forced to hunt for a response
- Incorrect usage of capital letters (e.g., using ALL CAPS to express emotion or emphasis)

Activity A: Then, create a check-in where staff discuss their own habits, emotional reactions, and preferences when sending and receiving emails.

   Questions might include:

- Do I differentiate my tone/style depending on the individual or group I am sending the email to?
- What are my own pet-peeves concerning email?
- Have I met this individual sending the email in person? Does knowing/not knowing this individual affect how I read this email?
- Are there any emails I disregard without reading? If yes, what signals me to disregard specific emails?
- How do I determine whether or not I should respond?

Activity B: Next, share fictional emails (or scenarios) with the staff. After reviewing each email, use the questions listed below to reflect on staffs' emotional response to each email and what next steps they might take.

   Directive Email**:**

   Hello, William,

   This is a reminder to keep track of your work and hours carefully and ensure you are presenting your best self to students. As you know, students are very important to us.

   Be sure to:

- *Review your introduction and conclusion in paper reviews to ensure a conversational tone.*
- *Read back through emails to students before you send them, making sure that you address their concerns.*

- *Track your time in TMI as Papers or Student Communication.*
- *Prioritize papers using the priorities checklist.*

Melanie Atwood, PhD
Director of Writing Things
Walden University
Nondirective email**:**
Hi, Glinda,

Good morning! I was hoping to dive into our slide revisions for our upcoming presentation. I have different thoughts on where we might begin. First, there is some information on slides 4, 6, and 7 that is out of date. I was hoping that someone could update these details. Second, I was concerned about the amount and density of instructional content throughout the presentation. I know that we have a lot of ground to cover, and it all seems like essential information to address. We don't usually make it through the entire slide deck. Perhaps we could build in more discussion questions to break up the instructional content. Thirdly, I had this idea that we could incorporate some of the recent update on APA formatting to share with everyone. Is there a place where you think we could fit this information and resources in? We probably need to get started on these revisions soon since the presentation is next week.

Oh, and, before I forget, we also need to address the post-presentation survey. I recall that some participants had trouble accessing it. The main issue is that it is missing the updated questions from quality metrics.

I am interested in hearing your thoughts. Thanks for all of your hard work!
Sincerely,
Jamie
Discussion Questions:

- What was your initial reaction to this email?
- What is your image of the individual behind this email?
- What do you like about this email?
- What do you dislike about this email?
- Does this email invite a response?
- What would your next step be after receiving an email like this?

Wrap up Presentation: Finally, provide some possible tips to crafting and responding to email communication, including discussion of:

- Opening address
- Purpose for email (e.g., "I'm reaching out because...")
- Not assuming; giving the sender the benefit of the doubt
- Invite response, start dialogue (e.g., "If you have any questions...")
- Sincere sign-off

Source:

Taylor, Shirley. Email Etiquette: A Fresh Look at Dealing Effectively with Email, Developing Great Style, and Writing Clear, Concise Messages, ebook, Marshall Cavendish International, 2010.

Appendix B

Main Focus: Reflective Writing and Emotional Intelligence

Context: The goal of this session was, first, to consider connection between mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and reflective writing, and, second, to create the space for staff to explore this relationship through a series of rapid reflections. This session was completed at the mid-point in our year-long training series and included a review of key concepts from

previous EI trainings in the year. Through this presentation, review, and reflection activity, we aimed to take a closer look at our team's culture and identity as well as to build a healthy organization.

Length: 1 Hour

Presentation: To start, provide a quick overview of what mindfulness entails and how it both relates and differs from emotional intelligence. Below are a few principles we reviewed:

- *Mindfulness*
    - Inward focus on an individual's thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment ([Goleman and Lippincott](#))
    - Act of noticing (i.e., by noticing emotions, anxieties, ideas, stressors, you can strengthen neural pathways and create a calm, confident headspace)
- *Emotional Intelligence*
    - Comprised of the perception, understanding, and management of emotion in the self and in others ([Kirk et al.](#))
    - Attention to behavior patterns and emotional labor
    - Learn how to respond rather than react
    - Establishes a foundation to build competencies, realistic expectations or goals, and wellness practices

Once you have reviewed these concepts, identify how reflective writing can help bring greater awareness to each of these concepts. Below are a few principles we discussed:

- Reflective writing: the act of writing about meaningful emotional experiences
- Benefits include:
    - Enhances cognitive processing and restructuring
    - Helps articulate or visualize thoughts and emotions
    - Enables individual to recognize patterns

○ Can lessen stress and anxiety around events or habits

Activity: Next, create the space for staff to engage reflective writing. To do so, have staff type anonymously or write and share responses to the following prompts. After each written reflection, take a few minutes to share what staff learned. For more details, see the list of supporting questions below each reflection prompt.

Note: We focused our reflection questions on aspects of the staffs' own sense of purpose and connection and explored how this individual emotional connection translated to our center's overall culture, remote environment, and the larger writing center community. However, these prompts could easily be adapted to focus on other areas of EI, emotional labor, mental health and wellbeing, team culture and dynamics, or general staff experiences.

Reflection Prompt 1: Take 5 minutes to read and respond to questions 1 and 2.

1. How would you describe your *purpose* as a writing center professional?
2. How *connected* do you feel to this purpose on a daily basis? What challenges do you face that might impede or make it difficult to achieve this purpose?

Afterward, share responses and reactions as a group. Participants might share:

- What you learned about yourself
- What you learned about others' sense of purpose
- If you noticed common themes in the connection we feel or challenges we face in writing center work

Reflection Prompt 2: Take 5 minutes to read and respond to questions 3 and 4.

1. How would you describe *our culture* as a writing center? What would you say are *the core values* of our center?
2. What aspects of emotional intelligence does it take to be a successful writing center professional in an *online, asynchronous environment?*

Afterward, share responses and reactions as a group. Participants might share:

- What you learned about our center (e.g., culture, core values)
- What is shared about how we understand *online* writing center work
- Whether there were common themes in the responses

Reflection Prompt 3: Take 5 minutes to read and respond to questions 5 and 6.

1. What core principles do we *share with other writing centers*?
2. What advice might you share with the larger writing center community about *how to maintain positive self-care and wellness* as both a writing center professional and one that works within an online, asynchronous environment?

Afterward, share responses and reactions as a group. Participants might share:

- What you learned about our view the larger writing center community
- What we share or unites us as writing center professionals
- Whether there were common themes in the advice we'd share about our work

Sources:

Goleman, Daniel, and Matthew Lippincott. "Without Emotional Intelligence, Mindfulness Doesn't Work." *Harvard Business Review,* 8 September 2017, https://hbr.org/2017/09/sgc-what-really-makes-mindfulness-work, Accessed 14 August 2018.

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Appendix C

Main Focus: This training was composed of two parts: 1. "swing and baseline" and 2. "sharing and mental health."

Part I

Context: In Part I, we discussed terms and concepts from Stone and Heen's book, *Thanks for the Feedback*.

Length: 30 minutes

Presentation: To begin, use Stone and Heen's book, *Thanks for the Feedback,* to introduce and discuss the terms **swing, baseline, sustain,** and **recovery.** Below is a quick overview of each term. Once you have defined each term, provide an explanation of the four sustain/recovery combinations.

- *Baseline* "refers to the default state of well-being or contentment toward which you gravitate in the wake of good or bad events in your life" (150)
- *Swing* "refers to how far up or down you move from your baseline when you receive feedback" (150).
- *Sustain and recovery* "refers to duration, how long your ups and downs last" (150)
- *Four sustain/recovery combinations*: Quick recovery from negative, long sustain of positive; Quick recovery from

negative, short sustain of positive; Slow recovery from negative, long sustain of positive; Slow recovery from negative, short sustain from positive (157-158).

	Long sustain of Pos.	Short sustain of Pos.
		No big deal either way
Quick Recovery from Neg.	"I love feedback!"	Positivity is great but I prefer to feel "even keel" overall
	It's easy to stay positive	
Slow Recovery from Neg.	"I'm hopeful but fearful"	"I hate feedback"
	When something bad happens I feel down for a while	I try to stay positive but bad things always seem to happen

Activity A: Using a variety of situations, have participants identify where they would land on the swing spectrum using the four sustain/recovery combinations provided above, which can also be found on pages 157 – 158 of Stone and Heen's book. Some examples we used during our session included:

- If a student expresses extreme frustration to you in chat about past instructor feedback;
- if you received a thankful email from a student after a paper review appointment;
- if your car breaks down and will be expensive to repair;
- if you have—then resolve—a fight with your partner.

** Note: We used possible examples from both professional and personal settings in order to acknowledge the emotional labor associated with daily work life balance and the impact each has on the other. If preferred, you could adapt these examples to be explicitly writing center or tutoring specific scenarios.**

Participants can then share their responses (optional) and/

or a reflection on things that bring them long positive or long negative impacts.

Wrap up presentation: Next, provide an explanation of why knowing swing and baseline is important in the context of EI. Concepts from *Thanks for the Feedback* we used for discussion:

- 50 percent of our happiness is how we "interpret and respond to what happens to us" and about 10 percent "is driven by our circumstances" (158).
- Understanding swing helps us receive feedback more effectively.
- Understanding swing helps us identify distortions in our own perceptions of ourselves and others' views of us.

All of these concepts help with EI because they deal with emotional regulation, coping, effective communication, and asking for support from others.

Source: Stone, Douglas, and Sheila Heen. *Thanks for the Feedback*. Penguin Books, 2014.

Part II

Context: For Part II, we looked to build on the above conversations about swing, baseline, and recovery in order to address the potential impact on staff's mental and emotional health. While not required, we encouraged staff to be vulnerable about their mental health and did so by first sharing examples of our own struggles. This section of the session was optional, and some staff chose to remain silent and write responses or reflect independently. This session approach may be most successful after some foundational sharing and EI building practice, as our team had worked to establish trust in previous trainings prior to this session.

Length: 30 minutes; 10 minutes for each activity

Activity A: Have staff complete an anonymous poll about

mental health challenges with questions like: Have you experienced any of the following: depression, loneliness or isolation, chronic pain, etc.? *[Optional, depending on participants' comfort and team connection: share the number of respondents per each question in order to bring light to what mental health might look like in your center.]*

Activity B: Discuss awareness as the first step to creating an active plan to boost mental health. Brainstorm with the group ways to boost mental health through connectivity at work as well as through individual practices at home. These might include: keeping a gratitude journal, taking time to chat with a colleague during the day, sending an appreciative message to a coworker, or meditation.

Then, practice this support of mental health by having staff share something they appreciate about another staff member (verbally or via written message).

Activity C: Once appreciation moments have been shared, offer the following prompted discussion. Allow staff to remain silent if they choose. Have presenters start things off to help begin the conversation:

- What's something that's been difficult for you to manage emotionally this year?
- What's something you feel you handled well emotionally this month?
- Is there anything happening with you now/recently that you'd like to share?

6. Tutors as Counselors: Fact, Fiction, or Writing Center Necessity by Sarah Brown

Keywords: Motivational interviewing, mental health, writing tutors, psychotherapy, evoking, tutor training

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine contemporary counseling techniques—particularly William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick's motivational interviewing (MI) technique as described in their book *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*—as they relate to writing center practice and tutor training methods. In doing so, I propose ways that writing centers have the potential to provide both academic help and emotional support to students in their tutoring sessions.

My motivation for writing this chapter stems from personal experience at my university's writing center, both as a tutor and a writer. As a graduate student tutor, I feel confident in my qualifications, training, and ability to assess my client's needs. Although the emotionally overwhelmed client is rare, I have had a few experiences with them. Disappointed by my lack of training on how to respond to an emotionally overwhelmed client, I felt that what little advice I did give was, unfortunately,

inadequate. For example, I had a doctoral student share how her somewhat tempestuous relationship with her advisor had manifested throughout the dissertation writing process. She described their interactions in-depth and discussed the emotional turmoil those interactions

Disappointed by my lack of training on how to respond to an emotionally overwhelmed client, I felt that what little advice I did give was, unfortunately, inadequate.

had caused her. She spoke about the anxiety she experienced when communicating with her advisor by email. And, naturally, she expressed how anxious she was to revise her work and share it with an advisor whom she respected but feared because of their incompatibility. This particular session was emotional, not only because of what she shared, but also because I felt an emotional response to her struggle and an overwhelming pressure to be the person to resolve this issue for her. In the same semester, a freshman client asked for help on how to begin her essay. She had not conducted any research or chosen a topic. Our conversation was difficult because of her lack of effort, but she later confessed that she was incredibly homesick. Although she never explicitly described a connection between her homesickness and her procrastination with the project, I believe there was one. She was clearly stressed, overwhelmed, and seeking guidance of a particular kind, and I realized I was unequipped to give her the advice she needed.

As a result of these emotional experiences, I began conducting research for this chapter with these writers in mind. I wanted to discover techniques that would have made disheartened writers like these feel more confident and develop a plan for how to help future writers address their personal challenges. In my experiences as a writer, too, I

realized how emotional a writing center session can be. For some students, writing center sessions can become emotional when outside problems are affecting a writer's wellbeing.

Mental health concerns have risen recently among graduate students, affecting both writing center tutors *and* writers at institutions that serve graduate writers and/or that are staffed with graduate writing tutors ([Kruisselbrink](#) 1; [Morrish](#) 13; [Tinklin et al.](#) 495). In current writing center practice, there are few techniques tutors are trained to use to inform, support, and provide guidance for writers who are facing mental health concerns like stress and anxiety. And the methods that are sometimes used—which typically include informing the writing center director or referring the student to counseling services—have the potential to disregard the student's ability to incite personal change in themselves, as well as the material circumstances of an institution's therapeutic support. After researching the connection between humanistic psychology and the writing center, I propose the incorporation of Motivational Interviewing into tutor training, and I suggest how it could be used as a supportive method in sessions with emotional writers. Although I believe in the potential effectiveness of MI, especially for tutor training, I have not had the opportunity to practice it myself before graduating; therefore, this is an exploratory chapter that I hope other scholars will put into practice.

Literature Review

As a graduate student, I know all too well the difficulty of balancing my academic life and my personal life. Graduate students and undergraduate students often experience stress related to their multiple roles. Additionally, it is important to recognize the ways in which writing center practices resemble those in psychology. [Christina Murphy](#) analyzes the similarity

between tutoring and therapy and claims that usually "the people who enter in therapy are 'hurt'—they are suffering from negative feelings or emotions, interpersonal problems, and inadequate and unsatisfying behaviors" (14). Murphy draws parallels between people who seek therapy and those who seek writing center support:

> The same is often true of individuals who come to a writing center. They, too, are "hurt" in that they display insecurities about their
> abilities as writers or even as academic learners, express fear to the tutor that they will be treated in the same judgmental or abusive way that they have been treated by teachers or fellow students before, or exhibit behavior patterns of anxiety, self-doubt, negative cognition, and procrastination that only intensify an already difficult situation. (14)

To emphasize the importance of understanding mental health concerns in the writing center, this section also provides a brief overview of recent studies on mental health issues in educational institutions, focusing on students, tutors, and staff. Thus, this literature review will cover the history of MI to establish some context for the reader and to provide a better understanding of the potential connectivity of MI to writing center work. This overview not only identifies the problem—a lack of training around strategies to use in responding to tutors and students with mental health concerns—but it also offers support for using MI techniques to make writing centers more attuned to the emotional needs of their tutors and writers.

Mental Health Concerns in Tutors and Administrators

Hillary Degner et al.'s study on understanding writing center tutors' mental health discovered that 57% of writing center tutors (the majority of whom are graduate students in their

study) and administrators suffer from some form of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and Attention Deficit Disorder (Degner et al.). The study revealed that 56% of the tutors' and staff's mental health concerns affected their tutoring abilities. Degner et al.'s study supports my argument for better student mental health awareness in writing center practice, and it also reveals that there needs to be equal awareness of writer *and* tutor mental health.

Role Strains in Graduate Students/Tutors

Additionally, Rebecca Grady et al. note that graduate students experience role strains because of the different responsibilities and jobs they take on. They note that "the social position of graduate students is rife with chronic role strains—ongoing or repetitive difficulties in meeting role(s) expectations—such as role conflict and role overload. While still students, many are also instructors or in other supervisory roles at their universities cause stress" (5). Role strains often lead graduate students to question their priorities even as they struggle with time management (6). In a study on undergraduate and graduate student's stress levels and help-seeking behaviors, Sara Oswalt and Christina Riddock identify that stress levels among undergraduate and graduate student populations has increased over the past several decades (25). They also note that graduate students seek mental health support at low levels, even though they might be interested in this kind of support for role conflict and other experiences that contribute to their stress levels (26). We often forget that graduate students are just as likely to experience mental health issues and disabilities as undergraduate students. This mental fatigue is often due to graduate students having to fulfill multiple roles at one time (as teacher, tutor, and student).

Isolation among Graduate Students

Graduate students struggle with more than just role strains; they also experience isolation. In a review of the literature, Jenny K. Hyun et al. found that "although the severity of mental health problems was the greatest predictor of seeking counseling, graduate students were more likely to seek counseling because of their distance from other sources of social support" (249). Yet graduate students also sought support from advisors or peer counselors who were largely unequipped to handle severe mental health concerns (249). Being away from family, friends, and other forms of social support, then, contributes to mental health issues in graduate students and higher education may be largely unequipped to support acute needs. Furthermore, these needs are not new.

> **Mental health concerns can trickle down into writing centers and manifest in the dynamics between graduate writers and tutors**

Mental health concerns among graduate and undergraduate students is a long-term issue. A 2001 MIT survey reveals that out of its undergraduate and graduate respondents, "74% reported having had an emotional problem that interfered with their daily functioning . . . [and] 35% of students reported a wait of 10 or more days for their initial appointment with the [mental health] service" (MIT Mental Health). A recent study found that "graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population" (Flaherty). These findings regarding the high levels of mental health concerns among graduate (and undergraduate) students are compounded by the way educational institutions handle mental health concerns, which includes a lack of appointment availability at their on-site mental health facilities and, for some graduate students,

outsourcing of mental health support to entities outside the institution. These mental health concerns, then, can trickle down into writing centers and manifest in the dynamics between graduate writers and tutors.

Motivational Interviewing—A Historical Overview

Miller and Rollnick's collaboration in their 1991 book *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People to Change Addictive Behavior* is perhaps the first collective example of MI concepts, but its early roots go much further back. According to Theresa Moyers, several psychological approaches influenced MI, primarily client-centered psychotherapy (292). She notes, however, that MI is more heavily influenced by social psychology, emphasizing Brehm and Brehm's 1981 work in reactance forms, which attempt to determine "the right moment to move forward in suggesting action" with a client (292). This approach came at a difficult time in the field of psychology, when psychologists were experiencing "increasing frustration with the unsubstantiated and clinically unsustainable belief that one should confront and coerce writers to change" (Allsop 343). As Moyers points out, interest in MI and its applications became even more popularized following the publication of Miller and Rollnick's *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* when its techniques had been circulated (296). Moyers and Miller provide what I believe to be the most accurate definition of this technique: "MI directly addresses what is a very common and often frustrating issue in practice: people's reluctance to change despite advice to do so" (759). Or, in the case of the writing center session with an emotionally overwhelmed student, a reluctance or inability to change that might be due to a lack of emotional guidance.

If tutors were better prepared with appropriate guiding questions that would lead writers toward motivation for personal change, the writing center could provide writers with change-focused approaches that are beneficial for their writing habits and their personal lives.

Defining Motivational Interviewing and Identifying the Connection Between Tutoring and Counseling

MI ultimately encourages the use of self-motivational statements and actions, a practice that can incite positive change in the minds of students struggling with mental health issues, stress, anxiety, and procrastination. Though I have not had the opportunity to use this method in a session, I believe that it could help tutors to manage these kinds of writing center sessions and increase mental health awareness in writing center practice. Thus, I propose that writing centers train their tutors to use the technique of MI for several reasons.

Both tutoring sessions and MI sessions are language-based, requiring conversation and collaboration, and both writing center attendees and MI clients are seeking answers, whether for academic or therapeutic purposes. Both writing center sessions and therapeutic sessions have the opportunity to become forums where behavioral and personal change occur—where writers can recognize their potential as independently-thinking individuals. I recommend writing centers incorporate Miller and Rollnick's MI therapeutic technique, which involves the following four processes: engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning. Several of these processes resemble those frequently used in writing center sessions, which is why I will emphasize the process I believe is missing from writing center work—evoking. An in-depth discussion of how each process could benefit writing center practice in new ways, however, might be beneficial to include in tutor training as well.

Motivational Interviewing Process

Engaging

Engaging is "the process by which both parties establish a helpful connection and a working relationship" (Miller and

Rollnick 26). In a therapy session, this process lays the foundation for a productive relationship between the therapist and the client as the therapist reassures the client of their level of empathy, understanding, and support. Similarly, at the beginning of a tutoring session, one of the tutor's responsibilities is to lay the foundation for a friendly and productive session and thus utilize the "engaging" process. Doing so requires the tutor to introduce themselves and learn session-related information about the writer (their name, why they have come to the writing center, and what they want to achieve during the session) all while affirming the writer's strengths and expressing their belief in/support of the writer and their abilities.

Focusing

According to Miller and Rollnick, focusing is the process that determines a "particular agenda" for the session (27). Therapists typically approach this process by negotiating with the client to establish a shared purpose, thus making the client feel both reassured by the therapist's guidance and confident in their own ability to construct a path toward personal change. Customarily, the writing center tutor is responsible for leading a discussion on what the writer would like to achieve in the session, which establishes a clear direction and agenda for the session as well. Sometimes, the writer volunteers this information, and the tutor does not have to tease it out. It is also worth noting that this "focusing" process sometimes takes place at the beginning of the tutoring session, but it can also take place in other moments. For example, some tutors prefer to read the writer's text before discussing an agenda for the session. In this motivational technique especially, tutors can become more attentive to their writer's personal anxieties based on what they determine is the agenda for the session.

Evoking

Evoking, the third process, "involves eliciting the client's own motivations for change" (Miller and Rollnick 28). In a writing center session, this process would involve the tutor gently exploring why a writer does or does not want to make changes or the writer offering those motivations for change without any probing from the tutor. In many sessions, this process does not take place at all. But when the tutor does attempt this process, they can discover exactly how/where the writer's personal or writing insecurities lie and thus better guide the writer toward solutions and growth. The use of the MI evoking process could benefit writers facing emotional struggles. Out of the four processes, this technique perhaps requires the most skills, and would thus require the most tutor training in the writing center, because the goal is to help the client determine their own "why" for personal change based on their personal ideas and motivators. A major part of this process, however, is the act of listening and gently exploring the writer's desire to change. To determine which processes or habits the writer could benefit from changing, the tutor must be willing and capable of asking mutually beneficial questions that allow the writer to recognize their own personal difficulties. It is important for the tutor to make the writer feel heard and valued during this process; it is, however, equally important that the strategy the tutor uses to teach the writer emotional skills will benefit either their writing process or their emotional growth. If, for example, the writer opens up about their emotional concerns, the tutor can acknowledge the statements directly ("I hear you," "It's understandable that you feel this way," etc.) and eventually, but gently, challenge the writer to address those emotions ("If you could change what you are feeling, how would you want to feel?"; "Let's think of ways we can resolve this," etc.). Again, implementing this MI technique into a writing center session could allow the tutor to not only become more aware of their

clients' personal struggles, but also equip them with the knowledge and support they need to assess and address those struggles.

Planning

Lastly, the planning process "encompasses both developing commitment to change and formulating a specific plan of action" (Miller and Rollnick 30). In a therapy session, this plan of action is accomplished over time and not always immediately carried out. The therapist encourages the client to commit to a plan for change based on the client's personal insights. Similarly, tutoring sessions typically conclude with some kind of "takeaway," such as encouraging the client to return to the writing center, following a more developed strategy like daily dedication to writing exercises, creating an outline before starting the writing process, or developing ways to cope with personal anxieties. Each of these takeaways could give writers motivational guidance toward creating better habits and personal change.

These processes build upon each other. Each process is mutually beneficial because they all serve one particular purpose—encouraging the client to take steps toward change.

Evoking may prove to be the most effective process with an emotionally overwhelmed client because it creates a space for the writer to examine possible reasons for their anxiety or mental block and actively work toward a solution, whether academic or emotional. The "evoking" process begins a process of effective communication. One way for writing center tutors to approach these anxieties is to offer discussion and/or questions that help transform the writer's anxieties into conquerable tasks.

> **Some examples of writer anxieties include the following, which are based on my personal experience as a writing center tutor:**

- I got a bad grade on this paper and my professor told me to come here.
- I have to write a paper on ___. I have no idea how to start.
- This paper is due at 2:00 p.m. today. Can you help me?
- I'm a really bad writer. Are you good at writing?

Or a student might open up about even more personal emotional struggles they are facing, whether family-related, relationship-related, or academic. For any of these situations, the evoking method has the potential to both comfort the student and encourage them to seek self-motivated ways of overcoming their emotional struggles. In MI therapeutic sessions, this process is quite strategic. Practitioners elicit and respond to change talk, and they also reinforce change talk by following a formula of question, affirmation, reflection, and summary. In a writing center session, I believe tutors should focus on providing affirmation and asking questions, stimulating the writer to consider solutions for personal change.

> ### The following questions or statements might motivate or comfort writers:
>
> - (Affirmation): I really appreciate that you shared this with me.
> - (Affirmation): It is OK for you to be feeling this way.
> - (Stimulation): Where do you think you could begin if you were to try to change this issue?
> - (Stimulation): What could increase your confidence (or punctuality, organizational skills, etc.)?

Sometimes, a tutoring session is centered on helping the writer recognize that seemingly undefeatable tasks can be broken down and overcome. At other times, the writer and the tutor never get to read through the paper because the focus shifts to a conversation about other "life" skills like time management, step-by-step processes such as organization, or ways to improve communication between the student and their instructor. The foundation of Miller and Rollnick's MI technique involves a conversational interaction, which they define as "a collaborative conversation style for strengthening a person's own motivation and commitment to change"; this is most likely to occur in the "engaging" process of the session (12). To meet the client's needs, the therapist and the client must first engage in conversation.

> **A synchronous (face-to-face) writing center session often:**
>
> - begins with a conversation about the assignment (the "engaging" process),
> - moves to the client's ideas about the assignment (either through brainstorming or reading the client's text, which is the "focusing" process),
> - then establishes the agenda for the session (the "evoking" and "planning" processes).

Questions and concerns may be addressed throughout, but an agenda-setting conversation remains the framework for the entire session, no matter what the tutor and the client seek to accomplish. Language and communication, as methods used in both therapy and writing center sessions, serve as the focal point for the majority of face-to-face and individual sessions. As demonstrated by the discussion above, some of these processes already take place in writing center sessions. The evoking method, however, encourages tutors to take an extra step with the emotionally overwhelmed client to establish a safe and self-motivated environment, affirm the client's emotional needs, and gently encourage self-change.

Training Tutors in Motivational

Interviewing—General Guidelines

Writing center directors and/or tutor training instructors will need to familiarize themselves with the MI technique in order to begin incorporating it into their tutor training programs. Due to the sensitive nature of mental health concerns, writing center directors and tutor training instructors might consider partnering with counseling services to prepare for tutor training, in order to learn about the potential challenges that students with mental health issues might face and how to adapt the questioning techniques used by counseling services to tutoring. If writing center directors and tutor training instructors feel unqualified to teach MI techniques, they could reach out to MI practitioners at their home institutions or consult with institutions that utilize these techniques for student support. The directors/instructors could then invite that outside speaker to their tutor training session to discuss incorporating MI into their writing center sessions. Whether it is directors/instructors themselves or a guest speaker who introduces MI into tutor training, they will have to introduce the technique in a practical way that tutors can imitate. Role-playing may be an effective approach. Watching videos of therapists applying MI techniques may be another option for the tutor training session. There are a variety of such videos available on YouTube (Figure 1), particularly on TheIRETAchannel (The Institute for Research, Education and Training in Addictions).
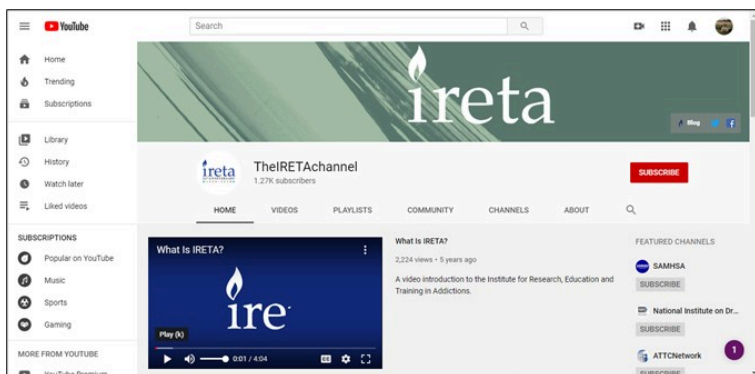
Fig. 1. Screenshot of TheIRETAchannel on YouTube.

In a video that shares examples of motivational interviewing questions (Figure 2), the therapist uses several MI questions/statements to encourage the client (a woman with a potential drinking problem) to self-motivate. Below, I share a set of questions that aim to self-motivate a client along with a "translation" of each question for how these conversational techniques could be used in a writing center session conversation between tutor and writer.

Fig. 2. Hyperlinked video still to video on examples of motivational interviewing questions from the TheIRETAchannel.

Self-motivating Questions and Their "Translation" to Writing Center Tutorials:

- **Therapist**: What is it that you like about alcohol?
- **Tutor**: Are you confronting any issues with your writing or academic work?

- **Therapist**: What do you make of this connection between alcohol and stress?
- **Tutor**: What do you make of the connection between your academic performance and stress?

- **Therapist**: How have you considered trying to fix this?
- **Tutor**: How have you considered ways to fix this?

- **Therapist**: How important is it to you to do something about your drinking?
- **Tutor**: How important is it to you to work on your academic habits?

- **Therapist**: How ready are you to do anything right now?
- **Tutor**: Are you feeling comfortable enough to do something about this right now?

- **Therapist**: What are some things you could do

After the MI techniques have been introduced to tutors during training, directors and instructors could encourage the tutors to apply the techniques through exercises. Again, I suggest role play where the scenario mirrors the therapy videos introduced during training. Role play gives tutors the opportunity to practice MI techniques that can then be incorporated into future sessions. While MI techniques could be included in a writing center tutor guidebook, so tutors can study them on their own time and/or reference them when necessary, writing center administrators should also prepare for tutor training in MI by reviewing Miller and Rollnick's book on MI techniques.

A Motivational Tutoring Heuristic

To aid with understanding how to put MI into practice, I have developed a brief motivational tutoring heuristic that includes a guide to incorporating MI techniques into a writing center session. These methods may be applied in the order in which they are listed below or interchangeably throughout the session, depending on the client's level of personal motivation. The first column describes the method being applied, the second column details what this method entails, and the third column provides conversational sentences or questions the tutor could rely on during the session in order to successfully implement the method.

Table 1

MI Heuristic

Method	Action	Questions and Statements
Inquire	Fostering collaborative conversation between tutor and writer.	What are you struggling with today?
	Developing a plan for the session.	What would you like to accomplish?
Inform	Expressing empathy, acceptance, and support of client's needs.	I understand what you're going through.
	Evoking client's personal motivation for making personal change.	Can you tell me what brought you into the writing center today?
	Identifying opportunities to provide feedback and advice.	Let's see if we can find ways to help you improve.
Listen	Implementing active listening.	Those are great ideas. You should be proud of yourself.
	Reassuring client's as they develop self-determined goals.	Can you summarize your personal goals/plan for change?

Study Limitations

As with every project, there are limitations to incorporating MI into common writing center tutoring practice. I must acknowledge the complicated but necessary balance of utilizing these MI techniques without falling into the role of a counselor. Tutors should be aware, too, that this balance will vary among different kinds of writers and tutoring sessions.

I must acknowledge the complicated but necessary balance of utilizing these MI techniques without falling into the role of a counselor. Tutors should be aware, too, that this balance will vary among different kinds of writers and tutoring sessions.

Certain writers may abuse the openness of the motivational method and take the direction of the session into unexpected territory, such as discussing intimate personal problems or taking over the session and distracting from the purpose at hand. Additionally, tutors may unintentionally place themselves in the role of a counselor by misusing the method. To prevent the tutor from introducing a "counselor role" into the session, tutors should be familiar with potential negative outcomes of using MI in a writing center session. During tutor training, tutors should be presented with complicated and nuanced situations so that they will be prepared to redirect a real session if it veers into a counseling realm. The dangers of a tutor taking on a counselor role are many, but one that can be more easily addressed is the client becoming too reliant on the tutor. If a tutor begins to feel that the writer is becoming too reliant, the tutor could gently remind the client of the session's goal or the purpose of the writing center, or suggest they take a break. The tutor can also prevent taking on the role of a counselor by reminding the client of the method's purpose. Writing center directors, too, can ensure tutors are supported in establishing boundaries in their writing center sessions.

Conclusion

Incorporating MI into tutor training may enhance the way we

work with emotionally overwhelmed students. With this training, tutors cannot expect immediate personal change, but they may be able to help writers increase their self-awareness about how their feelings are impacting their ability to complete tasks. Still, we must remember that personal change is hard and often occurs in small steps over a long period of time. Given the increase in emotional needs of students, writing centers need to start thinking about how to support students who are overwhelmed. MI is one strategy writing centers should consider adopting as a tool to support these students.

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7. "A Triumph Over Structures That Disempower": Principles for Community Wellness in the Writing Center by Yanar Hashlamon

Keywords: Disability studies, Black feminist studies, social justice, community wellness, community care, professional development

Introduction

In her analysis of Black feminist texts, Tamika Carey writes that for exploited populations, "Achieving wellness is a triumph over the structures that disempower" (62). Amidst writing center studies' turn to wellness, I find myself thinking more and more on this quote, and considering what about writing center work makes wellness a necessity, and for whom. Independent of this trend is another: the stories written by women of color in the writing center published since 2018—those by Neisha-Anne Green, Talisha M. Haltiwanger Morrison and Talia O. Nanton. Experiences of racism local to institutions and in our broader scholarly community don't yet intersect with our budding

wellness scholarship. However, the stories Green, Haltiwanger Morrison and Nanton tell are painfully familiar to many marginalized writing center professionals. Our wellness scholarship must contend with the oppressions stratifying writing center studies, as asking how to support writing center workers is undeniably a question of institutional and intersectional oppressions.

> In an activist context, self-care was made necessary by institutional racism that pathologized Black bodies and foreclosed officialized channels of care ([Harris](#)). Where I see calls for writing centers to align with university counseling services ([Degner et al.](#); [Perry](#)), I think about how, for many minority workers, university services are often inaccessible.

Seeing wellness become a subject of focus in writing center studies raises the question: if it could be subversive for writing center professionals to care for themselves and for each other, what forces and institutional structures are subverted by writing center wellness? Put another way, what oppressions necessitate wellness and how can we name, resist, and otherwise triumph over them? Such a line of questioning turns our attention to the activist roots of self-care and their applicability to writing center work. In an activist context, self-care was made necessary by institutional racism that pathologized Black bodies and foreclosed officialized channels of care ([Harris](#)).

Where I see calls for writing centers to align with university counseling services ([Degner et al.](#); [Perry](#)), I think about how, for many minority workers, university services are often inaccessible. Today, 72.4% of university counselors in the US are white ([LeViness et al.](#) 53). Students of color are less likely to seek

support than their white peers in higher education ([Hyun et al.](#)) despite experiencing higher levels of stress ([Dyrbye et al.](#)) and greater barriers to academic success ([Maton et al.](#))—points that also hold true for first-generation students in comparison with non-first-gen students ([Stebleton et al.)](#). Online counseling resources and outreach often are not inclusive to queer people ([McKinley et al.](#); [Kennedy and Baker](#)) and the overwhelming majority of university counselors themselves, 96.2%, identify as cis-male or female, 83.9% as straight, and 89.4% as non-disabled (LeViness et al. 53). While student counseling services protect confidential disclosure of abuse, other resources, such as student advocacy offices, often do not.

With institutional disparities in mind, this essay acts as a position statement to orient and complicate writing center wellness at the nascent stage of its scholarly discussion. I argue that achieving wellness is the triumph over that which makes workers *unwell* in writing centers' professional and scholarly spaces. Put short, wellness is made necessary by our community and must be addressed with community-based systems of support.

I will briefly delineate the professional and activist histories of wellness and self-care to suggest how both apply to the writing center. The political dimensions of these histories inform a discussion of two recent works by Black writing center scholars: Green's "Moving beyond Alright: And the Emotional Toll of This, My Life Matters Too, in the Writing Center Work" and Haltiwanger Morrison and Nanton's "Dear Writing Centers: Black Women Speaking Silence into Language and Action**."** I then posit four principles for community wellness in the writing center to help commit our scholarship and professional development to justice-oriented practices.

Parallel traditions of wellness: individual resilience and community action

Self-care locates its professional roots in the mid-20th century, originating in the caring or helping professions: the work of therapists, doctors and nurses, social workers, and educators (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison). For these workers, wellness is based on strategies to prevent burnout and otherwise address stresses contingent to interpersonal labor (Stamm). Supporting clients through traumatic events and supporting oneself through compassion fatigue and secondary stress are all deeply applicable to tutoring. In wellness scholarship published thus far in our discipline, writing centers seem well poised to apply this professional definition of self-care, especially in regards to mindfulness and mental health (Mack and Hupp; Degner et al.; Perry; Featherstone et al.). The recent 2020 *WLN* special issue on *Wellness and the Writing Center* and this digital edited collection both add empirical and pragmatic wellness knowledge to our field's oldest corpus of scholarship. Yet, how much of this work is equipped with the historical context and political scope needed for self-care's activist application—the application that emphasizes the wellness of minority and disabled workers in writing center practice? As important as it is that we establish community around peer experiences, we cannot flatten out the differences marginalized workers experience that affect and add stress on to those same experiences. The activist history of self-care and its connections to Black history and community wellness all contextualize the ways that the stories of women of color in the writing center directly bear upon wellness.

Contrary to the "self" in self-care, activist organizing around self-care is a story of community organizing in the American civil rights movement. The struggles against socioeconomic marginalization and racism in the United States tied healthcare

to broader forms of material stratification: that is, disparities in access to wealth, housing, and education. As Aisha Harris writes, "poverty was correlated with poor health," and community organizers worked "to dismantle hierarchies based upon race, gender, class, and sexual orientation," as identity was deeply tied to disparate access to health care. Most notably, the Black Panther Party formed community clinics throughout the 1970s in resistance to institutionalized discrimination and inaccessible medical care in Black communities (Nelson 106). The Party added a call for "completely free health care for all black and oppressed people" to their 1972 party platform, the "Ten Point Program" (Bassett). As a part of their platform, the party marked community health initiatives, like the Black Community Survival Conference depicted below, as a core priority supported by founding members like Bobby Seale.

Fig. 1. *Black Community Survival Conference, March 30th, 1972. Bobby Seale (Bob Fitch photography archive)*.

Community wellness is key to understanding the activist work of the Black power movement (Figure 1). Operating from the precept that social and material disparities disempower vulnerable groups, community wellness directly addressed health needs through community empowerment and support in the 1970s ([Jenkins](#) 388). Engaging in collective struggle is a key element of health justice—a process exemplified in the Black Panther Party's networks of care, enacted through People's Free Health Clinics that operated across the United States. Medicine has historically pathologized Black bodies, marking them as deficient and subject to surveillance and control ([Erevelles](#) 146). Contextualized by this history, the Panthers' health activism extended to group advocacy, empowering Black and impoverished people with the support required to interact with doctors and demand healthcare (Nelson 109). Figure 2 depicts one of the Black Panther Party's community health conferences, which included free medical testing and information about disparities in healthcare in Black communities.
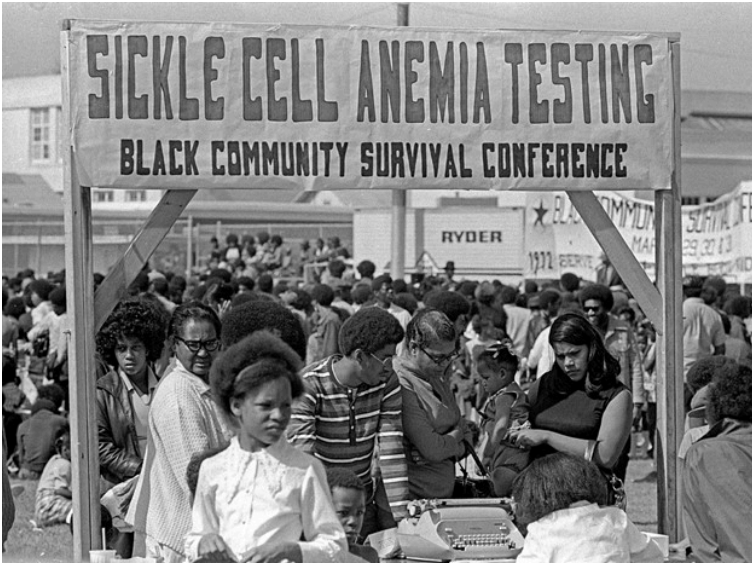
Fig. 2. [Black Community Survival Conference, March 30th, 1972. Sickle cell anemia testing (Bob Fitch photography archive)](#).

Beyond medicine, self-care in activist circles is perhaps most famously tied to Audre Lorde's 1988 book, *[A Burst of Light](#)*—specifically her epilogue, where she writes, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (130). Beyond the importance of group advocacy, Lorde speaks to the ways that everyday survival and prosperity disrupt norms of oppression, turning our attention back toward workplaces. The interpersonal strains caused by caring professions are not always conditions of the job and extend instead from social and material conditions that marginalize communities more broadly.

> The interpersonal strains caused by caring professions are not always conditions of the job and extend instead from social and material conditions that marginalize communities more broadly.

Professional and political wellness in the writing center

Historically, self-care in activist contexts has been as much about personal wellness as it has been about building community support, accountability, and alternatives to discriminatory institutions. Conversely, the professional dimension of self-care and wellness literature often emphasizes "resilience," as in the title of Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison's history of and guide to self-care, *The Resilient Practitioner*. This emphasis on resilience holds significant effects for marginalized people who live and work within oppressive material and social conditions. By locating responsibility in the individual, resilience can flatten out the structural inequities that necessitate self-care in the first place.

On the oppressive ramifications of self-care, Thomas Lemke writes that neoliberal ideology shifts "the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transform[s] it into a problem of 'self-care'" (201). As part of a service-oriented profession, writing center scholarship often perpetuates an ethic of individual

responsibility when it comes to caring for oneself and for clients. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* is one example of our field's habit to simplify the workplace relations of writing centers and thus simplify the tensions of our professional work. In its most recent edition, tutors are told to "be patient and polite" in sessions with sexist and racist writers, but to not "take the writer's viewpoints or language personally" (Ryan and Zimmerelli 106). Racism and sexism are treated as aesthetic choices—as words that are spoken, rather than histories that are lived and traumas that are suffered.

Where *The Bedford Guide* breaks from individual decision-making in harmful sessions, it gestures to workplace community by suggesting that as a tutor, "you should feel free to remove yourself from the tutoring session … if possible, work with the director to arrange for another tutor" to take over (106). There is no account of the realities that marginalized students live, or how terminating a session might be irreconcilable with the pressure to be resilient. Black workers regularly have their job performance "scrutinized more closely than the performance of white workers" across a multitude of industries—a trend tied to hiring discrimination and shorter employment duration (Cavounidis and Lang 1). Writing centers are no exception from the kinds of workplace discrimination Cavounidis and Lang describe, as evidenced by Talia Nanton's story. In her essay with Haliwanger Morrison, Nanton describes how her language was policed in her writing center, how she was "accused of not taking criticism well" and blamed for the actions of her coworkers. The other reality embodied in her story is a painfully

> **Racism and sexism are treated as aesthetic choices—as words that are spoken, rather than histories that are lived and traumas that are suffered.**

familiar one for marginalized workers—that the quality of our work will not spare us from discrimination.

Despite Nanton taking on "the earliest shift three days a week," her being "the first to prop the door open in the morning," never being late, and being "careful not to complain," she was still reprimanded for something as minor as "not saying 'hello' to another co-worker, however unintentionally." That "the guise of making sure the center remained 'a safe space'" was used to discriminate against Nanton shows what happens when writing centers' notions of professionalism protect white fragility. Workplaces are steeped in politics of respectability in the way that marginalized workers are expected to act a certain way to solve problems that systemically inform how they are treated and oppressed. Explicitly, this ethic of personal responsibility is clear in cases of discrimination in the writing center, but it pervades more subtly in instances where marginalized workers are asked or expected to educate others about their identities. Wellness must be oriented to the experiences of the oppressed—a need best exemplified by the stories of workers told in our scholarship, which might appear unique in writing centers, but are instances of a much bigger pattern of workplace marginalization and abuse.

We do not have to imagine the harm that an ideology of personal responsibility for wellness has inflicted on marginalized workers in writing centers. Green speaks to the microaggressions she is constantly subjected to as a writing center director (23-25). Structurally, the racism she describes is tied to the professional environment of her institution, while writing center studies' whiteness is emphasized more broadly by the fact that she "was the first Black person to have the keynote platform in the 34-year history of the [IWCA] conference" (15). Nanton writes from a tutor's perspective about the sexist and racist verbal abuse she suffered in the

writing center, resulting in her "dismissal/resignation" as an undergraduate tutor.

Fig. 3. Neisha-Anne Green's Keynote "Moving Beyond Alright" at the Fashion Institute of Technology February 21, 2018.

Every writing center professional should read or listen to Green's keynote (Figure 3) and read Nanton's story in the context of writing center wellness scholarship. Both women speak to the pressures of writing center work that marginalized workers suffer across academic status. If caring for oneself is an act of political warfare, as Lorde argues, the stakes of writing center wellness become even larger in scale. Any scholarship on wellness must be active in addressing the oppressions our workplaces perpetuate as products of structural, historical, and institutional inequities. Wellness cannot be the sole responsibility of the individual to survive oppression within scholarly and professional spaces. As Green writes, "I want more

than just alright—and right now, I'm not alright, because y'all keep trying me" (23). She writes on the way her professional and personal behavior depends on contexts she has learned to navigate "as a tutor, then a Black tutor … a writer, then a Black writer" differentiating, "When I am not in self-care, / self-defense, or / 'Oh Lord not me today' mode" (Green 23). Nanton's own experience of violent toxicity in the writing center will linger in our field's scholarship, but more significantly, it will persist in her life:

Any scholarship on wellness must be active in addressing the oppressions our workplaces perpetuate as products of structural, historical, and institutional inequities. Wellness cannot be the sole responsibility of the individual to survive oppression within scholarly and professional spaces.

> What I have experienced at this writing center, I now will take with me for the rest of my life, to every job I have, and this will sadly more than likely never change. I will almost always feel as though I cannot trust my co-workers, or my bosses, particularly with personal or even workplace grievances. (Haltiwanger Morrison and Nanton)

Writing centers are key spaces of professionalization and mentorship for many student workers. They can inculcate racism and patriarchal violence early in an academic career, as with Nanton, and reify those same oppressions well after someone has worked their way up the ladder, as with Green. Both writers speak to the discriminatory stresses they experience, showing the reality that wellness for marginalized workers is a matter of survival and empowerment. In contrast

to the ways that resilience places the responsibility on the oppressed to individually overcome structural violence, these writers place responsibility on writing center practitioners to make more livable professional and scholarly spaces.

I'd like to return to the question I posed at the start of this essay: what oppressions necessitate wellness and how can we name and resist them? In their writing, Green as well as Haltiwanger Morrison and Nanton make the answer clear. The most marginalized of us are already speaking to the oppressions we experience. Multiple marginalized scholars like Green, Haltiwanger Morrison, and Nanton name and work to resist said oppressions. Wellness can be the next step, where we work towards "moving beyond alright" (Green 23), and where we step even further into building alternatives to institutional structures that beget oppression. Based on the activist history of self-care, I posit four principles for community wellness in the writing center. It is my hope that we form a more radical relationship with our work at this early stage of our field's wellness scholarship.

Principle 1: Connect wellness to local activist and community health programs

Wellness in the writing center is intertwined with broader networks of care in university services; however, we must hold space to discuss the real limitations of those services, their need of revision, and the community-based alternatives that can be cultivated and supported. Holding space means that we disrupt top-down forms of professional development to create opportunities for workers to share experience and expertise with aspects of the institutional structures they inhabit. That institutions have barriers to university services is not a new insight to writing center professionals, given research into the

barriers that writing centers themselves have between their services and marginalized populations ([Salem](#)). Yet, oft-cited writing center scholarship on mental health (Degner et al.; Perry) points to university services without attending to the violence and inaccessibility those spaces present to first-gen, queer, international, and minority students who work at the writing center.

> **We cannot only look and work inward; wellness in the writing center must reckon with our position in universities writ large, contending with universities' material conditions and broader issues of labor, discrimination, and care.**

We cannot only look and work inward; wellness in the writing center must reckon with our position in universities writ large, contending with universities' material conditions and broader issues of labor, discrimination, and care. Fifty-seven percent of counseling program directors report they lack the hours to meet student needs. The average wait for university students to receive support is 17.7 days on a waitlist—that is, for the 33.7% of centers that have a waitlist to begin with (LeViness et al. 2). Arguing that writing centers partner with campus services, as both Degner et al. and Perry suggest, is an important first step. However, doing so uncritically—without attending to disparities of access and to the material conditions of local campus services—can be inconsiderate of marginalized workers' vulnerability at best, and a danger to their wellbeing at worst if they are directed to services that cannot meet their needs.

Institutional support as it currently operates is not a viable source of care for many students, and so writing centers can list forms of local support for staff and connect with community

organizations to provide alternatives to university resources. While local resources are supplementary to institutional support within the university for some, they are vital alternatives for students who require networks of community care outside the discriminatory structures of the university. There are often deep material disparities between universities and the communities they are located in, so in highlighting community support organizations, writing centers should not simply exacerbate often limited community resources to fill a university gap of support. While marginalized student workers need support, whether from within or outside of their university, writing centers should not be complicit in passing responsibility for care from universities onto local communities. Monetary support, volunteer work, and building community literacy partnerships funded by host universities are just a few examples of the ways writing centers can practice reciprocity with community support organizations.

Professional development and wellness training in the writing center can discuss the limitations of campus counseling and other student services, including material limits such as inaccessible wait times and the representational limits of whiteness, class, and normativity cited throughout this piece. Writing center professionals can hold space in our centers themselves to share campus initiatives for change, connecting writing center wellness to student/worker activism. At institutions ranging from the University of California at Berkeley to the University of Kansas, students have organized and struggled for mental health resources to support students of color ([New](#)). By raising awareness of local activist initiatives, writing centers can support larger forms of change within their universities and communities, advocating for better systems of support for marginalized students. Grappling with disparities in support turns us toward the larger context of wellness in the writing center—what makes it necessary and what institutional forces hinder its support structures.

Principle 2: Contextualize wellness in terms of and in resistance to institutional ableism

Writing center professionals must deploy wellness practices *critically,* not just to react to limited wellness resources under university austerity, but to be proactive against the ways that wellness has historically been leveraged to reify ableist notions of ability in the workplace ([Bagenstos](#)). Situating community wellness in terms of writing center work means we must contextualize our practices in the larger institutions that house our work. Disability is necessarily implicated in any discussion of professional wellness, given problematic relations between individual responsibility, productivity, and health in the workplace. As such, this principle is meant to give ableism its own focus—interconnected with other oppressions, but especially pertinent to the ways wellness can exclude or ignore lived experiences of disabled workers. Ableism is broadly defined as an orientation toward disability as "abject, invisible, disposable, less than human, while able-bodiedness is represented as at once ideal, normal, and the mean or default" ([Dolmage](#)). In the context of higher education, however, this definition is further whetted to include the ways in which academic structures are designed—what Jay Dolmage defines as academic ableism.

As writing center scholars have pointed out ([Babcock and Daniels](#), [Daniels et al.](#)), our work is in no way excluded from the ableist practices of assignment deadlines, attendance, or even the inaccessibility of our centers themselves. This same point holds true for disabled writing center workers, inviting us to examine our professional development in general, and wellness in particular, for any capitulation to ableism. Writing centers are not separate from university austerity, institutional ableism, or other forms of oppression that are often directly

enacted in structures of university administration and service ([Strickland](); [Welch and Scott]()). Professional development that foregrounds workplace solidarity can position self-care as an anti-ableist approach to wellness and also foreground the interconnectedness of writing center labor and resistance. Put another way, wellness should not just be 'not ableist,' for example, by ensuring that wellness practices like meditation (Featherstone et al.; Mack and Hupp) are inclusive, accessible, and voluntary for disabled and non-disabled workers. These practices should also be anti-ableist—they should point out the ableist ways wellness and health can be linked to productivity and instead make space for alternative definitions. Consultants and administrators alike should challenge *why is wellness important? Who is it important for? Why is it necessary? Is it just to make us all more productive, and if so, who does that benefit? Who does it exclude? How do we practice wellness to support one another? Why do we need to support one another in the first place?*

Consultants and administrators alike should challenge wellness initiatives by asking:

- Why is wellness important?
- Who is it important for?
- Why is it necessary?
- Is it just to make us all more productive, and if so, who does that benefit?

> - Who does it exclude?
> - How do we practice wellness to support one another?
> - Why do we need to support one another in the first place?

Disability studies in writing center scholarship must be brought to bear upon the ableism and inaccessibility that wellness can reify. Texts written by disabled writing center scholars, like Kerri Rinaldi's "Disability in the Writing Center," can contextualize writing center wellness alongside broader conversations of writing center work to address institutional ableism in the ways we interact with writers and workers alike. Work from outside the writing center grapples directly with the ableist tendencies of wellness in workplaces (Basas; Kirkland) and more broadly engages with inaccessibility within institutions like the university (Minich). Furthermore, any notion of disability justice must be intersectional, resisting the ways that disability is often whitewashed in scholarship (Bell) and resisting the lack of support for disabled workers of color. Disability studies texts like *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and work by Jina Kim and Sami Schalk build on conversations about care and the methods with which we confront and redress ableism and racism as linked structures of oppression. This principle and the texts listed above are intended to initiate a discussion of anti-ableism in writing center wellness scholarship. We can begin to alter our practices by citing outside the borders of our own literature and amplifying the histories of oppression that make wellness and care necessary in the first place.

Principle 3: Develop wellness through antenarrative and experiential scholarship

In professional development, writing center workers can be encouraged to amplify the perspectives of marginalized scholars, complicating what we think about as the key scholarship that informs our practices. Antenarrative is an applicable type of retrospection and speculation theorized for professional spaces. Jones et al., citing David Boje's 2011 definition of antenarrative, writes that:

> In contrast to narratives, which Boje conceived as characterized by 'stability and order and univocality' (5), antenarratives are poly-vocal, dynamic, and fragmented—yet highly interconnected. They link the static dominant narrative of the past with the dynamic 'lived story' of the present to enable reflective (past oriented) and prospective (future oriented) sense making. (Jones et al. 2)

This method has been applied to both professional and managerial settings (Boje) and to professional writing scholarship (Jones et al.) as a way to disrupt normative histories of practice. By examining the history of writing center scholarship and looking beyond our grand narratives, student workers can amplify the work of queer, disabled, and minority voices that apply to our notions of wellness—whether directly from our discipline, or from other fields of study. We can apply these scholarly perspectives in local training modules and other forms of professionalization, setting the stage for the work that has already been done within and beyond our field. This same methodology can expose exigencies where our scholarship lacks the perspectives of many writing center workers and must be expanded to more fully represent the diversity of experiences that inform and complicate our work.

Where antenarrative reframes the past, experiential scholarship can push our discipline into new ways of doing and caring that would otherwise be obscured by institutional norms. In a tutor column for the South-Central Writing Centers Association, Shantel Buggs theorizes how experiential knowledge could frame writing center consultations. Drawing from standpoint theory in Black feminist thought, Buggs asks, "how can students of color feel comfortable in the writing center, and how can the writing center encourage these students to embrace their own epistemological standpoints?" (23). As with students' writing experiences, writing center workers' needs for wellness are intertwined with their positionality and identities. This principle directly takes up and amplifies the calls to action women of color have made and modelled with their own stories in writing center studies. In their piece from 2017, Wonderful Faison and Anna Treviño suggest shifting writing center practice according to "the experiences of historically marginalized bodies working and receiving assistance/services in the WC." Haltiwanger Morrison and Nanton similarly call for this shift to draw on "the voices and experiences of tutors of color to inform the practices and scholarship of our field." Experiential knowledge reveals the political dimensions of our work that we often obscure: challenging, revising, and reclaiming writing center practice towards a more livable and just end.

Larger-scale studies can require methods training beyond what writing centers can offer in professional development to their workers. To disrupt our grand narratives in ways that can be accessible and materially feasible, writing centers must amplify marginalized workers' experiential knowledge. Knowledge from outside of writing center scholarship can also offer perspectives that intervene in wellness and care. Counseling, social work, women and gender studies, linguistics, education, and many more fields are outside of writing center studies, but often are embodied and

represented in our centers' staff and should be amplified in our wellness work. Our scholarship is often characterized by an "inward gaze" and "tight-knit genealogy," as [Neal Lerner](#) put it in his analysis of the *Writing Center Journal* (68). Our homogeneity is in the way we cite so adamantly from within our field, but I argue it is also apparent in which conversations we cite marginalized writing center scholars. Wellness can be a topic in which we emphasize a diverse, outward-facing perspective from conventional writing center knowledge. Workers bring disciplinary and experiential perspectives that, when paired with knowledge of what has already been done, afford insight into what needs to be done next.

Professional development can and should inform local practices and broader scholarly conversations from the perspectives of those who are otherwise not often cited in writing center scholarship. Respecting the diversity of a writing center's workforce goes beyond quantitative data—the experiences within must inform how wellness is encouraged and addressed. What is needed is a system of accountability to respect and amplify marginalized workers' epistemologies and experiences. Only by committing to accountability can practices like antenarrative and experiential knowledge-making be ethically organized towards inclusive community wellness.

Principle 4: Position wellness within a pedagogy of care

Calling for resources, accessibility, antenarratives and experiential knowledge from vulnerable workers, including tutors and directors, risks placing a burden on members of the communities that wellness is meant to support. Thus, it is necessary to frame all three previous principles in terms of

a pedagogy of care in writing center wellness. In her article "Pushback," [Ersula Ore](#) writes about her interactions confronting and questioning white students' microaggressions in the everyday spaces of the university. On her role as a professor, she argues, "those of us resting at the intersection of multiple forces of oppressive service, and those of us who are not, take into account the ways in which histories reverberate and intersect in academic space" (28). Her piece frames transgressions of students' etiquette and challenges to students' assumptions and privilege as caring interventions. She is *caring* for students who will not otherwise see how they reify oppression when she confronts and educates them. Ore concludes that she is also caring for herself as a woman of color whose professional belonging is constantly under doubt in ways that she experiences as intersectional oppressions.

Ore speaks to the professional tensions of her role as an educator and her need to protect and care for herself—a tension patently applicable to writing center work as well.

Green directly cites her experiences as a director facing the same oppressions as a Black female academic. Recounting instances of colleagues berating her about what her "qualifications were for doing this work," she writes, ""microaggressions have been tattooed on my soul and branded in my mind" (23). At her own institution, Ore is asked if she "works here" in the elevator to her academic building; Green is harassed in her car, asked if she "had any business on campus" (Ore 9; Green 24).

Both Green's and Haltiwanger Morrison and Nanton's pieces work as forms of pushback against white supremacy in writing center studies. Like Ore, they engage in experiential knowledge-making that informs writing center scholarship as well as model ways to produce knowledge within and about writing centers locally. Addressing wellness means engaging in care practices that respond to the inequities that emerge in writing center work at both local and disciplinary levels. A

pedagogy of care in the writing center means that no worker should be asked to inform on their community or to act as tokenized figures in research and wellness practices. From experiential scholarship and antenarrative to community networks of support, writing centers should hold space for workers to share connections, but never place the burden of making wellness inclusive on those who are meant to benefit most from its practice. As Ore writes, citing Fannie Lou Hamer, "there comes a point where one becomes 'sick and tired of being sick and tired'" (29). A pedagogy of care intervenes before writing center workers reach "a point where silence and acquiescence to gendered scripts, hierarchies of discipline, and customary performances of the color line" have the exact opposite effect intended by wellness (Ore 29). By ensuring that writing center wellness does not *rely* on vulnerable workers overextending themselves to create change, a pedagogy of care enacts a constantly reflexive relationship between workers and wellness. We must check and recheck our practice to ensure that we are caring of and accountable to one another.

> **Care can be abrasive. It can make people uncomfortable as it shakes and unsettles institutional norms of behavior. These are features of a political framework of wellness informed by experiences of oppression and resistance to its continuity.**

We must recognize, as Ore does, that pushback can be a way to care for oneself and others; that wellness is both politically resistant and proactive in creating change. Care can be abrasive. It can make people uncomfortable as it shakes and unsettles institutional norms of behavior. These are features of a political framework of wellness informed by experiences of oppression and resistance to its continuity.

Conclusion

Under a pedagogy of care, principles of community wellness work to address the scholarship already being done on wellness in the writing center, including those adjacent in this digital edited collection. The ways we implement empirical scholarship into our professional practices are always political, expressing some values over others through the communities and traditions we evoke and groups who benefit as a result. The principles presented in this article are not just a means to produce new knowledge, but to re-contextualize extant scholarship. We must grapple with the values we express as a field when we discuss wellness, and work to apply anti-racist and anti-ableist frameworks in all of our scholarly conversations. If we enact wellness practices by contextualizing and resisting institutional oppressions that necessitate its practice in the first place, we can hold ourselves accountable to the most vulnerable of our communities.

This essay is as much a tool for administrators designing resources as it is a guide for workers to resist uncritical wellness practices. There is nothing in the phrasing of the above principles that precludes tutors or graduate administrators from cultivating community wellness in the writing center. It is my hope that this essay might help writing center administrators ally with and support their workers, especially as many directors themselves occupy precarious labor positions (Caswell et al.) and experience oppression as queer, disabled, minority, or otherwise marginalized academics (Green). Directors, consultants, and staff can all build solidarity to contextualize material conditions rather than stratify wellness along managerial lines. However, as is so often the case, it will be workers who carve out livable spaces for community and form coalition in the writing center.

As wellness takes on greater importance as a part of writing center training, workers can be critical of ableist notions of

health and productivity. Where university administrations advertise overburdened counseling services, workers can consider the needs of our coworkers and connect with community actions and resources we are aware of, and often organize ourselves. Workers can push back in training when the material issues of funding and representation within university services are glossed over. This is the activist history of wellness—not managerial edicts, but collective, local acts of resistance and care backed by principles that can be taken up by our whole field and applied according to local contexts. If administrators seek to implement equitable wellness practices, they must do so as workers first and foremost—as peers to staff members and tutors with shared goals that will, at times, conflict with university administration as we build solidarity with one another. We are all accountable to one another when we seek to make wellness an ongoing and constantly revised aspect of writing center practice.

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Discussion Questions for Readers

The contributors to this collection developed discussion questions for their chapters. We hope these questions can help to guide discussion among students, tutors, and administrators on topics related to wellness and care in writing center work.

[1. A Matter of Method: Wellness and Care Research in Writing Center Studies by Genie Nicole Giaimo](#)

- How do the approaches to researching wellness in a writing center differ?
- What kinds of data generated in your writing center might help you examine issues of wellness in your center?
- What are some unique challenges and opportunities for conducting a study in a writing center?
- Where do you see issues of inequity in writing center, or educational work, intersecting with potential wellness interventions?

2. Naming and Negotiating the Emotional Labors of Writing Center Tutoring by Kristi Murray Costello

- Name the emotional labors you perform in your position and the strategies you use to negotiate them. You may find it helpful to refer to Table 1, in chapter two, for a list of some emotional labors of writing center work.
- How can you and your colleagues work together to establish your center as a community of care or enhance your existing community of care, especially during the more stressful times of the year?

3. Imposter Syndrome in the Writing Center: An Autoethnography of Tutoring as Mindfulness by Benjamin J. Villarreal

- Brainstorm some ways you can engage in writing as a mindful practice (you can refer to C. Brown's suggestions for inspiration).
- When you find yourself losing track of or getting stuck on an idea, how might you go about reminding yourself to accept your experience non-judgmentally and resume writing?
- Think about a time you felt like an impostor. Without necessarily sharing details of the moment, share what other feelings accompanied it as well as what might have contributed to those feelings.
  - What do you notice about what others share?
  - What do your experiences have in common with the experiences of others?

4. The Hidden and Invisible: Vulnerability in Writing Center Work by Lauren Brentnell, Elise Dixon, & Rachel Robinson

- Look around your writing center or think about the last writing center in which you worked. Where are the hidden moments of vulnerability (like dying plants, not-yet-unpacked boxes, and/or "alarming" magnetic poetry sentences), and what do you think these moments signify for your center (the space itself) and the consultants and writers in it?
- How has your understanding of a "worst case scenario" for your writing center work been changed by local, national, or world wide emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - What have you learned about vulnerability throughout this time?
- In what ways are your vulnerabilities different from your colleagues' vulnerabilities in the writing center?
  - How can you account for these different kinds of vulnerabilities?
  - What do you do when these different vulnerabilities create conflict or collide?

5. Cultivating an Emotionally Intelligent Writing Center Culture Online by Miranda Mattingly, Claire Helakoski, Christina Lundberg, & Kacy Walz

- What aspects of writing center work are most difficult to manage emotionally?
- In what ways might you mitigate the stress and emotional labor associated with writing instruction and tutoring?
- What role does emotional intelligence play in a writing center's health and culture?
- How might discussions around emotional intelligence,

and related topics like self-care and mental health,
enhance administrators' and staff's ability to respond to
changes in organizational culture (e.g., shifts in tutor
offerings, team dynamics, administration and leadership,
budget, COVID-19 response)?

6. Tutors as Counselors: Fact, Fiction, or Writing Center Necessity by Sarah Brown

- How do you find ways of balancing between acting as a
  tutor and as a "listening ear" in writing center sessions?
- Think about a time when you had a session where you felt
  your tutoring methods were ineffective. Do you think that
  implementing motivational interviewing techniques
  would have improved that session, and if so, which
  particular methods would you have used? Explain your
  reasoning for using/not using a particular motivational
  interviewing strategy.

7. "A Triumph Over Structures That Disempower": Principles for Community Wellness in the Writing Center by Yanar Hashlamon

- What elements of writing center work necessitate care
  and wellness practices?
- How do we delineate where wellness should be practiced
  individually and where it should be enacted through
  structural changes to how the writing center (or broader
  university) works and is run?
- What does it look like to apply principles of community
  wellness in your local context?
- Consider the ways that wellness can extend the ways you
  have incorporated or have planned to incorporate anti-
  ableism and anti-racism into your own writing center

through professional development and training. If these scholarly/activist commitments aren't present in your context, how can an attention to wellness bring them into your writing center?

About the Contributors

Lauren Brentnell is an Instructor of English at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. They are a managing editor of *constellations: a cultural rhetorics publishing space* and the current secretary of the CCCC Queer Caucus. They are the author of "Crybabies in the Writing Center: Storying Affect and Emotion," in *Affect and Emotion in the Writing* Center, co-authored with Elise Dixon and Rachel Robinson, and "Living Oklahoma: A Memoir About Trauma and Rebuilding in Academia," in *Pixelating the Self: Digital Feminist Memoirs*. Their dissertation, "Responding to Sexual Violence Through Care-Based Practices in Writing Programs," argues for the incorporation of trauma-informed work into writing program administration.

Sarah Brown is a recent graduate of The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where she received a Master's degree in Literature. During her time at UNCC, she was a graduate student tutor in the Writing Resources Center, where she developed a scholarly interest in writing center practice and tutor training. Sarah is author of "The Ideal Gothic Romance: Landscapes, Heroines, and Villains in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" in the December 2016 issue of *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies*, and her research interests focus on contemporary horror fiction and film, animal studies, and more recently—tutor education. Due to her personal experiences as a writing center tutor, she feels strongly about transforming the writing center session into a positive, safe, and self-motivating experience for all students.

Kristi Murray Costello is the Associate Chair of Writing Studies and General Education and an Associate Professor at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. She is the four-year university president of the CWPA regional affiliate Writing

Across Virginia (WAVA) and co-editor of the Utah State University Press collection *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration*. Her recent article, "From Combat Zones to Contact Zones: The Value of Listening in Writing Center Administration," can be found in *The Peer Review* and her co-written chapter "Naming What We Feel: Self-Dialogue as a Strategy for Negotiating Emotional Labor in WPA Work" is forthcoming in Leigh Graziano et. al's *Making Administrative Work Visible: Data-Driven Approaches to Understanding the Labor of Writing Program Administration*. In her spare time, Kristi enjoys yoga, hiking, live music, and spending time with her partner and their adorable dog, Rafa.

Elise Dixon is an Assistant Professor of English and writing center director at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. She is a past historian of the IWCA-GO and served as a guest speaker for the IWCA LGBTQ Special Interest Group in 2019. She is co-editor of the Special Issue of *The Peer Review: (Re)Defining Welcome*, with Rachel Robinson; author of "Uncomfortably Queer: Everyday Moments in the Writing Center" in *The Peer Review Journal* and "Strategy-Centered or Student-Centered?: A Meditation on Conflation" in *Writing Lab Newsletter*. She's currently navigating her first year on the tenure track and as a Writing Center director.

Genie Nicole Giaimo is Assistant Professor and Director of the Writing Center at Middlebury College in Vermont. She has served as editor for special issues published by *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship* and *Praxis*. She is also the author of over ten peer reviewed publications and half a dozen book chapters. An active member of her College's AAUP chapter, Genie's research connects wellness with issues of workplace safety, labor advocacy, and anti-racism. This is her first book-length project.

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Claire Helakoski is a Writing Instructor at Walden University and the Director of the Writing Center at Kendall College of Art & Design. Claire is a dedicated writing instructor, researcher, and creative writer who is active in her local community of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Claire is the producer and co-host of *WriteCast,* Walden's academic writing podcast, and author of many posts on their blog. She believes that emotional intelligence is the key to a strong workplace, effective teaching, and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

Christina Lundberg is a Writing Instructor and Coordinator for the Walden University Writing Center, and she teaches composition and creative writing courses at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Upon being awarded an M.F.A. in Creative Writing in 2007, Christina embarked on a writing and teaching career, which has served as her guiding light. Her poems have appeared in the Naropa Summer Writing Program journal *Guilty as Charged,* the Naperville Writers Group publication *Rivulets,* and the journal dedicated to all things farmer with a literary and educational slant *Farmer-ish*. As a person devoted to helping people meet their writing goals, Christina studies the art of meaningful connection and believes that writers thrive when they feel plugged into a healthy and supportive community.

Miranda Mattingly is a Manager of Writing Instructional Services at Walden University's Writing Center. Miranda holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Missouri and is currently working on projects dedicated to creating more inclusive pathways for students and tutors to connect through writing instruction.

Nicole Pollack is a senior at Middlebury College majoring in

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Benjamin J. Villarreal is an Assistant Professor of English at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico. In addition to being the Director of Undergraduate Studies in English, he studies, teaches, and designs games for learning. He is the author of "Truth, Justice, and the Victorian Way: How Comics and Superheroes Might Subvert Student Reading of Classic Literature" in the book *[With Great Power Comes Great Pedagogy: Teaching, Learning, and Comics](#)* and is currently designing a card game for beginning conversations about mental health with writing center staff. And while not currently managing a writing center, he leads professional development for faculty on student writing and mental health.

Kacy Walz is a Writing Instructor at [Walden University](#), and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Missouri. Kacy has been

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About the Editors

Genie Nicole Giaimo (**Editor**) is Assistant Professor and Director of the Writing Center at Middlebury College in Vermont. Along with Yanar Hashlamon, she is the special editor of a recent WLN issue (January – February 2020) on wellness and care in writing center work. Her work has been published in *Praxis*, *Journal of Writing Research*, *The Journal of Writing Analytics*, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *Research in Online Literacy Education*, and *Kairos*, as well as a number of edited collections (Utah State University Press, Parlor Press). She is past Vice President and Conference Chair (2018) of ECWCA and is currently Vermont State Representative for NEWCA. She is also Co-Chair of the IWCA Collaborative. Her current research utilizes quantitative and qualitative models to answer a range of questions about behaviors and practices in and around writing centers, such as tutor attitudes towards wellness and self-care practices, tutor engagement with writing center documentation, and students' perceptions of writing centers.

As editor, this is Genie's first book length engagement with the topic of wellness and care in writing centers, though she is currently finalizing an academic monograph on this topic. A native of New York City, she lives in Columbus, Ohio, and Middlebury, Vermont.

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