

## CHAPTER 8

# “SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST AN ‘A’”: A TRANSFORMATIVE HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER PARTNERSHIP

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and Kristen Nichols-Besel**

In late 2011, Burnsville High School (BHS) teacher Marie Hansen contacted Kirsten Jamsen, director of the Center for Writing at the University of Minnesota (UMN), with what she thought was a kind of wild request—“Can I bring my high school writing coaches to campus to visit your writing center?” In true Minnesota fashion, Kirsten and the Center’s assistant directors Debra Hartley and Katie Levin, along with graduate writing consultant (and former K–12 teacher with an interest in high school writing centers as sites of teacher development) Kristen Nichols-Besel responded, “Ya, you betcha!”—welcoming the opportunity to embark on an experimental and collaborative journey together. The story of this developing partnership between a well-established, multi-location university writing center with a strong focus on writing across the curriculum (WAC) and a small high school writing center located in an English teacher’s classroom reveals how curiosity, risk-taking, and grassroots enthusiasm can start and sustain a partnership despite minimal resources.

At the beginning, not one of us had any idea our partnership would go so far, but now, more than two years later, we have created a mutually beneficial program of cross-institutional professional development for both high school student writing coaches and university student writing consultants. Although the success of our partnership is due in large part to our willingness to communicate with each other, jump into action, make mistakes, and be flexible, this is more than a story of individuals. The BHS–UMN partnership grew out of—and continues to enrich—a strong, professional community of educators committed to teaching writing, most notably our mini-regional organization of writing center professionals and the local network of National Writing Project teacher-leaders. In this way our partnership seeks to be what Henry Luce describes as an ideal writing center collaboration: “an on-going and growing community of writers,

mutually supportive, mutually instructive” (130).

With our deep and broad engagement in a wide variety of cross-institutional communities of practice, all participants in the partnership saw the collaborative, experimental, inquiry-based values at its core to be a natural part of their writing center work. From the start, we five co-leaders have been energized and sustained by two convictions: (1) student coaches and consultants are capable of—and can learn from each other about—engaging their peers in meaningful conversations about writing across the curriculum, and (2) observing and experiencing the work of another writing center helps us to reflect upon and improve our own practice. We hope this story of our partnership will inspire others to seek out their local networks and take the courageous steps of reaching out across institutional boundaries to find out what others are doing, to ask for help, to share resources, to develop cross-institutional staff education models, or to simply converse as we would in a supportive writing center consultation.

## **TWO STORYLINES CONVERGE TO FORM A PARTNERSHIP**

The initial 2011 connection that kicked off our partnership involved the convergence of two storylines: Marie’s individual quest to create the Burnsville High School (BHS) Writing Center in 2008 and Kirsten and Katie’s efforts to support the development of high school writing centers in Minnesota, which solidified when they participated in a workshop on high school-university WAC partnerships at a 2010 conference. These stories came together in 2011 during the Minnesota Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute.

In 2008, fresh out of college, Marie began her education career teaching English at BHS, a large public high school in a suburb of Minneapolis. From the beginning she faced frustration. No matter how many times she talked about thesis statements or academic voice in front of the classroom, her students just didn’t “get it.” Their essays fell short of her expectations, and she could not figure out why she wasn’t reaching them. Drawing on her college experience as a writing tutor at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota for two-and-a-half years, she began encouraging her students to come in for after-school conferences before major essays were due.<sup>1</sup> Something wonderful happened when she had one-to-one conversations with her students. Even though she used the exact same words to explain thesis statements, for example, these individual conferences produced the “lightbulb” moments she had been missing in class. She began to see a real change in her students’ writing. Despite her sense of success, Marie knew that after-school teacher conferences would not be feasible with 150 students; she couldn’t possibly meet with all of them. What if her students could receive writing support similar to what she and her colleagues had given at Bethel?

Marie began researching high school writing centers and found only one in Minnesota: the Minnetonka High School Writing Center (<http://www.minnetonka.k12.mn.us/writingcenter>), which at that time involved tutoring done by two professional teachers and several parent volunteers.<sup>2</sup> As a first-year teacher, Marie knew she could not ask her administration to pay for something so expensive. But what if she set up a center staffed with peer tutors? As a young teacher, Marie vividly remembered the struggle high school seniors often face as they try to demonstrate community service and extracurricular activities on their college applications. Could she use this need to attract volunteer tutors? She connected with several colleagues who directed the National Honor Society and Youth Service programs at BHS, and they agreed to accept tutoring hours for credit. Motivated by a desire to improve student writing and relying on the competitive nature of college-bound seniors, an idea was born. As Childers, Fels, and Jordan remind us, “All one really needs to start a writing center is an idea of what that writing center will be” (7).

In retrospect, the rest of the process of setting up the BHS Writing Center was simple and refreshingly free of red tape. It involved first talking to departmental colleagues, and then running the idea past the principal in a thirty-second hallway conversation. The principal asked for a brief proposal ( $\frac{3}{4}$  page) and meeting (fifteen minutes), after which Marie was officially the proud director of the new BHS Writing Center, opening in fall of 2009.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting back, Marie recognizes that if she had gone into a formal meeting asking for a stipend, money for paying tutors, a paid period to work at the center during the school day, or a fancy space decked out with extra computers and other resources, she would have been turned down. Rather, she took the approach of minimal commitment and maximum student benefit, agreeing that the center would not cost BHS any money, at least not for the first year. After that, she thought, she would be in a better position to ask for resources. Marie also wisely tapped into BHS’s strong focus on college readiness for all students, language she heard in every staff meeting and school communication. She had easily sold her administration on the idea of a student-staffed writing center that benefited both high achieving student leaders and struggling students. With invaluable advice about logistics from her friend and former supervisor April Schmidt, director of the Writing Center at Bethel University, Marie recruited tutors for the following school year from the strong writers in her eleventh-grade English classes, put up posters, developed sign-in and record-keeping systems, and organized tutor training.

Even though starting the BHS Writing Center in fall 2009 was easier than she imagined, keeping it stable and helping it to thrive was trickier. By 2011, building and sustaining the BHS Writing Center felt practically impossible to Marie. Drawing on what she remembered from college, Marie and her writing

coaches advertised in English classes; begged teachers to send in their students, even if it took bribing them with extra credit; offered to tutor before school, after school, and during tutors' study halls; and simplified every aspect of signing up for a writing consultation. After two years, however, the BHS Writing Center was helping fewer than one hundred students per semester (in a large suburban high school with more than two thousand students), and those clients were almost always coming from Marie's classes. With this writing center functioning more as an extension of Marie's classroom rather than a school-wide opportunity, the coaches were becoming discouraged. Their sessions rarely lasted longer than fifteen minutes, and they began skipping their volunteer shifts.

Enter the Minnesota Writing Project (MWP), the local site of the National Writing Project, housed in the UMN Center for Writing.<sup>4</sup> At UMN, the Center for Writing is a locus of what Robert W. Barnett and Lois M. Rosen call a "campus-wide writing environment" (1): this comprehensive center offers one-to-one writing consultations for students, writing-across-the-curriculum workshops and consultations for instructors, support for research into the ways in which writing can foster learning in and across the disciplines, and a writing-enriched curriculum program that guides academic departments through a process of infusing writing and writing instruction into their undergraduate curricula.<sup>5</sup>

With three years of teaching under her belt, in 2011 Marie was ready for new ideas to improve her teaching and build a professional network beyond her school. Four of Marie's BHS colleagues were teacher consultants through the MWP, and MWP director Muriel Thompson had taught at BHS for many years before retiring and working at UMN. Because of their encouragement and support, Marie participated in the MWP Invitational Summer Institute in June and July of 2011. Here she met teachers from across grade levels and disciplines, and was first introduced to Kirsten and Debra, who help lead the MWP Summer Institute each year. Marie remembers that she had to build up her courage to ask for writing tutor training support from Kirsten and really didn't expect her to say yes.<sup>6</sup>

For Kirsten, saying yes was easy. Even before she and Debra had spent the summer with Marie writing, reading, and participating in teaching demonstrations together during the MWP Summer Institute, Kirsten and many of her colleagues in the Center for Writing had been learning more about high school writing centers, talking with Maggie Shea as she established the Minnetonka High School Writing Center, and thinking about how to support the growth of writing centers in primary and secondary schools in Minnesota. Those thoughts began to take actionable form when Kirsten and Katie participated in Pamela Childers and Jacob Blumner's workshop on High School-University WAC Partnerships at the 2010 International Writing Across the Curriculum conference in

Bloomington, Indiana.

When they were asked to reflect on partnerships in the workshop, Katie and Kirsten recognized how much they had gained from their active participation in professional organizations like the Midwest Writing Centers Association, the International Writing Centers Association, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the National Council of Teachers of English. Indeed, at Indiana University that week, they had just participated in a meeting of Big Ten writing center directors and would return home for the next meeting of the Writing Center Professionals of Minnesota (WCPM), an informal mini-regional group of writing and learning center administrators from a wide variety of institutions of higher education across Minnesota. Although WCPM had already proven to be a resource for high school writing centers (with Maggie Shea from Minnetonka High School now attending meetings and, unknown to Katie and Kirsten, WCPM-er April Schmidt supporting Marie’s development of the BHS Writing Center), the size of the group (over 100 members) would limit the opportunity for secondary school teachers’ voices to be heard. To facilitate a focus on writing centers in secondary and primary schools, the idea for the E12 (Early education through twelfth grade) Writing Centers Collective was born: an informal, grassroots network for anyone leading, starting, or just dreaming about a writing center in a preschool, elementary, or secondary school context.<sup>7</sup> Like WCPM, from which it was an offshoot, the E12 Collective would share the motto “Anyone who comes belongs,” encourage information sharing and support among members, and meet regularly at different writing centers. In September 2010, Maggie Shea hosted the first meeting at the Minnetonka High School Writing Center, and since that time this group has met eight times, at six different secondary school writing centers and twice at UMN. Many of the teachers in the E12 Collective are also active MWP teacher consultants, who have helped expand and strengthen the network by inviting colleagues into the group and serving as resources for one another.

Marie’s 2011 request for help brought these two separate storylines together and began the process of shaping a collaboration based on shared values, mutual respect, and the desire to create a partnership of benefit to both writing centers. On the surface, the partnership between UMN and BHS may seem improbable. Located at the state’s flagship university, the UMN Center for Writing is visible and long-established, drawing on a history of writing tutoring since the early 1970s, of formal programs for writing across the curriculum since 1987, and of National Writing Project site leadership since 1990. Its Student Writing Support (SWS) program has multiple locations, both physical and online; offers computers for student use; provides hundreds of resources and texts; conducts over 10,000 writing consultations each year; and hires undergraduate and graduate

students and professionals to work as writing consultants (currently maintaining a staff of forty consultants). At BHS, the writing center is in a corner of Marie's classroom, sign-ups are written on a calendar on the hallway wall outside, student attendance can be inconsistent, and the coaches are high school students. The BHS Writing Center finally secured a computer after four years of existence, but still lacks an internet connection. Despite our vastly different centers, however, we share many of the same beliefs about what writers need and how best to tutor writers, and these shared values allow our partnership to thrive.

## **A CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL MODEL OF CONSULTANT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS BORN**

Shortly after Marie posed her question to Kirsten, we arranged a face-to-face meeting at the UMN Center for Writing to talk about possibilities. Although Marie was meeting Katie and graduate writing consultant Kristen Nichols-Besel (who had been interested in high school writing centers since she first learned about them at the 2008 International Writing Centers Association conference) for the first time, introductions and small talk quickly became action. Kristen volunteered to lead Marie and her BHS coaches on a tour of SWS's two physical locations and demonstrate SWS.online, and together we came up with the idea of having the BHS coaches experience college writing consultations with SWS consultants after SWS closed for the day. This "field trip to the U" would both introduce the BHS coaches to an established university writing center that employs consultants and serves writers from across the disciplines, and give them the experience of sharing their own writing with a writing consultant—something none of them had done before.<sup>8</sup>

The plan became a reality in March 2012, when Marie secured funding from her principal for a bus and brought fifteen coaches to campus for a five-hour visit, which also included lunch at the student union with former BHS coaches who were now UMN students, and a chance to tour campus before meeting with Kristen. As the BHS coaches watched college students meeting face-to-face with SWS consultants in two locations and saw a brief presentation about SWS.online consultations, Kristen and Marie encouraged these high school seniors to use and consider applying for work at the writing centers of the colleges they would attend the following year. Then, the doors of SWS were closed to UMN students, and the cross-institutional activity began.

We formed groups of three—one SWS consultant and two BHS writing coaches—for two rounds of thirty-minute consultations. The BHS students brought their own writing, including personal essays for college applications that had already been submitted, and essays for their challenging College in the

Schools writing and economics courses. While each SWS consultant worked with a BHS coach on her/his writing, the other coach observed and took notes, using a set of guiding questions (see Appendix 1). Then, the consultee and observer switched roles and rotated to work with a different SWS consultant for a second round of thirty-minute consultations and observations. Finally, we all met in a forty-minute, large-group debriefing discussion, sharing what coaches experienced as consultees and recorded while observing, and using the debriefing questions to focus our discussion. The BHS coaches were eager to talk during the debrief, noting that they were surprised by how much the SWS consultants negotiated agenda-setting with them and put them in the role of expert on the content of their writing. Many of the BHS coaches were enthusiastic about the experience of interacting with the SWS consultants, who were interested in and respectful of their ideas, as well as encouraging about ways the writers could improve and revise their papers. As Kevin (a pseudonym) noted, this interaction with a consultant made him realize how talking about how to improve a paper and grow as a writer was about “so much more than just an ‘A.’” Similarly, the SWS consultants shared how much they enjoyed working with writers who brought strong, polished drafts and were motivated to be there and learn more about expectations for college-level writing.

Upon returning to BHS, Marie noticed a powerful change in how her coaches worked with writers. Before, their sessions were very short, averaging just fifteen minutes. Indeed, in her initial training, she had put so much emphasis on prioritizing global over local concerns (in other words, tackling thesis and organization before grammar and word choice) that her coaches seemed to think that the only way they could cover all those issues in a session was to rush through their suggestions quickly. After working with SWS consultants, her coaches began conducting thirty-minute consultations using the specific strategies employed by the SWS consultants, such as reading an essay slowly out loud or mirroring back what they heard in the student’s draft (“What I hear you saying is ... Is that correct?”). Instead of telling student writers what to do to get a better grade, they began asking questions that could encourage writers to take ownership over their papers and draw out their own ideas for revision: “What is the purpose of this paragraph?” “How do you think this idea fits in with your thesis?” and “How did you realize this claim was true when you were reading the book?” From working with the SWS consultants, the BHS coaches realized that their role was not to tell the students what was wrong with their essays and send them out the door; rather, they could ask students about their own goals and purposes, encourage them to help guide the session, and use questions and conversation to facilitate the student writers’ own thinking and writing. As they developed these skills, the BHS coaches realized that they did not need to have



taken a class to help a student writing for that class; instead, they could, like SWS consultants, rely on the student writers for content expertise, no matter what the discipline.

With such marked improvement in the work of her coaches (all of whom graduated in June 2012), Marie was eager to bring her next cohort of coaches to UMN sooner, when they were first learning how to consult. In October 2012, Marie brought nineteen new BHS coaches, and we followed the same field trip schedule and three-person consultation and debrief protocol.<sup>9</sup> These new coaches were very engaged in their consultations, but during the debriefing were more reluctant to share their impressions of what happened; in retrospect, this reluctance was not surprising, because most had not yet seen any student clients in their center and were therefore at a loss when we asked them to draw comparisons between the two centers. Nonetheless, Marie noticed again that her coaches began to mimic the strategies they observed as they began consulting in their center. Because the BHS coaches were so engaged in their SWS consultations, they returned to BHS with high expectations for engagement in consultations with their fellow BHS students. We learned later that they were disappointed when BHS student writers requested quick corrections rather than engaging in more substantive conversations about their work and their process.

To give SWS consultants a chance to hear about what the coaches had been doing since their visit and to challenge the hierarchy we had created of high school coaches learning how to tutor from university consultants, a small number of the SWS consultants who participated in the October collaboration visited the BHS Writing Center in May 2013. We hoped this role reversal would help the BHS coaches gain confidence in their ability to help experienced writers with unfamiliar assignments and begin to see themselves as part of and contributing to a larger writing center community. During the first part of the visit, the BHS coaches explained how their sessions had worked during the year and described sessions that they enjoyed or struggled with—noting that they enjoyed sessions where the writer had ideas to discuss, but they disliked the sessions in which it was difficult to get the writer to talk. The BHS coaches (all seniors) also admitted that they were often most comfortable working with papers from classes they had taken and assignments they were familiar with, leading to a discussion about working with students writing in different subject areas, expertise, authority, and the triangulated relationship between tutors, teachers, and students. When the seven SWS consultants shared their writing with the Burnsville coaches, we connected each university writer with at least two BHS coaches. Many of the coaches seemed uncomfortable giving feedback on the university consultants' writing, although they were very eager to find out more about the expectations of college-level writing and talk about their own college plans—not surprising



for graduating seniors. After the visit, some shared with Marie that they felt a significant barrier between themselves and “expert” university-level consultants, something the next phase of our partnership will try to address more explicitly.

Despite the complexities of coordinating field trips between our centers, we all agree that this partnership has been a positive and affirming experience. Both writing centers believe in the value of peer tutoring, a minimum of hierarchy, and respect for all writers. Although many high schools use college students, pre-service teachers, parent volunteers, or their own school staff as writing consultants, Marie has always believed in her students’ capabilities to ask thoughtful, probing questions and engage in intelligent conversations with their peers. UMN’s writing consultants affirmed her faith in the competency of the BHS coaches. During these practice consultations and discussions, the SWS consultants and high school coaches developed camaraderie and a mutual respect. Their interactions also demonstrated the power of conversation between a careful questioner/listener and a writer in an unfamiliar course or discipline. With guidance from experienced consultants at UMN, BHS coaches are gaining confidence and developing their tutoring repertoire.

Similarly, the directors of both centers appreciate the benefits of flexibility. Rather than becoming stonewalled by bureaucracy and red tape, we all believe in finding a way to work around restrictions. When confronted with low funding, for example, we are all willing to find creative solutions. Marie has been leading her writing center as extra service without a stipend, her student coaches work without pay, and her principal funds her bus for field trips to UMN out of a special account. UMN consultants participate in these collaborations as part of their paid professional development time. UMN consultants pay for their own travel to Burnsville when we meet there. Maintaining this flexible and generous attitude, rather than assuming that things must work a certain way, has allowed us to accomplish much more together.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to providing valuable professional development for coaches and consultants in both centers, this partnership has had a positive effect on the growth of E12 writing centers in our area. One of the most powerful moments in the partnership was when in May 2012, a few months after our first collaboration, Marie and her coaches hosted a meeting of the E12 Writing Centers Collective. In this meeting, attended by teachers involved in teacher- and parent-led writing centers in their schools as well as those getting ready to launch new centers, a panel of Marie’s coaches reflected on the experience of coming to UMN two months earlier, shared how and why they volunteer their time in the center, and responded to many questions about what they would recommend for establishing writing centers and supporting peer coaches. The teachers in the E12 Collective still talk about how impressed they were by Marie’s coaches, and

the writing center directors at both a large public urban high school and small private suburban school later shared how much that conversation influenced their own thinking about what their centers could be.

As we hope our story reveals, the values of this cross-institutional writing center partnership are also WAC values. In making a case for the natural connection between WAC and writing centers, Steven Corbett and Michelle LaFrance articulate the shared WAC/writing center beliefs that “students come to understand writing conventions as the products of disciplinary communities when they can compare writing tasks and conventions across disciplinary contexts”; that “writers at all levels of proficiency benefit from thinking about the often unspoken assumptions of ‘effective’ writing within particular contexts”; and that “the writing center [is] a *cross-curricular way of learning*” (2, 6). We believe that our collaboration is, to paraphrase Corbett and LaFrance, a *cross-institutional way of learning*. The same kinds of conversation, listening, collaborative problem-solving, and co-learning across disciplines that take place in a WAC writing center undergird many of our shared professional networks and are at the heart of our BHS–UMN partnership. We are excited that our partnership has begun to encourage and nurture other cross-institutional collaborations, as we’ve shared our learning-in-progress with members of Writing Center Professionals of Minnesota and the E12 Writing Centers Collective.

From our partnership, we have seen evidence of many dimensions of cross-institutional learning—for all parties involved.

### **1. The high school coaches developed a collaborative, conversational philosophy of tutoring, which made them more confident in their ability to help others, and gave them specific consulting approaches to enact this philosophy.**

The story of one BHS writing coach reveals the powerful effect of participating in university writing consultations. Marie was nervous at the beginning of the year because one of her coaches, Callie (a pseudonym), was extremely shy. Callie panicked every time she had to speak in public and told Marie she felt uncomfortable telling students how to write an essay. Conscientious and thoughtful, Callie was afraid she would offend writers with blunt directions, creating a big challenge for her as a coach. Callie did not speak much during her visit to UMN, but Marie noticed her approach to tutoring immediately changed after that visit. Callie became one of Marie’s most successful coaches because she asked so many thoughtful questions. Marie believes that Callie realized by participating in and observing conferences in SWS that she didn’t need to tell students what to do or have the “right” answers; she just needed to have a conversation. Callie felt confident initiating a conversation because it didn’t require

as much directiveness as she first assumed, and she found herself able to help her peers much more. As they become comfortable with asking questions and drawing out student knowledge in the consultations, BHS coaches are better prepared to work with students writing across the disciplines.

After both visits to UMN, Marie noticed all of her consultants trying the very strategies they observed SWS consultants using with them: asking writers to share their goals and concerns, negotiating an agenda together, asking probing questions, mirroring back what they heard in a text, encouraging a writer’s ownership and self-assessment of their writing, and talking about one’s writing process beyond the text in front of them. Even the English teachers at BHS took notice, commenting to Marie about the coaches’ use of questioning and conversation in the writing center and during in-class peer review sessions. BHS student clients have also noted that the coaches ask the same kinds of questions their teachers do.

**2. As the BHS Writing Center began using a collaborative, conversational approach that talked about writing as more than just “English papers,” both consultants and student writers began to consider how this work involves negotiations around disciplinary knowledge, previous writing experiences, and levels of expertise and authority.**

During their visits, BHS coaches observed and worked with both undergraduate and graduate SWS consultants from a wide range of majors, such as American studies, biology, education, history, political science, and theatre. The fact that SWS consultants shared their perspectives on writing in different fields and at different levels—and did not know anything about the BHS English teachers who encourage much of the BHS Writing Center activity—opened up the high school coaches to talking about writing across the curriculum and for different audiences and purposes.

In fact, it was the BHS writing coaches and students in her class who alerted Marie to the buzz around school about a particularly challenging historiography assignment, opening the door for the writing center to work more closely with AP United States History teachers and their students. When Marie emailed the history teachers to chat, they were open to sharing what they were looking for in these essays—sending her their rubric, a checklist of important things to remember, and a relevant PowerPoint presentation.<sup>11</sup> Although only a small number of students are using the writing center for their historiography essays so far, Marie and the history teachers are eager to continue working together in future semesters by publicizing their partnership to students early in the process.

This expanded view of writing also encouraged student clients to see the value in a conversation between peers and that they too could become writing

coaches. For example, when honors student Keisha (a pseudonym) began visiting the BHS Writing Center several times without receiving extra credit as most students did, Marie became curious and pulled her aside after class to ask if she was struggling with the assignment or had any questions. Keisha explained that it helped to talk about her ideas with someone else while she was writing her college application essays. Despite her anxiety with this high-stakes writing, when Keisha went home each night with a new question from her coach to answer, she was able to write a little bit more, return the next day for more help, and repeat the process. Keisha's continued writing center usage would never have happened if her coach, Austin (a pseudonym), who both visited UMN in October 2012 and participated in the May 2013 discussion at BHS, had not focused on asking so many questions about Keisha's experiences, probing her for more information about what she had learned. Austin's approach to these meetings as an informal conversation between two writers chatting about ideas and word choice significantly reduced Keisha's stress. Her final essay was excellent, and she applied to be a coach for 2013–14, largely because of this experience.

### **3. High school writing coaches and their student clients gained support in preparing for college, while, at the same time, university writing consultants gained valuable insight into the high school-to-college transition from working with high school writers.**

The initial connection between the BHS Writing Center and college readiness appealed to the BHS administration, in part because of the center's contribution to what Luce identifies as “bridging the gap between high school and college ... ensuring the continuity of excellence throughout the system” (129). Similarly, in their survey of secondary school and university WAC partnerships, Blumner and Childers note the common desire of high schools to “create seamless transitions between high school and college” (92). Students who visit the BHS Writing Center benefit from learning that asking for help is okay, and have become more aware of writing centers and other academic support resources in college. Senior coaches appreciate the opportunity to *be in college* during their field trips, are eager to share what they experienced with their peers, and begin to see opportunities for student leadership that they can take advantage of when they leave high school in just one year.

For example, at the first UMN field trip, BHS senior Allie Waters connected with Kristen about the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), which Kristen had attended as an undergraduate and which Allie planned to attend in the fall. Once at UNI, Allie started visiting the writing center with her own essays, and then she was hired as a tutor at the end of her freshman year. She tells us no one at UNI can figure out how an accounting major ended up becoming a writing

center tutor and even publishing a short story in the campus literary magazine. Allie acknowledges that she probably wouldn't have considered the possibility without having the background as a high school writing coach and visiting the UMN Center for Writing. In addition, several graduated BHS coaches have told Marie how quickly they began using their university writing centers, and we are eager for those attending UMN to apply to be undergraduate writing consultants. Clearly, college students are more likely to visit a center if they have already observed its value, rather than entering college believing there is a stigma associated with asking for help with writing.

We have also learned that the word “college” bears so much weight for high schoolers because they see it as a place where people are intelligent, capable, and have the “right” answers. When they worked with the UMN consultants on campus, the BHS coaches were very receptive to the consultants' ideas because they arrived ready to learn. In addition, when Marie and her graduating coaches passed out applications for next year's coaches, only a few students were interested. After Marie reminded the coaches, “Tell them about the U!” and her coaches described the training at UMN, many more hands went up. These prospective coaches believe that they will be effective writing coaches next year, not because they see themselves as strong writers, but because they assume working with consultants at the UMN can get them there, as both writers and coaches.

Building off this strong interest in college readiness, the BHS Writing Center has marketed itself as the place to prepare for college, offering a semi-annual “Grammar Crammer” before the eleventh grade grammar final exam each semester. In this popular event, which attracted over 100 students in 2012–13, BHS Writing Center coaches help students correct extra practice questions, which are similar to those in the high-stakes ACT verbal section. Similarly, the BHS Writing Center sponsors a panel of local college admissions directors who share their insights into college application essays, and then follows that panel with a week of additional tutoring hours to help application essay writers.

As the BHS coaches asked about college more generally during their consultations, the UMN writing consultants found themselves in the role of guides and insiders. Many consultants enjoyed sharing stories about their own transitions from high school to college and their suggestions for making the most out of college and being successful as a student. For the youngest and newest UMN undergraduate consultants, this partnership provided a rare opportunity for them to feel a sense of expertise among their more experienced colleagues, many of whom are graduate students and professionals.

The UMN consultants also expanded their understanding of the transition from high school to college-level writing and how they can best help first-year students—affirming Cox and Gimbel's argument, in Chapter 2 of this book,

that those in high schools and colleges have much to learn from each other about how writing is used in each other's context. Though many consultants commented that working with these high school seniors was similar in many ways to working with college freshmen, they were able to have conversations with the students about high school writing and the students' concerns about the upcoming transition from high school to college. They appreciated the opportunity to expand their understanding of this transition and to talk with highly motivated high school writers about their strong, very polished drafts.

#### **4. Directors at both the high school and university writing centers found support, connection, and inspiration through this partnership, which became a touchstone for their larger community of writing center professionals.**

The learning arising from this partnership was not limited to coaches and consultants, as the directors of both centers gained significantly from the project. During her first two years running the BHS Writing Center, Marie felt a bit like she was living on a deserted island. If she had not met the Center for Writing staff in 2011, she questions whether she would have continued the BHS Writing Center. She likely would have become discouraged and run out of new ideas to try to bring students in, as both coaches and clients. Buoyed by the positive energy of this partnership and the enthusiasm her coaches have for our collaboration, Marie has greater confidence and belief in the value of her efforts. Not surprisingly, her center has become more visible, her student usage has tripled, and more students apply to be coaches each year.

Kirsten, Debra, and Katie have long been supportive of local secondary writing centers through hosting meetings of the E12 Writing Centers Collective and meeting individually with secondary teachers starting their own centers. Yet those conversations have often felt one-way, sharing UMN practices without deep knowledge of what is really possible in a high school writing center. The collaborative nature of the BHS-UMN partnership opened our eyes to the realities of writing consultancy in a high school setting: where and when it happens, the kinds of assignments and audiences high school writers face, and—most importantly— who the high school coaches are and what motivates them as writers and consultants. The fact we have pulled off regular field trips and meetings has strengthened and inspired the larger E12 Writing Centers Collective as well, building our grassroots network to be one where we visit each others' centers and share our practices together.

#### **5. University directors were able to use the partnership as a key component of their staff professional development efforts, providing them and their consultants a fresh perspective on their own practice, questioning their assump-**

**tions, seeing alternatives, and wrestling with challenging questions raised by our different writing center contexts.**

As the lively full-group discussion in our March 2012 meeting revealed, all participants were intrigued by the differences between our writing center contexts and how our pedagogies adapt to and push against those contexts. Faced with curious young coaches who wanted to learn how to tutor, university consultants had the opportunity to articulate the strategies and beliefs behind their practices. Although the UMN Center for Writing consultants participate in professional development on a regular basis, rarely do the consultants have the chance to have such in-depth conversations about their practices with eager learners who are curious and appreciative. As UMN undergraduate consultant Damian Johansson describes:

I love working with the Burnsville tutors. It is always exciting to work with people that are purely interested in the topic of work, and these kids were so ready to talk and learn about tutoring, making for a fun, informative, and truly productive day. I would have described it as relaxed, but the sessions were so charged with interested participants that it wasn't exactly relaxed, but still enjoyable.

During spring semester last year we visited the tutors at the Burnsville campus, bringing our work for their consideration. I decided to push this unique experience further by bringing a creative piece with me for consultation. The tutor I worked with was both flabbergasted and excited to review a creative piece. He was a creative writer himself, and although slightly daunted, he volunteered to work with me. We talked about creative writing in general, and after he confided his love of creative writing to me, I asked if he had any of his writing with him. As all writers should, he had hardcopy with him. I asked if, while he read my piece, I could read some of his. This broke down the barrier of perceived authority/old dudeness that he was shackled with, and he dove into his backpack. We read, side by side, both making noises of enjoyment or interest as we read. Afterwards, we first talked about my piece, as this was my session for help, and then I generally talked about my perceptions of his piece, mostly responding to his direct questions about it.

Not only did the university and high school tutors make connections and



develop a sense of “peeriness,” as Damian describes, but the experience of stepping into another writing center helped them explore such controversial issues as consultant expertise and the triangulated relationship between consultants, teachers, and students. As UMN undergraduate writing consultant Alysha Bohanon reflected recently:

Even if you’ve taken the same class as the student [at UMN], the chance of you taking that class with the same professor is slim. High school is very different, and I wonder how these coaches would go about separating their personal experience in a class from their position as a tutor. Shielding your expertise wouldn’t work when the student already knows you had to have taken the class, since you are in the same school. It was especially interesting to me that one of the reasons Burnsville teachers referred students to the writing center was because the coaches had already taken the class and knew what was expected in the assignment—I’m not sure how the high school coaches could possibly escape their expertise in this scenario.

Despite the different atmospheres of high school and college writing, I think a version of this pressure to “make it do what the professor wants” creeps into our center sometimes, particularly with undergraduate writers. It’s still so much about grades and pleasing your professor at that level, even if there is more creativity involved. I’ve seen too many written comments from professors telling students to come to the center to figure out what is expected in an assignment, as though we are not only experts in every discipline, but also mind readers for confusing assignment sheets.

Seeing the constraints of the high school writing center made visible to UMN consultants the often invisible constraints in our university context, opening us all up to deeper conversations about working with writers across the curriculum and negotiating expertise that have continued in our ongoing staff development.

## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

The UMN consultants who have participated in the consultations and conversations with BHS coaches are helping to keep our collaboration going by regularly asking, “When are we going to see the high schoolers again?” and “How’s

the Burnsville High School Writing Center doing?” As we move into our third year of the partnership, once-per-semester BHS visits have begun to feel like another regular form of staff development in the Center for Writing, alongside regularly scheduled Friday staff meetings and discussions.

Drawing on the flexibility and risk-taking that marked the start of our partnership, we continue to experiment with new strategies for our centers and our collaboration. For example, Marie has begun to call her tutors “coaches,” rather than tutors. Although writing center literature has used the “coach” metaphor since as early as 1986 (see, for example, Muriel Harris’s *Teaching One-to-One*), this particular decision stems from a conversation during the May 2013 UMN visit to BHS, where we talked together about the parallels between athletic coaching and coaching writers. We believe that for high-schoolers, who are often familiar with a coaching philosophy from their experiences with youth athletics, this name change may promote a new style of tutoring, as well as confidence. In addition, as part of their staff development, Marie’s coaches are now reading excerpts from Dawn Fels and Jennifer Wells’s *The Successful High School Writing Center* (including Alexandra Elchinoff and Caroline Kowalski’s chapter, “The Tutors Speak,” to bring in perspectives from yet another school). They will also write a literacy narrative essay, the same one that new UMN undergraduate writing consultants write in Kirsten’s Theory and Practice of Writing Consultancy class, before visiting UMN (Appendix 2). We hope this shared assignment will create more of a common ground between the high school coaches and UMN writing consultants who have written it themselves in Kirsten’s class or are familiar with this annual assignment. We hope that by responding to the assignment prompts about personal reading and writing history, BHS coaches may realize that they all have the background necessary to contribute to a conversation about literacy.

In future years, Marie will hire new coaches sooner than the last few weeks of school, creating more continuity from year to year in our partnership. During April, there is usually a lull in the BHS center, and senior coaches begin to lose focus at the end of the year. Marie plans to sign up new junior coaches and organize training sessions throughout the spring with both incoming and experienced coaches, including the spring visit from UMN tutors. Therefore, three types of tutors will be able to participate in mock consultations and observations—SWS consultants, BHS senior coaches, and BHS junior prospective coaches—fostering a feeling of expertise and continued commitment from both incoming and experienced coaches.

Recognizing that the heart of our collaboration is the interaction happening between the high school coaches and university consultants, we will continue to work on breaking down the barriers to open sharing and discussion, experi-

menting with small group discussions to debrief the practice consultations before moving to large group conversations. Inspired by the work of Rebecca L. Damon and Melody Denny at the Oklahoma State University Writing Center and Writing Project, we are considering using a structured, shared blog, where SWS consultants and BHS coaches can talk about their experiences and offer each other support.

The success of our partnership has also helped generate enthusiasm across our E12 Writing Centers Collective for more cross-institutional learning among our growing number of secondary writing centers. At the last E12 meeting, Marie and Kelly Langdon, who directs the Farmington High School Writing Center, began talking about an August mini-conference for student coaches, which would help meet the training needs of novice coaches, provide a valuable form of leadership and professional development for experienced coaches, and expand our network to include more student voices and ideas.

Those student voices are essential for the BHS Writing Center to be seen as a resource for students and teachers across the curriculum. Marie continues to ask her coaches and students in her classes to tell her about their challenging essays in other courses so she can reach out to the teachers, and so that the writing center can set up help sessions, much like the after-school and evening “writing parties” around common assignments that take place in the Minnetonka High School Writing Center. Based on the positive interest she has already received from the advanced placement U.S. History teachers, Marie sees much potential in explicit WAC outreach to social studies and AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) teachers.

After more than four years since the BHS Writing Center’s beginning and two years into our partnership, we are all proud that the BHS Writing Center has become a more visible and ingrained part of school culture. BHS students and teachers know what the center is, and Marie’s coaches hosted approximately three hundred separate student visits during 2012–13 in various formats. BHS English teachers have committed to encouraging students to come in after school, sometimes by offering extra credit and other incentives and setting up sessions where coaches visit their classes. In addition, many of the new coaches for 2013–2014 have used the center multiple times as sophomore and junior students. In fact, several of them have taken a college preparatory class for capable students who need a bit of extra guidance to reach college readiness, which includes a requirement to visit the BHS Writing Center once a semester. These future coaches already understand the value of a thoughtful conversation about their essays, so we are excited to see how they challenge the past divide between BHS Writing Center coaches (typically honors students who had not used the center) and clients (typically underclassmen needing extra help). With increased

visibility and a growing understanding among coaches of the value of one-to-one consultations for *all* writers, the BHS Writing Center has the potential to be seen as a resource for students and teachers at all levels and across the curriculum.

Looking to the future, we are striving for small increments of growth in our partnership over time, and we are patient enough to develop cross-curricular models that fit our local context. We will continue to incorporate all three of the basic components of collaboration described by Blumner and Childers in their study of successful university-secondary school WAC partnerships: we will engage in “information exchange,” “involve students,” and continue to “provide support” through human and financial resources (95-97). With the UMN partnership, BHS coaches are more effectively trained and feel more confident working with students’ writing across the curriculum, and Marie no longer feels as if she is alone on an island. Conversations with Kirsten, Katie, Debra, and Kristen have inspired Marie more than any other resource, and the feeling of mutual benefit for all members of the partnership—and our surrounding networks—is palpable. Marie will share her story and start-up strategies at the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English Conference in April 2014—with, not surprisingly, her coaches presenting alongside her.

## NOTES

1. It is such positive past experiences with writing centers that Trixie Smith identifies in Chapter 10 as motivators of successful high school-college collaborations.
2. For more information about the Minnetonka High School Writing Center, see Childers and Lowry. Minnetonka now has a large staff of volunteer student coaches in addition to teachers and parents and is actively involved in supporting teachers using writing across the curriculum.
3. This teacher-driven process contrasts with McMullen’s experience, described in Chapter 6, in which the academic dean decided his school needed a writing center.
4. See [http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource\\_topic/writing\\_centers](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource_topic/writing_centers) for evidence of the many ways NWP supports secondary school writing centers.
5. See <http://writing.umn.edu>.
6. This experience is an illustration of Trixie Smith’s point in Chapter 10 that collaborations often originate through personal connections.
7. See <http://writing.umn.edu/sws/e12wcc/index.html>.
8. For another model of shared professional development among high school and college writing consultants, see Henry Luce’s description of the collaboration between Red Bank Regional High School and Monmouth College (134).

9. See our video about this visit at <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/display/174825>.

10. In Chapter 10, Trixie Smith describes many other ways that writing centers can interact with schools and community organizations that do not require a lot of time and money.

11. This openness from content area teachers in response to Marie's outreach is a step towards the kinds of "faculty risk taking" Pamela Childers describes in her collaborations with science and math teachers at McCallie School in "Writing Center or Experimental Center for Faculty Research, Discovery, and Risk Taking?"

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## **Appendix 1: Handout used during visits to the U of MN’s Center for Writing**

### **Consulting Across the High School—College Transition:**

Burnsville High School Writing Coaches meet University of Minnesota Writing Consultants

*Friday 9 March 2012, 2:15-4:15pm, 15 Nicholson Hall*

**When you are observing a consultation, please take some notes on the following:**

What did you notice?

Who held the pen/pencil/typed on the keyboard?

Where was the paper?

How would you characterize the nonverbal communication?

How would you characterize the talk in the consultation?

What surprised you?

What might you try doing in your own coaching from watching the consultant?

**During our debrief after the consultations, we’ll discuss the above questions as well as the following:**

How did it feel when you were the student writer?

What did the writing consultants do to make writers feel comfortable? Engaged? Motivated to write/revise?

What did the coaches learn about college writing from the consultations?

What did the consultants learn about working with CIS students from the consultations?

How do the consultations at Burnsville compare to the consultations we did today (length of time, type of conversations, etc.)?

What roles do we play as consultants?

**Appendix 2: Assignment used in Jamsen’s Theory and Practice of Writing Consultancy course at the university each fall; BHS writing coaches will draft their own literacy autobiographies as part of their**

## fall 2013 training and bring them for consultations at the university

### Literacy Autobiography

**Draft Due:** Tue 18 Sept

Bring two copies of your complete draft (must have a beginning, a middle, and an end) this day for our in-class consultations

**Final Version Due:** Thur 27 Sept

As with all three of major papers in this course, you will submit the final version as a portfolio, which is the culmination of your entire process of developing, writing, sharing, and revising this paper. Even if you tend to do most of your revision work on the computer, be sure to print out the various notes, outlines, and versions to show me evidence of that process. And, as you revise, please attend to the grading criteria for this assignment listed below.

**Length:** 3-5 pages

**Genre:** The literacy autobiography is both personal and analytical. This assignment asks you to reflect upon and analyze your own experiences learning to read and write, ultimately focusing around a central idea about your literacy development that you want to share with our classroom community.

As you saw in the model papers, a successful autobiography must be focused, vivid and descriptive. As readers, we want to see, hear, and feel your experience. But, this assignment also asks you to analyze your experiences. You will make crucial decisions about what experiences to discuss and how to connect those key experiences into a central argument about your own development as a literate person or about your attitude towards your literacy. After reading your autobiography, we should come away with an understanding of both what you experienced and how and why those experiences were significant in your development.

I encourage you to approach this essay creatively, giving yourself plenty of time to reflect and brainstorm before attempting to bring your argument together. Here are several questions to help you get started. You definitely won't want to tackle all of them in a 3-5 page paper, so once you've brainstormed fully, you'll want to narrow and focus your paper. As you think about your experiences, you may also find an angle that is different than any I've suggested here.

### Brainstorming questions:

Looking around your home, your backpack, your vehicle, etc., what are the artifacts of your literacy practices? (consider not just the obvious things like books and newspapers, but also the little things like scraps of paper, Post-Its, visual texts, etc.)

What were the artifacts of literacy in your childhood?



When and how did you first learn to read? To write?

What were your parents’ or other family members’ attitudes about literacy?

What was your experience of reading and writing in school? Was it different than outside of school?

Were there any specific moments when your attitude towards reading/writing changed?

Were there any times when you were challenged to read and write in a new discourse (say, for your major or for a job)?

What was (and is) pleasurable about reading/writing? What was (and is) challenging?

How do you see yourself as a reader/writer now?

Are there ways that your own literacy helps or hinders you?

### **Grading Criteria:**

#### *Process*

1. Evidence of significant drafting and revising processes.
2. Awareness of audience and reader feedback.

#### *Focus, Evidence, and Analysis*

3. Focus on an appropriate story/argument about your own literacy.
4. Development of a compelling personal narrative with vivid details as evidence (“showing”).
5. Rigorous analysis of personal experience, drawing logical conclusions (“telling”).

#### *Product*

6. Clear, coherent, engaging style.
7. Professional presentation (format, technical details, attention to correctness at the sentence level).