Chapter 13. Writing Fellows; Fellow Students

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In the summer of 2016, as a rising college junior, I worked as a writing fellow for my campus' pre-college preparation intensive. The goal of the program was to help economically disadvantaged, often first-generation and BIPOC students gain access to higher education by guiding them throughout their college careers with extra tutoring and support. Having worked as a writing fellow during the school year, I was excited to get started with these students and thrilled about the readings they'd been assigned (*Hamlet* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, to name a few). I absolutely loved writing center work–reading about pedagogy, chatting with classmates about their writing projects, finding a close-knit community of writers on campus–so taking this summer job had been a no-brainer. I spent many afternoons beneath the frigid library air conditioning reading student drafts and planning workshops, decking out their accompanying PowerPoints with the ubiquitous memes of the moment and goofy transition effects between slides.

Working with the students, as it so often is, was wonderful. They were smart, funny, and tenacious; they had some of the hottest *Hamlet* takes I've ever heard. That wasn't the hard part.

The hard part was this program's pedagogy. It was run by a different set of staff than the writing center, which meant that while I was doing the same kind of work I did during the school year, I was expected to follow this other program's rules. They took a hardline approach: students spent from sunup to sundown in college-level courses, and then, after a short break for dinner, they'd have enrichment and tutoring followed by homework time and a mandatory curfew and lights out. This was meant to prepare them for college, but I was struck by the dissonance between the program's portrayal of college life and what my life at college was actually like: I definitely worked hard, but I also spent a lot of time napping, exploring the city, spending too long at dorm parties and then waking up late to leisurely read *Middlemarch* on the lawn. I was in charge of my own schedule, for better and for worse, and at no point did that schedule involve fourteen-hour days of pure academics. Weren't we preparing these students to see college as a constant uphill battle, rather than a time for self-discovery and fun?

At the time, I didn't feel like I could take these concerns to program administrators. I had gotten accustomed to the consistent guidance and open-door policy of my boss, who encouraged stopping by to discuss new ideas or tricky moments that came up in work with students. It was thanks to her training that I recognized

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problems with the program's zero-tolerance approach to conflict, whether it was lateness, absence, or struggle with the material. If students didn't complete or understand the reading, they'd be forced into mandatory meetings with advisors. This made students reluctant to seek help and went against everything I'd been taught at the writing center, but as a tutor with little say in the curriculum, I felt like my hands were tied. It didn't help that I met with students between 9-10 p.m. each night because their schedules were so overloaded. We were all exhausted. I love Shakespeare, but at 10 p.m. I want to be tucked into bed with a book, not discussing him with students in the empty hallways of the English department because all the classrooms are locked.

I was twenty the summer I worked in this program. I remember one particularly demoralizing evening as I walked back to my dorm, getting caught in a flash flood as I broodily made my way across campus. I was still so young, still tapering off my teenage years (and their accompanying bent for drama). I didn't know how to articulate the apprehension I was feeling.

Instead of having a conversation with my bosses, I complained during staff meetings about their rules, checked out during mandatory workplace development, and made clear to students that I also thought these policies were unfair. It seemed like we were erroneously telling them that they were already behind and that keeping up in college would mean never letting their guard down. Instead of caring for them as people and ensuring they were in charge of their own learning, we were engaging them with a pedagogy that tended toward a *Scared Straight!* mentality. They deserved so much better.

It also became clear that other students who visited the writing center during the school year were treated to a completely different kind of pedagogy. I had been taught to lift students up, reaffirm their strength as scholars, and always leave the session goals up to them. But the moment students were deemed remedial or "behind," all that went out the window. It showed me first-hand how only some students are considered worthy of transgressive teaching and student-centered approaches, and how learning goals shift based on how instructors see their students, whether those perceptions are accurate or not. Only some are provided the space to be creative, to use digression as a means for creativity, and to work at their own pace.

My main takeaways from that summer: writing center work should always center what the student wants to tackle, and I shouldn't spend sessions trying to improve student writing based on my own metrics for success. I'd been taught that the point of our labor was to help writers define and achieve their own goals, whatever that meant to them, and I needed to hold fast to that conviction even when faced with inflexible administrators and worn-out students. It's hard to write without being told exactly what to do and when to do it, but we owe it to our students to be honest about what writing entails (lots of nuance and negative capability; any Keats fans in the house?) and create the conditions for them to figure out their projects on their own. This doesn't mean letting errors slide and treating students with kid gloves, as some people incorrectly assume–this approach is actually in keeping with a high level of rigor. Part of the magic of writing center work is the ability to tailor our approach to individual students' needs and goals, and this summer job was a crucial reminder that working with students on their writing means acknowledging them first as thinkers and people. If writing is thinking, and thinking involves a synthesis of our lived experience, then how can you separate the writing from the person holding the pencil?

You can't, but that summer, we tried. And failed. The best workshops and writing conferences happened when I went off script, letting students chat, debate, and generally deviate from the course material. The worst workshops and conferences took place when I felt stressed about covering the curriculum and insisted on following the program's strict and too-fast-paced learning goals. Had I been listening more closely, I would've understood that students weren't ready to focus on constructing an argument or making a debatable claim, that they were still understanding and drawing connections to the reading material. Had I been more adept at navigating tricky workplace situations, I would've shared my concerns with program staff and we might've had a productive conversation. And had I had my finger on the pulse of cultural trends, I would've known that PowerPoint transition effects are embarrassing and my students were just too nice to say anything.

I think about this summer often, especially when I'm frustrated with a student who seems to be slacking off. I have to frequently remind myself that most effort is invisible and that even if a student isn't putting in the effort, there are lots of reasons this might be the case. I know that college is hard, and as a writer, that writing might feel impossible. So I pause, and reorient: instead of measuring their work by a rigid set of standards, how can I plant the seeds for them to continue developing the high-level cognitive skills required to get words on the page?

Writing is inherently messy–as is working with students, as is learning to teach, as is figuring out how to position ourselves as writing center workers–but the process is as important as the product (for the novice writer, maybe even more so). As teachers and tutors, our main job isn't to correct mistakes or even improve the quality of student writing. It's to show students what a writing practice looks like. It's to be the liaison between student and page, student and professor, student and administration. It's to create the conditions they need to develop a process that works for them, then insist on those conditions, external pressures aside.