

Chapter 17. Counterstory: Ignored Labor with a Writing Center

Lucy (Pseudonymous)

This is a writing center (WC) labor story told in the third person by Lucy. Lucy is neither a writing center director nor a peer tutor at her university; she is an English faculty member who joined this institution in 2015 and is currently an Associate Professor, but she has an intersectional relationship with the writing center, as she serves as the liaison between it and the English department. She also teaches the writing tutor training course. As a WC practitioner, Lucy has published some research studies. At the university where she previously taught, she volunteered as a faculty writing tutor. During her doctoral program study, Lucy was a writing tutor, and her dissertation focused on writing centers. Because of her multifaceted experiences and because she does not have direct administrative or tutoring responsibilities, Lucy sees herself as both an insider and an outsider to the WC. Different from other WC stories (e.g., Caswell et al., 2016; Giaimo, 2021), Lucy's is a counterstory about how her labor is ignored by her WC administrators.

In 2017, the writing center was taken from the English department and subordinated to the Office of Retention and Student Success (ORSS); its official name became Writing Support Center (WSC), and it was supervised by a non-expert staff member. Its location also moved from inside the library to a classroom building with reduced space. Sadly, there was no official campus announcement about these changes. Students and faculty only heard about them later through word of mouth. As new faculty, Lucy did not know about the changes either until one day, in early 2018, she received a phone call from a former retention specialist, asking if she would be able to conduct tutor training workshops. Recommended by her dean, Lucy was considered an expert because of her writing center background, so she complied.

Lucy understood the changes to the writing center because some universities locate them in student life departments. Based on its utilization, a smaller space for the WC could also work. However, Lucy believed changing the name to WSC was imprudent as *support* carried a negative connotation that reinforces the long-term stigma of a WC as a “fix-it” shop. It misleads students and faculty. This name change, to some degree, might encourage those faculty who already do not understand the work of the WC to direct their students there to fix writing problems. Students might be reluctant to utilize it as nobody wants to be labeled “weak” or in need of “support.” What surprised Lucy further was only then learning that those tutors had never received any formal or informal training before

they started working as tutors. They were merely recommended as strong writers by their composition instructors or even self-recommended as they needed an on-campus job.

Firmly believing that tutor training is essential for tutors and benefits writers, Lucy immediately accepted this invitation with compensation neither offered nor requested. She carefully prepared a series of workshops, covering various topics throughout that semester. The workshops were well received. Because of tutors' positive feedback, Lucy was appointed by the dean to be the liaison between the English department and the WSC. Tutors' questions regarding different issues during the workshops made Lucy realize that there was an urgent need for a writing tutor training course. She then proposed this idea to her department. With the approval of the chair, the curriculum committee, and the Office of Academic Affairs, Lucy planned to offer a tutor training course in the 2020 spring semester. She was excited and thinking of how to assist WSC to better serve students through their collaboration. But events did not go in the direction she expected.

When designing the course, Lucy shared her course syllabus with the WSC administrator for her input yet did not receive any response, which was frustrating, but not unexpected. As the liaison, Lucy expected to work collaboratively with the administrator. For example, she suggested having a conversation about renaming the WSC. Again, she did not hear anything back. Knowing the WSC had neither a mission statement nor a webpage to communicate its purpose and service, and suffered from a declining staff and client base, Lucy proposed two remedial plans: 1) creating a WSC webpage and posting flyers, including its mission statement, service, location, and hours, 2) allowing tutors to visit classes, especially writing classes, at the beginning of each semester to introduce the WSC. For her proposed ideas to be heard, not ignored, Lucy purposefully shared them during the 2021 fall semester's faculty meeting. Unfortunately, Lucy's first idea was ignored, the second was rejected immediately. The reason was "we don't want to interrupt any classes, we cannot do so!" even though Lucy explained that the visit would be brief, simply promoting the WSC's existence and allowing its service to be known. This short-sighted thinking demoralized Lucy. But she told herself that laymen need persistent enlightenment; she continued to persevere.

During the pandemic, many university writing centers quickly switched to online tutoring, synchronous and/or asynchronous. The WSC, however, failed to make such adjustments. Its reaction to the abruptness of COVID-imposed restrictions was to limit the number of sessions and only allow scheduled sessions, excluding walk-ins. Believing that she might be ignored as usual, Lucy altered her approach in communicating with the WSC about the importance of online tutoring. This time, she shared her tutor training course students' research projects with her students' permission. In order to protect her students and be discreet, Lucy removed students' names and deleted sensitive statements that pinpointed the WSC's deficiencies. In her email to the WSC and ORSS, Lucy applied an

inquiring tone and admitted that some ideas were merely a starting point. She also expressed her hope for an open discussion to address her concerns for the WSC. Not surprisingly, Lucy experienced the same results as before—she never heard back from anyone, not even an acknowledgement reply.

Occasionally, Lucy received emails from the WSC administrator, addressing issues such as the arrangements of the WCS practicum for Lucy's students. The WSC administrator's emails to Lucy, however, focused on matters pertinent to what she wanted to address, such as recruiting tutors, but ignored discussing Lucy's observations of the WSC. During the 2022 spring semester, when Lucy brought her students to the WSC for their practicum, she invited the WSC administrator to meet them. The administrator's first question was asking students' major. When finding out one student was majoring in Computer Science, she immediately said to him "I need you, I will hire you to tutor Math!" Lucy even received a follow-up email from the administrator, requesting more information about that student. This was not the only occasion where Lucy's well-trained students were redirected into other "more important" areas. Lucy understood that the administrator supervised several centers, but felt these interactions should focus on introducing the WSC to the prospective writing tutors.

For years, none of Lucy's initiatives were discussed, let alone accepted. Lucy kept consoling herself that the WSC administrator's priority was to ensure all the centers run each and every day. Yet, she felt frustrated with her wasted efforts and recognized that a positive, collegial, respectful relationship was definitely missing between her and the administrator. Lucy lamented the fact that such an indispensable learning facility was not fully developed or even recognized, and her value as an expert was not utilized. She even thought about reporting her observations to her dean so that the dean would use his power to push reforms, but she worried that such an attempt would be considered as further interference.

Reflecting on these administrators' behaviors toward her, Lucy thought it might be a result of their protection of their academic fiefdoms. Lucy even joked about herself that she is just a liaison that can be seen as an outsider in these administrators' eyes who does not understand their practices but keeps bothering them. Although Lucy's ultimate goal was to assist in improving the WSC for students, she felt alienated from any meaningful engagement with the WSC. Lucy's counterstory displays a writing center practitioner's labor and frustration. She wants to identify the crux of such a situation and hopes to seek solutions to overcome the constraints she faced. Meanwhile, her alternatives are limited: bypassing the current political structure to make independent announcements about the WSC to the student body, but this would be seen as insubordinate to her department and make her an enemy of the WSC administrator. Going to her chair, dean, or provost would risk her reputation as being pushy, and she might still have no guarantee of a response. However, not performing the little work she is allowed could harm students. Lucy feels trapped by her situation with no ethical way out.

References

- Caswell, N., McKinney, J. G., & Jackson, R. (2016). *The working lives of new writing center directors*. Utah State University Press.
- Gaiimo, G. N. (Ed.) (2021). *Wellness and care in writing center work*. Digital Edited Collections: An Imprint of WLN. <https://ship.pressbooks.pub/writingcentersandwellness/>