

Chapter 18. “...at least for now”: A Story About Undergraduate Writing Centers and Labor Compensation in Five Parts

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One/Context: Despite decades of evidence showcasing positive campus impact, undergraduate writing center labor is often institutionally undervalued.

Here’s a story. In April 2022, I got an email from one of my tutors noting that they wouldn’t be returning to their position in the fall.

Let’s call this tutor Chris. Chris is an incredible young writer in multiple genres, a thoughtful listener, a campus leader, and an enthusiastic ambassador for the things that writing centers do well.

Much of our program’s recent impact—especially given the challenges of the pandemic—was due to Chris’ excellent and central participation: one-on-one sessions with a wide range of students, leadership in full-class workshops, programming for specific majors (almost entirely on Zoom, of course), success in a targeted writing fellows initiative, and service to students and faculty who were all in various states of exhaustion.

At the start of the pandemic, our program was busier than ever: over 1000 sessions in fall 2021, over 90 percent of patrons noting they’d recommend our services to peers, an award from our regional WC organization in early 2022, four undergraduate publications in writing center journals, and five online undergraduate presentations at conferences. In short, a lot of *labor* that serves student writers, institutional missions, and nearly everything in between at a time of worldwide crisis.

Chris sent me a kind breakup note. In the end, it was the pay: . . . *given the time-to-pay ratio, I don’t think it’s practical for me to come back, at least for now.*

Two/Origin Story: Our writing center began in the early 1980s in an unused basement room with hand-me-down furniture and stale-smelling carpet. A place where young writers were often “sent,” often with the best of faculty intentions. Our founder was a former nun and dedicated poet who thought that students needed peer-centered spaces for collaborative/creative inquiry. It’s a story that’s common to that generation of writing center professionals: *someone sees a need, someone finds a way to cobble together basic materials and a space, someone goes from class to class, professor to professor, talking about the value of peer mentoring and collaboration.*

One might argue that tutors such as Chris receive compensation via lifetime learning skills or career development (as shown in Hughes et al.'s 2010 survey of writing center alums). They'd likely not be aware of the complicated and politicized ecologies of writing instruction; they'd likely say—and they'd be right—that their faculty have been incredibly supportive, that their time as a tutor has been fulfilling, that their work has made them an even better thinker and communicator.

But Chris might also likely say that their labor as a tutor is more challenging than can easily be expressed to our campus community—even with visible commitments to writing culture, almost weekly accolades noted on campus websites, reports of strong student numbers and assessments for deans and vice presidents, etc. In short, praise and accomplishments don't pay for tuition.

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Three/Research: A few months ago, I reached out to other writing center professionals via a short, IRB-approved survey. Currently, my institution pays writing center tutors \$8.20 per hour, and only for hours in which students book sessions or when we host events. Kentucky's minimum wage is \$7.25.

I received 125 completed surveys.

I began with two subsets: writing centers who align with our regional affiliate, Southeastern Writing Center Association (39); and writing centers at institutions that identify as Small Liberal Arts colleges (50). If multiple pay grades were noted, I used the lowest as a baseline. I chose these two groups because they were the closest in defining my own institution. As of the time of this informal survey, there are 126 schools that are affiliated with SWCA; this includes high schools and programs outside of traditional colleges. It is more difficult to gain a specific number of colleges that identify as SLACs

Here's some of what I've learned so far concerning how institutions have not fully recognized the impactful roles that peer tutors play in sustaining college writing cultures via reasonable pay.

SWCA respondents:

- 3 percent paid less than state minimum wage/offered other incentives
- 15 percent paid their respective minimum wage
- 13 percent paid up to \$1 more . . .
- 15 percent paid between \$1 and \$2 more . . .
- 53 percent paid more than \$2 above their respective minimum wage.
- 46 percent offered increased pay based on time served, leadership roles, etc.

SLAC respondents:

- 6 percent paid less than state minimum wage/offered other incentives
- 34 percent paid their respective minimum wage

- 22 percent paid up to \$1 more . . .
- 14 percent paid between \$1 and \$2 more . . .
- 24 percent paid more than \$2 above their respective minimum wage
- 44 percent offered increased pay based on time served, leadership roles, etc.

One way to tell this story would be to highlight the differences between the upper tiers and minimum wage rates as a move toward progress, and, to be sure, colleges who offer more than a minimum hourly wage deserve commending. But this story isn't entirely fair. The SWCA sample skews high due to low state minimum wages, or lack of state minimum wage laws (defaulting to the national rate of \$7.25). The most common hourly pay among SWCA-aligned respondents is \$9.60/hour.

Another part of the story: the average pay among SLAC-aligned respondents is \$21.00/hour. But this obfuscates things as well, due to wage differences between centers in Northeast and Southern states. The most common hourly rate for SLAC-aligned respondents is \$7.25/hour.

Another way to tell this story: just under ½ of SWCA and SLAC-aligned respondents offer any sort of pay raise for time served as tutors, skills developed, certifications, etc.

If this story was for a different audience, I'd start rattling off all the ways that *tutors like Chris support peers, faculty, their college, etc.* I'd note mentoring roles that *enhance liberal arts aims* and that play into *retention efforts*.

But these are stories that we've told for *decades* as a field.

Four/Research Redux: Respondents in both groups frequently noted their attempts to tell their own stories to other stakeholders:

I have tried to increase the undergraduate peer tutor hourly pay for years.

No one seems willing to address the inequities in student pay.

Administration said I can pay higher wages, but the consultants will get the same total amount.

Other respondents included frustrations concerning their inability to employ tutors working remotely/out-of-state at the beginning of the pandemic; how increased usage and/or moves toward pay equity led to overextended budgets. About ½ of each group of respondents noted that there were on-campus jobs that paid *more* than their respective writing support programming.

. . . *the pay rate has drastically affected our ability to recruit and train tutors. We would, in a typical year, receive 50-70 applications for 20 slots. This year we received 26 (pay, of course, is not the only factor at work, but it certainly has affected recruitment across the board).*

We've had tutors request fewer hours to avoid burnout.

The stories shared by these and other respondents get even further complicated if they are only allowed to recruit from certain groups of students (such as those eligible for federal work-study), or when a campus requires the same rate for all student labor, regardless of skills required.

Which leads us back to Chris: . . . *given the time-to-pay ratio, I don't think it's practical for me to come back, at least for now.*

Five/Coda: In reflecting on Chris' story and on the work that peer tutors do, I'm reminded that campus labor conditions are shaped by a complicated web of institutional forces. I hope that as a field, we can consider the question of what such work is actually worth—and how the worth of such work might be made more visible, even if such efforts seem somewhat futile at times.

But to dig a bit further, it seems that some of the most common stories I find myself telling—of deep educational experiences, of resume lines, of the sincere joy that often occurs in peer tutoring spaces—might somehow impede conversations concerning equitable pay for nuanced, skilled labor. In other words, there seems to be an underlying implication that community involvement and personal development are reasonable forms of compensation.

Such compensation is significant, absolutely. But that's hardly the whole story.

I hope our field can craft different stories—ones that avoid implying that *we only want folks who can afford such wages* to apply for positions, that show Chris' *time-to-pay ratio* as institutionally meaningful, that highlight how *almost every aspect of my university's mission can be connected back to skilled peer collaboration*. Such stories might more fully recognize our students' significant economic concerns, as well as the value of collaborative learning in the liberal arts.

Postscript: All data concerning pay scales—at my own institution, and at others—might have changed significantly since this initial study. However, given conversations with writing center professionals since this study began, and given my time in this field for over two decades, I argue that conversations about labor and pay scale for undergraduate peer writing consultants are still incredibly important as part of the larger conversation concerning student support.

References

- Hughes, B., Gillespie, P., & Kail, H. (2010). What they take with them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project. *The Writing Center Journal*, 30(2), 12-46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43442343>