

# Chapter 19. Advocating for Equitable Tutor Pay with Campus Partners

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When I started as the Center for Research & Writing director at Keene State College (KSC)—a small public liberal arts college in Southwestern NH—most of my tutoring staff had a second job off-campus “to pay the bills.” The tutors, all undergraduates, often said that if they could pick one job, they would choose the center because they loved tutoring, and because the center offered the most opportunities for professional development. Tutoring is the primary focus of the center, but because professional development is an ongoing part of our work together as a staff, the center’s administrative team included it in the job description students read during the training course they take before becoming a tutor. We emphasize to our tutors that time they spend engaging in professional development is always compensated time; we also make this case to college administrators, noting that to remain a relevant, dynamic, and responsive center, we need to build in time (and money) for our tutors to learn together, to come to common understandings about the mission, purpose, and nature of the work that we do, and to develop a vision (and become equipped) for what we hope to do in the future.

In talking with college administrators about the center, I often highlight the importance of investing in tutors’ professional development *long-term*, noting that the depth of knowledge that tutors develop over time is not easily replaced and should be acknowledged through equitable and fair compensation. Rebecca Brittenham (2017) states that “in the current language of academic success—‘retention,’ ‘time to degree,’ and (most ironically) ‘workplace readiness’—the multidimensional realities of students’ actual work experiences are often rendered invisible or obscured through a narrative of interference” (p. 527). This narrative of interference, she says, implies that work interferes with students’ ability to concentrate fully on their academics. Yet, Brittenham cites studies illustrating that “students working significant hours per week achieve higher GPAs and have greater academic engagement than their nonworking counterparts” (2017, p. 527), something I’ve found to be true of tutors in my center. Of course, students are not more successful in their academics *because* they work many hours; it’s more likely that students gain skills and strategies through their work experiences that they apply in their academic pursuits, a reciprocal relationship that the narrative of interference misses. Although it arises from a concern about students’ welfare, the narrative of interference privileges academic study over working, rather than acknowledging that both pursuits can be valuable, and even mutually beneficial, for students.

While Brittenham (2017) focuses on off-campus jobs, the language used to describe on-campus jobs often reflects a narrative of interference. Although the KSC student employment policy limits on-campus jobs to 20 hours/week, most KSC students work more than that in off-campus jobs. The student employment website states that students who work on campus, whether through work-study or other funding sources, “are expected to budget these earnings for education expenses.” This policy, however, does not account for the economic realities of our students (and is not typically enforced). As center director, I heard my tutors’ concerns about the rising costs they lived with daily—college loans, textbooks, rent, utilities, or food. Tutors secured employment off-campus because on-campus hourly rates and the 20-hour work week were not sufficient to sustain them financially. Additionally, the 20-hour limit meant that tutors working on-campus elsewhere had to split the 20 hours across all campus jobs. Over time, more tutors reduced their hours or quit working at the center due to better pay options off-campus.

Alarmed by this growing trend, I contacted the directors of our math center and Aspire (TRIO) Programs, and they, too, had several tutors reducing their hours or leaving in search of a more livable wage. In 2018, KSC’s student hourly rates were set to the federal minimum wage, \$7.25/hour, and capped at \$8/hour, far below rates that students could get off-campus. The directors agreed to research tutor pay rates at peer institutions and at the other University System of New Hampshire’s (USNH) academic support programs; this research revealed that tutor pay rates at other schools ranged between \$0.60 to \$3.60/hour higher than KSC, and that peer institutions in other states were paying tutors between \$3-\$8/hour more than KSC. Given this information, we appealed to the provost, proposing an institutional investment in peer tutoring.

Our proposal included six components:

1. Comparative data from USNH and peer institutions
2. Evidence that academic support units are essential to institutional retention efforts, including fall 2019 combined usage data indicating that 1:5 students (1:3 first-year students) accessed 1 or more of our services.
3. Evidence that the tutor attrition trend was due to low pay rates.
4. Tutors’ job descriptions, illustrating that peer tutors are highly qualified, and meet a range of requirements prior to being hired.
5. Evidence of significant investment in tutor recruitment and training each year (ex. 3 support services employed 102 tutors in spring/fall 2019).
6. A cost analysis and implementation strategy for tutor pay increases.

Our cost analysis incorporated a phased approach, with incremental pay rate increases between \$9-11/hour over three years to allow the institution to plan for the increases. While \$11/hour is lower than the average off-campus hourly rate, we hoped that this incremental approach would result in pay rate increases for tutors. To sustain pay increases and maintain our current level of staffing and

services, we calculated gradual increases to our student labor budgets, which for the center meant an annual increase of \$2000-\$3000 per year across a three-year time span, and for all units, \$20,000-30,000 across three years—a fairly minimal institutional investment with implications for increased student success and retention, and recognition of the importance of compensating tutor expertise. The good news is that our proposal was successful, not only for our tutors, but *for all KSC student workers*; in the 2020 summer semester, the Cabinet decided that all student workers should have a base pay of \$8/hour, with potential increases up to \$12/hour. However, this success comes with a cautionary tale.

The outgoing provost had agreed to pay increases, but institutional cuts meant that the center's student labor budget was cut for the first time since I had become director. In 2020-21, the center absorbed the cuts because our services were entirely online due to COVID-19 restrictions. But in 2021-2022, with the return to in-person *and* online tutoring, these cuts meant that we had to reduce our hours and services to students, faculty and staff, which, ultimately, ended up defeating the purpose of our original proposal. Although we could pay tutors more/hour, we had to offer fewer hours overall, erasing the benefits tutors might have otherwise received from the pay increase. As a result, tutors sought off-campus jobs once again. To address this issue, we considered reducing staff sizes in future hiring cycles, but we hoped to make the case to the new provost that the administration should support investing in our tutors' expertise and professional development. In our annual report, we explained that the budget reduction resulted in a reduction of hours/services and that, with a fairly new tutoring staff, we would need to prioritize essential tutor training, which would mean reducing "direct service hours to students and limiting in-class workshops and outreach activities."

Thankfully, this cautionary tale has a happy epilogue. The administration agreed with our concerns and increased the student labor budget, though not to the amounts we'd requested in the original proposal. We've still had to make choices about what we can and can't do, including limiting campus outreach, tutoring hours, and whole staff training meetings during the semester. For our training meetings, we've prioritized community building and professional development during the meetings that we do have. Professional development continues in other ways, through session debriefs, daily conversations, book club meetings, and event planning, and center-based research.

In making the case for equitable compensation for tutors, we've learned that, for our institution, coalition building was the best approach to achieve the result we were hoping for. The work we did together, to share usage data, research tutor pay among peer institutions and the university system provided a united and stronger voice than one writing center leadership team could offer. The college administration took note, not only for tutors, but for student workers at the college overall. Our collaboration reminded us to work together more to support students' academic pursuits, including co-hosting weekly events together

and offering collaborative tutor training. With regard to tutor pay, more needs to be done, and I wonder how to make progress as our institution deals with pandemic costs, enrollment declines, and ongoing budget cuts. My hope is that continued coalition-building across campus will help us to envision a sustainable future for our tutors; collaboration may mean compromise and re-thinking our work in terms of new, possibly innovative structures. The center's administrative team will, I know, continue to advocate for tutors on our campus, and, hopefully, to create conversations among like-minded administrators more broadly in the future.

## References

Brittenham, R. (2017). The interference narrative and the real value of student work. *College Composition and Communication*, 68(3), 526.