

Chapter 20. Benefits and Drawbacks of Hiring Professional Academic Tutors

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I used to have some strong and misguided opinions about who should be hired as tutors in writing centers. I used to think peer tutors were the most relatable—and therefore most effective—types of tutors, and professional tutors would be too authoritarian or too “sage on the stage” to relate to students. And it turns out that I was right—there are challenges with professional tutors. They’re just not the ones I thought.

Let me back up. I’m the faculty director of a writing center at an open-access, two-year college within a research university. Our center has four 80 percent FTE professional academic tutors and one manager who also tutors for 16-20 hours per week. We don’t currently have any peer tutors. Before I started working at my college in the fall of 2014, the only experience I had with writing centers was those with undergraduate and graduate student peer tutors. I myself was a peer tutor. I knew that some writing centers used contingent and/or full-time faculty to tutor students, but I figured there weren’t many professional tutors out there, and if there were, the writing centers they worked in probably lacked the collaborative spirit that peer tutors bring with them to their work.

Like I said: strong (misguided) opinions.

Once I started working at my college as a faculty member (not yet as director of the writing center), I quickly realized how wrong my snobbery was. After my composition students visited the center, they came back with thorough, in-depth, and engaged feedback from the tutors. The center’s director went on sabbatical, and I filled in for him during the 2018-2019 academic year, so I spent the spring of 2018 shadowing him to prepare for the role. That’s when I really began to understand some of the profound skills professional tutors bring with them to their work. When the previous director’s term ended in the summer of 2020, I took over and I’ve been the faculty director since. That means I’ve had the opportunity to witness first-hand the benefits of having professional tutors. While these qualities are not necessarily exclusive to professional tutors—many peer tutors also have many of these attributes—I do find them especially striking in our professional tutors.

First there’s the obvious: professional tutors are highly knowledgeable about and experienced with writing. We hire extremely qualified people who are passionate about writing and talking to students about writing. Of our four current tutors, three have master’s degrees, one has a Ph.D., and our manager also has a Ph.D. (the educational requirement for the tutor position is a bachelor’s degree in

English or a related field). All of them have prior teaching experience, and some have also tutored in other places. They've written books and articles and have presented at professional conferences. They are eager to engage in professional development—we've read and discussed many books and articles together—and they have an interest in engaging with the college and university. For example, they participate in the college's faculty and staff learning communities, they've collaborated on projects with staff units throughout the college like the Library and Accessibility Resources, they've served on search committees for other staff positions, and one even was elected the chair of the staff representative council at the college. And in addition to being highly qualified, tutoring over 30 hours per week means that the tutors become very, very good at their jobs. They are professional people who bring with them a variety of educational backgrounds and life experiences. They integrate those experiences into their tutoring, and they do it in a way that is collaborative, holistic, engaging and welcoming to students.

But having professional tutors does have some drawbacks. As I mentioned, we have high expectations and requirements for their qualifications, but the pay is low. The current approximate pay range we list in our job ads for our professional tutors is \$16.00-\$17.16 per hour. The pay scale is set by the university, and it applies to other professional tutors in other support labs as well. I should say that this isn't necessarily part of the typical "writing centers are underfunded" issue, but rather a labor issue related to staffing at universities writ large. Many staff don't get paid enough at institutions of higher education, so this is not a problem unique to our tutors. As a director, this means it can be challenging to hire and retain qualified individuals who are willing to take the low hourly wage. We've extended interviews and job offers to tutors in the past who have turned them down and cited the low pay as the reason, so we've started to list the pay range directly in our job ad. This has understandably limited our applicant pool. The pay range also means that I often find myself in the position of trying to advocate for pay raises for our tutors while coming up against institutional constraints.

The low pay also leads many professional tutors to be on the hunt for new jobs. While the position is a good fit for some people—for example, those who have partners or parents who can help support them, people who want to partake in the tuition remission program, or even retirees—it's not a financially sustainable job for most of the people who apply. We are currently fully staffed with four tutors and one manager. With such a small staff, when people quit, it's a big deal for two chief reasons: 1) a smaller staff means we can't accommodate as many appointments, and it also overburdens the remaining tutors, and 2) the staff hiring process is quite lengthy, usually taking multiple months. And this doesn't count the time spent by the manager, myself, and the tutors to help onboard the new hires to prepare them to begin tutoring. These unsustainable hiring practices make all of our work lives more complicated and frustrating and can take energy away that should be devoted to the core of our work: tutoring and teaching students.

And this problem doesn't just affect our professional lives; this type of turn-over and overwork can result in physical and mental health repercussions as well. Here's an example of how this can play out: in fall 2018, when I was filling in for the faculty director, two tutors resigned before November. That meant, going into the busiest part of the semester, to serve a population of around 5,000 students, we had two tutors and one manager. The process to hire new tutors took around three months. Understandably, during this time, our two remaining tutors and our manager were exhausted and overworked over winter break. I got shingles, which my doctor attributed to stress. While I appreciate that many workplaces—mine included—have begun wellness programs for their employees to deal with the physical and mental health effects of these types of working conditions, it sometimes seems like treating the symptoms rather than dealing with the root cause of the problem.

So what is there to be done? Frankly, I'm not yet sure. In addition to the pay scale, the university also sets the position's required education (Bachelor's degree in English or related field) and required experience (at least one year of teaching or tutoring experience), so those can't be changed. But perhaps adjusting the job description—or even the job itself—to make it less demanding could start to bring some parity between the position and its pay. However, I worry that changing the job description could make it harder to find qualified people. And that would, in turn, put more pressure on the manager and me to train the new hires. Hiring peer tutors could also help, but again, that doesn't really solve the compensation problem with our current tutors. It's tough to hire people in good faith when I know that they might not be adequately compensated for their talents and hard work.

Despite these challenges—or maybe in part because of them—my time directing the writing center makes me want to bring attention to the excellent work professional tutors are doing in writing centers; working with professional tutors encourages me to be a better teacher and researcher. My experience has made me think a lot about how important it is to highlight how complex and varied writing center staffing and labor can be. It has also made me think a lot about expertise and the ways we reward it—or fail to. And I've thought a lot about the work and emotional labor directors and managers have to do to advocate for people whose livelihoods depend on it.

References

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