

Chapter 34. Labor of Love: Managing the Writing Center and New Motherhood during the Pandemic

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Our writing center labor story has taught us the impossibility of separating our personal and professional lives. Both working mothers, we have learned that life and work get complicated when the two collide but also that friendship and flexibility can ease the challenges of working full-time while raising children. In this essay, we reflect on how the pandemic necessitated new ways of laboring that offered surprising advantages for navigating working motherhood. Our friendship maximized these advantages and modeled working friendships for our tutors. Without minimizing the pandemic's tragedies or arguing that friendship can replace supportive labor policies, we offer some thoughts about how writing center leaders can support caregiving employees and students.

Our story begins in October 2018, when Elizabeth began working as our writing center's first full-time office manager. Jaclyn had requested this position for years to lighten her own and the tutors' loads and redirect their focus appropriately to directing the center and tutoring. While she loved her writing center work, Jaclyn often felt so overwhelmed by the day-to-day labor of the center that thinking creatively about its practices and spending time on big-picture planning was difficult. She was also lonely: As the only full-time employee in the writing center, she was often physically alone during breaks and off hours and intellectually alone without a full-time, nonstudent colleague with whom to collaborate.

A recent English graduate and former writing center tutor, Elizabeth was not new to the center, but she was new to working full-time at the university. More importantly, the newness of the position meant that Elizabeth was creating much of her job from day one. It was on day 10 or so that Jaclyn called Elizabeth into her office to say, "I'm pregnant and will be on leave this summer!" Understandably, this announcement startled Elizabeth, who felt excited but nervous at experiencing such a huge change when she had just been getting her footing in the job.

There was no reason to be nervous: By winter break, Elizabeth was a pro who had become crucial to the center's day-to-day functioning, the tutors' good spirits, and Jaclyn's renewed joy and newfound calm in her work as a writing center director. With Elizabeth and an interim director at the helm, Jaclyn went on maternity leave in summer 2019 as all parents should be able, knowing with confidence that she could ignore work and focus on healing and caring for her new baby.

That fall, Jaclyn returned to the office as a new working mom, complete with all the anxieties and exhaustion that come with the role. Elizabeth was always extremely empathetic, and for good reason: During the winter break of 2019, Elizabeth came into Jaclyn's office to say, "I'm pregnant and will be on leave this summer!" While thrilled, Jaclyn felt the same nerves Elizabeth had at Jaclyn's announcement, as she had just been getting her footing as a full-time working mom.

In early spring, spirits were high. The center successfully hosted the Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) 2020 conference in February, and tutoring numbers were higher than ever. While we rarely said so directly, the subtext of our conversations often revolved around how much we had accomplished professionally when we were personally, even *physically*, in the midst of so many changes. Elizabeth found herself panting on her walks across campus, a walk she'd made 100 times before without problems. For her part, Jaclyn mastered the art of a desk nap on days when her baby had decided the night before that sleep was for suckers. During the SWCA conference, social media highlighted our personal changes, as posts included pictures of Elizabeth's very pregnant body standing at the check-in desk and the conference keynote speaker holding Jaclyn's eight-month-old daughter. We were proud of the message these posts sent: We can successfully labor at work without hiding or downplaying our labor or identity as parents.

Then came Friday, March 13, 2020. When we came to work that day, we knew it would be our last in-person for a bit, but we could never have anticipated that "a bit" would turn into a year and a half. No one even bothered to clean the dry-erase calendar at the front desk.

Of course, the pandemic created a completely new labor story for Elizabeth and Jaclyn. Both the labor itself and the context for that labor transformed overnight. Creating a fully remote writing center presented challenges, including getting to know several new technologies. In a different example, the hiring process Elizabeth had worked so hard to perfect the year prior had to be overhauled again. Further, Jaclyn and Elizabeth had to maneuver ever-changing policies and hiring freezes that left summer and fall hiring a last-minute misery.

Even with these challenges, remote work offered surprising advantages. For Elizabeth, working from home during the last few months of pregnancy proved useful as she quickly became so swollen that walking was difficult. She was grateful to be able to lay on the bed, feet propped high into the air as she worked on a video about how to use the virtual scheduling system. Without the pandemic, Elizabeth would have taken her maternity leave early, leaving her less time to recover, or try to push through the swelling, among other things. For Jaclyn, working from home with a baby was difficult but the flexibility of remote work was extremely valuable. She was grateful for the time spent at home with her daughter, who improved many a Zoom meeting by smiling and waving at the camera; she was also grateful for the occasional cat nap on the couch instead of her desk. Without the pandemic, Jaclyn may not have learned the joy of this

approach to working motherhood, though we, of course, must acknowledge the immense challenges the pandemic brought for parents with older children who needed help with remote schooling and who may be less entertained by tagging along on Zoom meetings.

A few weeks into fall 2020, Elizabeth returned to the office two months postpartum. Jaclyn returned the next day, thanks to an agreement to alternate days to avoid spread. The semester felt lonely and quiet, especially since the tutors continued to work remotely. After years of a bustling writing center, it felt haunting to see an empty space and a whiteboard calendar still reading March 2020. At the same time, the hybrid work schedule helped us navigate work and family in ways we did not anticipate. While lonely, the arrangement helped Elizabeth ease back into working postpartum. Having two days at home with her baby, assisted by her mother, allowed her to continue to recover from childbirth while working full-time and continuing graduate school. For Jaclyn, the flexible hybrid schedule meant she did not need to scramble for childcare on days her daughter stayed home from daycare. While the pandemic brought a lot of pain to our world, it also upended how we labor in ways that proved advantageous to us as new working mothers.

Our friendship was also important to the success we found personally and professionally over the last three years. That we care about each other and each other's families made our work more productive and more joyful and the challenges we faced easier to solve together. Much energy is spent trying to separate the personal and professional, but we feel our time is better spent talking openly about how to be both/and—both parents and writing center leaders, in one example, and both friends and colleagues, in another. We have brought our babies to the writing center. We have declared random Wednesdays Cake Day when it seemed the staff needed cake. Elizabeth has said to Jaclyn, “Why are you here? You don't feel well. Go home,” and Jaclyn has said to Elizabeth, “Your kid is sick? Go. I've got today.” This attitude has trickled down to our tutors, who likewise feel comfortable telling us when they had a rotten tutoring session because of something going on in their personal lives or when they simply need a mental health day. In caring for our writing center, its staff, and each other, we embrace the mix of personal and professional that the pandemic and working motherhood have required.

Despite the challenges of working motherhood and the incalculable pain of the pandemic, we feel grateful for how both experiences have helped us embrace empathy and flexibility for caregivers laboring in the writing center as students, tutors, and center leaders. We are also grateful for how the experiences have helped us reimagine writing center labor in ways that may better support caregivers. Before the pandemic, parents working from home with their children seemed like an impractical pipe dream. Anecdotally, we know that writing center administrators often feel pressure to work from campus more than other faculty, perhaps because centers are such physical spaces. We encourage writing center

leaders to take their time working from home, particularly if they have young children, and we also urge them to allow and advocate for their staff, particularly parents and other caregivers, to work from home when needed. While we cannot control broader university labor policies like parental leave, we often *can* control how labor works in our centers.

The time both of us were able to work from home with our children also brought to our awareness how important virtual tutoring is for student and tutor caregivers and parents-to-be. Giving parents virtual tutoring options makes education more accessible to those caring for children, aging parents, and others, and they offer a more comfortable option when long treks to our physical centers are challenging for pregnant bodies. Virtual tutoring also provides flexibility for caregiving tutors who find themselves with sick children or closed daycares and schools. The flexibility of virtual tutoring illustrates again how we may support students and tutors even when broader university policies are beyond our control. Even with our best intentions, liability and other concerns may limit our ability to create child-friendly spaces on campus, but virtual tutoring may step in to offer a flexible, accessible option for those balancing childcare with school, work, or both.