THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

...FROM THE EDITOR...

When we build our case for the importance of writing labs, our primary reason is, of course, that we assist in developing our students' writing skills. But there are other important objectives, and this month's articles should help you marshal your arguments. Linda Poziwilko builds a powerful case for our work in aiding retention, so much so that we might even add a new category for a type of assistance we offer, "FTSP," a term she introduces us to: "freshman to sophomore persistence." Kathleen Hunzer's article raises an interesting question, though, about whether some of the FTSP work we do might be related to either gender or gender stereotyping. (That should make for an interesting discussion among the tutors in your center!)

To add to the list of what writing labs do, Margaret Stewart writes about the benefits of their Writing Center to their WAC program, and next month we'll have an article about a WAC program that spent great effort and much time in proposing (and getting!) a writing center to assist their WAC program. And last month, we had Neal Lerner's research on the benefits of attendance in his writing center. We aim for much—and achieve even more!

Muriel Harris, editor

...INSIDE...

Writing centers, retention, and the institution: A fortuitous nexus

It was a typical September day in the Writing Center at Belmont University; my entire tutoring period in the Center had been filled with appointments, and most of them had been with freshmen working on drafts of narratives for composition class. All afternoon I'd been explaining showing versus telling, asking students to tell me what *they* believed to be the significance of their remembered events, and trying to avoid the temptation to just go ahead and correct their comma splice errors.

When David, my last appointment of the day, walked in, I expected more of the same. A tall, slightly overweight young man, David came into the Center with his head down, the requisite canvas and leather backpack hanging from one shoulder. He seemed unsure of where to place himself, so I quickly indicated the chair beside me at the tutoring table and asked him to have a seat. As I took an information sheet from the stack in front of me, he busied himself with extracting a paper from the depths of the backpack. Once he placed his paper on the table in front of

me, I started asking him the questions on the general information sheet we fill out for all Center appointments. I also tried to establish some eye contact, but he kept his head down, so I was unable to judge what sort of tutoring session I was going to have. As I queried him about the assignment, he told me this was his first paper of his college career, and the first time he'd ever been assigned a narrative, so he had come to the Center because he just "wasn't sure if he was on the right track." I'd already heard that at least five times on

this day, so I fully expected I would repeat some portion of the conversations I'd been having all afternoon about autobiographical significance and vivid detail.

By the time I had reached the second page of David's draft, however, I knew there would be little I could tell this young man about writing a narrative. He had chosen to write about a summer he spent as a campaign worker for the Democratic party, and his writing demonstrated a natural feel for which details to use to build tension and how to subtly reveal autobiographical significance. As I read his description of the fervor and anticipation at campaign headquarters on the night they were waiting for election results, I couldn't resist telling David how much I was enjoying his story. He had expressed concern that his conclusion might need some revising, but even here, I thought he was quite effective. Yet this student had come for help, and I felt I owed him some discussion of writing, so I pointed out a couple of places where he *might* use more effective transitions.

Soon we branched off into a conversation about the details of the summer he spent working on the campaign, and he told me that he had been interested in politics ever since, at seven years old, his parents took him to hear a senator speak at a rally. Even as a young boy he liked to watch political speeches on television, and when he was presented with the opportunity to spend the summer campaigning for a favorite senator seeking reelection, he jumped at the chance. He had enjoyed the summer so much that he began planning for a career in politics, and that decision had led him to major in political science. At this point, David and I were both turned sideways in our chairs so we could face each other, and the somber, downturned face that David wore when he walked into the writing center now glowed with the pleasure of telling a favorite story.

In no time at all, our thirty-minute appointment was over, and we hadn't spent more than ten minutes discussing writing. Now, the crucial question—did I do David a disservice? The university pays me based on the assumption that I help students become better writers, and David came seeking such help. But the only writing suggestion I had made was that he add a transition or two. Was I wasting his time and the university's resources?

In my early days of writing center tutoring, I might have thought exactly this, and such a session would have left me feeling guilty. But I no longer feel this way, and a look at some recent research concerning how college affects students confirms a number of things that I have come to believe over my years in the Writing Center.

First of all, contrary to misserving our institutions at tutoring sessions such as mine with David, we may well be doing the institution more good than even we recognize. Of vital importance at all institutions of higher education is retention; as Jeanne Simpson states in "The Role of Writing Centers in Student Retention Programs," "retention is the magic word from the department level right on up to governing boards and legislatures. Funding, support, everything is based on how many students an institution gets, keeps, and graduates" (102).

Key factors influencing retention, according to Simpson, include academic assistance, mentoring, and developing friendships and other peer relationships. Of course, the most obvious connection between the writing center and retention is academic assistance, and it stands to reason that students who have difficulty with writing will have a better chance of staying at our institutions if they come to the writing center early in their college careers and get into the habit of coming regularly. Yet recent research on retention indicates that our reach in the writing cen-

ter may extend far beyond the under-prepared student. First of all, retention does not mean "hanging on to poorly prepared students beyond a reasonable point," a common misconception (102). Rather, a good retention rate indicates that an institution is attracting and keeping students who are well matched to the institution's style and mission. Another key point that Simpson makes and that is corroborated by other research on retention is that "much of retention happens in a few key weeks, the first ones that a student spends on campus" (102). So what happens in these first weeks on campus that helps keep students at our institutions?

A close look at current institutional research on retention reveals some very interesting factors that may tie student retention tightly to writing centers. One such area addresses the psycho-social aspects, or the self-system, of freshmen and sophomore students. This area of study includes examination of the sense of self, personal identity, ego development, self-concept, and self-esteem. In layperson language, students are trying at this point in their lives to achieve balance between their inner selves and the external social structures they inhabit. Vital to this process of development of individual self-systems involves peer relationships, yet research also indicates that students need to connect early and positively with their institutions in order to set the development of their self-systems into motion. Researchers are unclear on the early stages of this process, but they do know that as a group, during the college years the majority of students who stay in college will successfully resolve identity-related issues, become more positive about their academic and social competencies, and develop a greater sense of self-worth and value. Reaching this point is a tremendous task, and while the freshmen who are arriving on our campuses are in the very earliest stages of this process, many of them are overwhelmed

by the pressure of the impending changes, even though they do not yet even recognize the full scope of what lies before them.

In short, students who arrive on our campuses are facing one of the most psychologically demanding periods of their lives, and they come bearing a huge load of psychological baggage. As anyone knows who has tutored even briefly, some of this baggage often gets unpacked in the writing center. Recent writing center scholarship indicates that this is certainly an area of concern to many of us: a glance at just two recent publications garnered "Freud in the Writing Center: The Psychoanalytics of Tutoring Well" (Murphy) and "The Invisible Couch in the Tutoring of Writing" (Barnett).

All of us who tutor can recount experiences with students where we felt as if we were being asked to be analysts rather than tutors, and I admit to feeling uncomfortable and sometimes even angry at being cast into this role. Certainly, the bulk of our tutoring does involve working directly with student writing, but more times than I can recall, I have listened patiently while a student told me how unfair she thought a professor was, or how ridiculous a writing assignment she had to complete was, or how boring her Western Civ-Econ-Music Apprec class was. I have also listened as students have revealed to me the full story of what was only suggested in a paper: stories of physical and sexual abuse by family members, confessions of extreme guilt over having let a friend drive drunk, tearful stories of the death of a beloved grandparent, and anguished accounts of desperate attempts to meet the expectations of parents.

Yet as frustrated as we might be at times by tutoring sessions that proceed in this manner, I think it is clear that we are providing a much-needed service. As Christina Murphy points out: "A good psychoanalyst and a good tu-

tor both function to awaken individuals to their potentials and to channel their creative energies toward self-enhancing ends" (43). Ideally, the writing center is a place where students can feel comfortable bringing their writing, where they know they will be dealing with a professional, helpful writing tutor, and where they can receive help with developing ideas they may have just hinted at in their writing. Because we are non-judgmental and willing to spend a few minutes simply talking with a student, we are helping the student work on the development of that self-system—and this is precisely what students need to help keep them at an institution.

A yet stronger link exists, however, between retention and writing centers, and it is clearly distinguishable via a consistent and clear factor that Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini reveal in their seminal work, *How College Affects Students:*

Investigators found that freshman-to-sophomore persistence [the technical term for retention] was positively and significantly related to total amount of student-faculty non-classroom contact with faculty and particularly to frequency of interactions with faculty to discuss intellectual matters. The latter finding. . . suggests that the non-classroom interactions with faculty that are most important to persistence are those that integrate the student's classroom and non-classroom experiences" (394).

These findings should be of vital importance to all of us who tutor or direct writing centers because they reveal that what we do in our centers is precisely what research has shown to be a significant factor in retention. As we all know, what begins as a discussion about a student's writing very often turns into an encounter such as the one I had with David, one that entails both the personal and the intellectual. Often (but perhaps not as often as we would

like) freshmen come to our campuses craving true intellectual discussion, and it's a safe bet they are not going to find it with their peers. The one-on-one non-classroom contact they receive in the writing center may provide such students with an early and positive connection with the intellectual, scholarly side of the university—something they know about through movies and television, but that they have yet to experience outside of class. In the most current research on retention, there is no other one single factor that emerges as clearly and consistently as does non-classroom contact with faculty. In this regard, the positive correlation between the writing center and retention is indisputable.

I would guess that most administrators have no idea of this connection, even though all institutions expend much time, energy, and money on studying and analyzing retention. Perhaps this is because it is notoriously difficult to measure what influence the writing center has on student success. Or perhaps it is because we directors have not vigorously enough called attention to ourselves. We complain and fret to each other about being given quarters in the darkest corner of the basement of the humanities building, forced to set up with mismatched furniture and ancient computers, but we are not always eager to explore the avenues that will help us secure a more prominent place in our institutions. As Simpson points out, we tend to be committed to writing, not to institutional politics (107).

Yet this is exactly where we are going to have to become involved, because until we discover how the decision-making process works on our campuses, we are not going to know who to approach with proposals for more space, more tutors, and more computers. Simpson asserts that writing center directors should attend council and committee meetings not

only to learn how the decision-making process works, but to learn what positions our colleagues take on various issues and to give our centers and our positions as directors greater visibility (107).

Current research on retention confirms much of what we in writing centers have always known—that our reach extends far beyond whatever corner of the campus we are allowed to use. We are a vital cog in the wheel of retention, and with the backing of the administration, we can expand our circle of contact with students. Certainly, we want never to forget that what we love and do best is help students become better writers, and we in no way want to run counseling services off the campus or take the place of relationships students form with professors in their major fields, but in those first few weeks after freshmen arrive, we very likely are one of the first campus services students will seek out because they are encouraged to do so in composition class. Based on the research I have done over the past few months combined with my five-plus years of experience as a writing center tutor and director, I have no doubts at all that I and my Writing Center colleagues have made a difference at my institution. The administrative wings of my university buzz daily with the word "retention," and now that I have research to back my assertions, I am going to make certain that the word appears in any document or speech I generate in my pursuit of funds for our center.

Yet no matter how political I must become, I hope I never lose sight of the fact that often the best thing I can do in a tutoring session is listen. I know that sometimes putting aside the student's draft, turning in my chair to face her, smiling, and addressing her by name might be more necessary at that moment than discussing her writing needs. I know that as she leaves the

center, if I ask her to come back and tell me how the paper turns out, that she very probably will. In a thirty-minute appointment, we are not going to wreak a magical transformation in any student, but we just may have helped her get through the day, and through the semester, and possibly through four years with us.

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East Central Writing Centers Association	Call for Proposals April 3-4, 1998 Youngstown, Ohio *"Moving Forward, Looking Back"*

The conference will be dedicated to the memory of Gratia Murphy, Founding Board Member. Proposal Deadline: January 15, 1998. For more information contact Sherri Zander, Writing Center, Coffelt Hall, 1 University Plaza, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio 44555-0001. Phone: 330-742-3055; e-mail: WrCenter@juno.com

Northern California Writing Centers Association	Call for Proposals March 6, 1998 Belmont, CA

Deadline for abstract submissions: Jan. 5, 1998. Contact Marc Wolterbeek, English, College of Notre Dame, 1500 Ralston, Belmont, CA 94002-1997. Phone: 650-508-3708; e-mail: MWolterbeek@cnd.edu

Kellogg Institute

The Kellogg Institute for the training and certification of developmental educators announces its 1998 training program, June 26 to July 24, on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. For details on faculty, fees ($795 plus $610 for room and board), and graduate credit, contact Elaini Bingham, Director, Kellogg Institute, or Maggie Mock, Administrative Assistant, National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608; phone: 704-262-3057. Application deadline: April 1, 1998.

The Dangling Modifier

To subscribe to *The Dangling Modifier*, the newsletter of the peer tutors at The Pennsylvania State University, you can request their subscription form. Basic annual rates are $5 for one copy each of the October and May issues; multiple copies are sent at different rates. Contact *The Dangling Modifier*, 219 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16802. Make checks payable to the Penn State Writing Center.

A Reader Comments. . . . . .

As writing centers proliferate across the world, one of our more recent subscribers is Tracy Santa, the new director of the Writing Center at the American University in Bulgaria. Tracy wrote to tell us how helpful Viviane Chase's April 1997 article was. Notes Tracy: "The issue of *WLN* with the article on the wcenter at Vesalius College in Belgium arrived just before I flew to Bulgaria to interview in May, and it gave me a number of issues to think about and discuss."

"Writing Center Ethics"— Works Cited (cont.)

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Misperceptions of gender in the writing center: Stereotyping and the facilitative tutor

While reviewing back issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, I read an article in the April 1995 issue by Lisa C. Birnbaum, "Toward a Gender-Balanced Staff in the Writing Center" and realized that my presentation at the 1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication examined a similar group of perceptions about gender in the writing center. However, whereas Birnbaum researched the teachers' and center directors' perceptions of how differently gendered tutors behave, I examined a different perspective, the tutees' perspectives of how gender differences manifest themselves in tutor behaviors.

My findings showed that student writers who attend the writing center are actively aware of the gender of the tutor, and this awareness is usually tainted by the gender stereotypes that permeate society. In other words, students believe that females are more casual and caring, and the male tutors are more analytic and straightforward. Consequently, while the beliefs in these stereotypes can cause the writer to feel more comfortable with and confident about writing, this belief can also hinder writers as they allow the stereotypes to control their perceptions of the tutors. Therefore, writing center personnel need to find a way to work with these restrictions in order to facilitate the writing of the students and to enlighten them to the realities rather than the misconceptions of gender in the writing tutorial; there is no such thing as a typical "female" or "male" tutor. While being careful not to submit to gender stereotypes, we also must be certain not to impede efforts of both

the tutors and the students because collaboration cannot succeed if the student and tutor do not trust or listen to each other, no matter what the cause.

For three semesters while I was a graduate student, I tutored in a writing center at a university in Pennsylvania. As I worked with other graduate student tutors and with students throughout the college, I noticed disturbing trends in the gender relationships in that center. As I tutored and talked with some of the students, I found that tutors of both genders were perceived differently by students of both genders, and these differences reflected a value judgment by the students. Male tutors, according to male students, were direct, detail oriented, and knowledgeable about rules of grammar and punctuation. Therefore, the male tutors were judged to be highly effective tutors. Male tutors, according to female students, were all of these in addition to being somewhat intimidating and not as interested in the student as a person. Consequently, the female students said the male tutors were not effective because the male tutors were too intimidating. On the other hand, the female students saw the female tutors as being easy to work with, knowledgeable about everything (not just grammar), and willing to work through problems that did not always directly pertain to the piece of writing at hand. This type of tutoring was extremely effective in the female students' eyes. However, the female tutors, according to the male students, were not aggressive enough and did not assert themselves as authorities in the tutorial. Therefore, the male students did not

think female tutors were entirely effective in the tutorial.

The roots of these student assumptions can be seen in the stereotypes that often mis-characterize the genders. According to stereotypes purported in society, males are frank, straightforward, objective, analytic, less skilled at listening and more skilled at addressing the specific task at hand, and they are more active, aggressive, and self-assertive. Females, on the other hand, are stereotyped as being deferent, non-assertive, sensitive, caring, emotionally involved, casual, good at listening, concerned with self-expression and discovery, and are more cooperative than directive in their manners of speaking (Wood 27, 77, 261-266; Eakins and Eakins 6-7, 28, 38, 47).

Although research has repeatedly proven that gender stereotypes are simply labels based on over-generalized presuppositions, these stereotypes were deeply rooted in the minds of some students. Because the students perceived the tutorial atmosphere as being affected by gender stereotypes, an important issue was raised: if students believe that tutors are different by gender, then the students also believed that the gender of the tutor affected the effectiveness of that session. Thus, changes must take place within the writing tutorial to eliminate the detrimental effects of gender interference.

This study of anecdotal evidence was not completed to establish an empirical study, but instead to reveal whether my tentative conclusions were accurate or an issue for further attention. I started

by creating a survey that I mailed to 74 students—37 males and 37 females—who had previously attended the center. The questions were intended to show what students were thinking about the center and of specific tutors with whom the students had worked. Three of the twelve questions that appeared on the survey were:

• With which of the following did you work?
  1: female tutor
  2: male tutor
  3: both

• How did you choose the tutor with whom you worked?
  1: recommendation by friend
  2: recommendation by teacher
  3: reputation of tutor
  4: random depending on schedule
  5: wanted to avoid a specific tutor
  6: _____

• What quality do you feel is most important in a writing center tutor:
  1: knowledge of the steps in the writing process
  2: ability to listen to students
  3: knowledge of grammar
  4: ability to successfully re-shape ideas or essays
  5: adaptable personality
  6: _____

The thirty-nine students who responded ranged in age from 17-30, and 16 were males, 18 females, and 4 anonymous. I contacted those students who answered "yes" to the question at the end of the survey: "Would you be willing to discuss the results of this survey in small group discussions with other students and a writing center researcher?" Only five students, two males (ages 18 and 22) and three females (ages 18, 22, and 23), arranged and kept their appointments to be interviewed. Since everyone had different schedules, each student was interviewed on a one-to-one basis. Below are seven of the approximately forty questions the students were asked in the interviews; each person was asked the same list of questions:

• Describe a typical session at the writing center that you have experienced. (If the student worked with both gender tutors, I asked the student to describe one of each.)
• Were you pleased with the attitude(s) of the tutor(s)? Why or why not?
• Did the tutor listen to you?
• Did you trust the tutor before the session? After the session? Why or why not?
• Did you feel threatened, anxious, or intimidated when you attended the center?
• What qualities appeal to you in a tutor?
• Do you feel there can be a 'bad' tutor? What do you mean?

The responses of the five students suggest that they believe in gender stereotypes and that these beliefs affected the success or failure of the tutorial. Male students thought male tutors were more effective and thus good tutors; female students thought female tutors were more effective and thus good tutors. In addition, the male students perceived the female tutors to be less effective, and the female students perceived the male tutors to be less effective. These conclusions are apparent in the following comments made by the five interviewees.

The first student, William, worked with both male and female tutors, but he expressed a sincere preference for the male tutors. The male tutor he frequently worked with impressed William for several reasons: the tutor remembered William over the course of his numerous visits, the tutor knew the answers to grammar and punctuation questions without looking them up, the tutor went through the paper step-by-step, sentence-by-sentence, and the tutor "scratched out stuff" and fixed the mistakes on William's draft. Although William responded favorably about the sessions with a male tutor, William did not respond favorably about the sessions he had with two different female

tutors. William felt that female tutors are "nice, and easy to talk to," but he felt that they were "afraid to mark-up" or "give their opinions about [his] paper." William appreciated that the female tutors are interested in him and his work, but it annoyed him that they are afraid to be assertive.

William's main concern going into the session was having his paper proofread for grammar and punctuation mistakes, and he felt that male tutors were the best at this task. William said that the male tutor he worked with knew "small things" that William did not think anyone would know without the use of a reference book: The tutor knew that Douglas fir had a capital "D" and a lower case "f." This impressed William. A second concern of William's was that the tutor should concentrate solely on the essay at hand. He said "we stuck with the paper mainly; that's okay by me [because] it's the main reason I went there, not to talk about sports or anything." William obviously preferred a straightforward-grammar-oriented tutor. He feels he found this in the male tutors but not the female tutors.

The second male, Daniel, also worked with both male and female tutors. He believed that "males and females are both professional in their attitudes . . . and are both obviously there for the same purpose," but ultimately each had different goals. Male tutors, according to Daniel, were "more concerned with grammar" and the technical aspects of the paper. Female tutors, on the other hand, concentrated on the "ideas expressed in the paper" and concentrated on explaining rather than simply pointing out the "errors" in the essay. Daniel did not necessarily prefer one tutor over another because he felt that he was exposed to different methods and therefore he learned "different viewpoints from different tutors." Unlike William, Daniel and his tutor often discussed items outside the paper (i.e. "the Marines," "sports teams," and "current events"),

and he enjoyed this. Daniel felt that this type of discussion helped the tutor understand where the paper was coming from and where it could go. Although Daniel did not mind tangential conversations in the session, he still liked to maintain control. He did not want the tutor to write the paper for him; Daniel wanted "to be active" and in control. Daniel did not express a clear preference for one gender tutor or the other, but he did say that he saw a difference in the focus of each tutor. Daniel saw the male tutor as being more analytic and straightforward, whereas he saw the female tutor as being sensitive and caring. Daniel's comments as well as William's comments demonstrate some belief in societal gender stereotypes by these two students.

These beliefs in gender stereotypes were also reflected in the interviews with the three female students. The first female student, Michelle, had also participated in sessions with both male and female students, but she preferred the female tutor. Michelle felt that because of the methods used by the female tutor, Michelle's grades and writing habits improved. When Michelle discussed her experiences with the female tutor, she described the sessions as "a lot of fun," "helpful," and "great." Michelle liked the female tutor because she guided Michelle through the paper, and the tutor was "pleasant, not just criticizing." As Michelle said, the female tutor "made me feel more confident in myself and my writing" because the tutor "was interested not just in the paper, but with everything that is going on—social life too." Like Daniel, Michelle felt that discussions of outside issues helped her attitude about writing, and these discussions helped "ease" the student in the session.

Most importantly to Michelle, she learned to trust the female tutor. Michelle said she was "scared to trust the tutor at first," but later she felt very comfortable with the female tutor be-

cause she was "more caring about how you are doing as a person and your grades . . . and has more of an understanding as far as feelings." At one point in the interview, Michelle said that after working with the tutor a few times, she felt a "sisterhood" with the tutor. The attitude Michelle had about her sessions with the male tutor was quite different from the positive attitude she had about the female tutor. The male tutor, according to Michelle, was somewhat "distanced, not disinterested, but not as caring." Michelle said that the male tutor was more "intimidating" and less concerned with Michelle's life outside the paper at hand. He was "more directive in the way he talked" and he "took control of the session more" (i.e., he marked up her paper, told her how to change her errors, and circled the areas that needed work).

The relationship she established with her tutor, according to Michelle, affected what she brought out of the session. She said she was hesitant to "bring up certain subjects" or "ask some questions" of the male tutor, but she felt that she could discuss anything with the female tutor. In the end, Michelle noticed a slight difference in the grades she received working with the two different gender tutors. She said: "I can't blame that totally on the [male] tutor; it's probably because I didn't have enough [guts] to ask the right questions that I wanted to . . . I didn't want to ask him questions for fear that he might think I'm stupid." Overall, Michelle felt that the female tutor was "more understanding and comfortable with the situation," and the male tutor "sat back and judged her" which made her feel anxious, over-powered, and somewhat defeated. Michelle's comments clearly correspond with societal gender stereotypes.

The second female student, Carrie, also worked with both male and female tutors but preferred the female tutor. Before she attended the center, Carrie expected it to serve as a grammar and

spelling corrector. The first time she attended the center, she worked with a male tutor, and she said grammar help was exactly what she received. She said the tutor went over the mistakes, circled them, and then sent her home. After this experience, she stopped going to the center and relied on her teacher for help. Two semesters later, Carrie returned to the center, worked with a female tutor, and was very pleased. Carrie "felt very comfortable" with the female tutor because the tutor was "more understanding, more comfortable, more relaxed . . . and was able to understand a lot." Also, Carrie said the female tutor let Carrie "use her own words" and then they worked on the applicable rule or technique to hone Carrie's words.

As Carrie attended the center more, she felt more "relaxed" and "trusted [the female tutor] more." Carrie noted that the "concentration is on 'am I helping this person further than just the paper' . . . and having me put my feelings into the paper." The fact that, in Carrie's eyes, the female tutor was "softer," "open," "non-judgmental," "not as much of an authority figure" and did not treat Carrie "like I was stupid" kept Carrie returning to the female tutor. Like Michelle and Daniel, Carrie appreciated discussing outside topics because these tangents helped the tutor gain some insight into the paper and the writer. She did not believe that they discussed irrelevant issues or used the tutorial as a "gab session"; Carrie believed the tutor always guided the session in a certain direction. Carrie said, "it's nice to have a friendship and academic relationship . . . but it's not to the point of being uncomfortable and a waste of time."

There were times when Carrie could not schedule with the female tutor, so Carrie worked with another male tutor. After working with him a few times, Carrie said that she experienced negative sessions as she had the first time she went to the center the year before: The male tutor took control by locating

recurring mistakes and correcting them. According to Carrie, the male tutor was "more into the papers and he had a harder exterior . . . more straight-edged," but this technique to her was not as detailed and helpful because he was "more like a teacher and an authority figure" rather than a one-on-one tutor like the female. Carrie's experiences with both gender tutors at different stages in her academic career reflected her belief in stereotypes. Carrie said that women in general are more understanding and caring, and this helped the female tutor balance these traits with her knowledge of writing; therefore, according to Carrie, the female tutor is able to help students "on many levels." For Carrie, the more direct and assertive demeanor of the male tutors was less helpful and less successful.

The last female subject is Anna, an honor student and psychology major who attended the center only once and worked with a male tutor. She reported attending the center only once for several reasons: 1) after attending the center she only received a C+, 2) she said she could write well on her own, and 3) "the tutors [were] not able to help me with my major papers because of the [psychological] theories and terms in them." She said that if she ever did decide to return to the center, she would be able to work with any tutor with any subject, even extremely personal ones. Ironically, after the interview, Anna asked if I had a few minutes to spend with her because she was working on an essay about the lesson she learned from a particular teenage trauma. The essay was highly personal and emotional. We talked about the essay for a few minutes, she thanked me, and then she was gone. She never attended a tutorial at the writing center after this, and I never saw her again.

After this happened, though, a few questions went through my mind. If a non-psychology major, in her eyes, was not capable of understanding the terminology and expressions, then why did she have me read this paper that dealt with psychological terminology? Even though she said that she could discuss any topic with any tutor, would she have discussed such a personal essay with me if I had been a male? Did she let me read it because she perceived me as understanding and comforting, the roles other students also believed female tutors fulfill? I tried to reach her to discuss these ideas, but I was not successful. Although my questions went unanswered, I think it is possible to conclude that my gender did affect Anna's decision to allow me to review her essay with her.

Many tutor training manuals outline the different roles and tutoring styles that tutors tend to implement. One example of this is Lil Brannon's essay "On Becoming A More Effective Tutor," in Muriel Harris' *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs,* which outlines four roles that tutors often assume in tutorials:

- "Facilitator": the tutor serves as an audience for a paper but is also able to lead the student to see what in the paper needs to be clarified. The tutor and student share a sense of equality with regard to power and control.

- "Supporter": the tutor encourages the student and rewards the student for his/her accomplishments; however, the main control and responsibility lies with the student.

- "Leader": the tutor pressures the student to pay attention and stay focused; therefore, the student feels coerced into listening and learning.

- "Resister": the tutor does not establish any common ground between him/herself and the student, so there is barely any communication between the two. (106)

These roles are not labeled as being "male" or "female," yet there seems to be a correspondence between the roles outlined by tutor training manuals and the students' perceptions. According to the students' experiences and comments, each of these roles resonates with a particular gender. The male tutor that William responded to in a positive way seems to fit with the "Leader" role, and the female tutors that William did not like seem to fit the "Supporter" role. Daniel's remarks seem to place all tutors in the role of "Leader," but what each tutor focuses on is different: males grammar, females ideas and expression. The remarks the three female students made seem to label all female tutors as "Facilitator" or "Supporter," and according to the comments offered by Michelle and Carrie, the male tutor was a "Leader" or a "Resister." Although these roles are probably not intended to be gender-based, the perceptions the students had of what tutors should and should not be like did seem to cast a gender shadow on each of the roles. In other words, what the students seem to perceive as "male roles" are "Leader" and "Resister," whereas the "female roles" are as "Facilitator" or "Supporter."

Not only did the students perceive the tutors as acting in accordance with societal gender stereotypes and with Brannon's taxonomy of "tutor roles," but the students also attached a judgment about each tutor that was dependent upon the gender of the student. The male tutors, according to all of the students interviewed, fit these generalized "male" qualities almost perfectly. Also, according to all of the students, the female tutors conformed to the generalized "female" qualities. William associated positiveness with the male stereotypes and negativity with the female stereotypes. Therefore, William inadvertently offered his gender bias. Carrie and Michelle expressed the same judgment: Females were positive and males were negative. Daniel did not necessarily judge which was better, but his responses of what each tutor fo-

cused on reflect the stereotypes outlined above: males are analytical, females are more expressive.

The comments of these students suggest that numbers and statistics are not necessarily needed to see that even though gender stereotypes are not correct judges of personality and behavior, these stereotypes are affecting the students who are tutored and the relationships that are established within the writing tutorial. Both Michelle and Carrie readily admitted that they did not feel comfortable bringing up certain subjects or asking too many questions of the male tutors for fear of being seen as "stupid." Not feeling comfortable enough with the tutorial situation devalued the effectiveness of their sessions with male tutors. Daniel, because of his perception of gender differences in the session, expects to receive different foci from the different tutors. Daniel has not been able to see that male and female tutors were similarly trained to be "Facilitative" tutors, and this flaw in his perceptions influenced what he took away from each session. Also, if Daniel expected male tutors to focus on grammar and female tutors to focus on ideas, then he might have been hesitant to ask grammar questions of the female tutor or idea questions of the male tutor.

The same problem could have arisen with William: Did he bother to ask questions or did he let the male tutor run the show? Would William have asked any content-based questions of the male tutor, or did he feel the males would not be willing to spend time with these concerns? What if a tangential idea was exactly what William needed to break through a barrier or integrate another useful idea, but this was not brought out because William only liked the tutors who focused on grammar and punctuation?

Finally, there is Anna; I do not believe that she would have shared her essay with a male tutor because of the extremely personal nature of the essay

and the fact that she even seemed to be slightly embarrassed that I was reading it. I believe that Anna was influenced by societal-gender-based stereotypes, and I think this influence could have stunted the effectiveness of her writing. If I had been a male researcher, and she had not received any feedback on her essay, errors would have made their way into her final draft. However, because I was a female who coincidentally was asked to read a highly personal essay, these errors were found.

Since students clearly admitted the tutor's gender affects the tutorial, some measures can be taken within the writing center to prevent gender-based assumptions from harming the success of the relationships between students and tutors. First, whenever possible, make sure that a male and female tutor are both working so that the student can actively, or subconsciously, choose the gender of the tutor that fits their needs. Although this seems to submit to gender stereotypes, providing tutors of both genders can be helpful to the student. If the effectiveness of the session will be increased by allowing the student to work with a specific tutor, then perhaps this allowance should be encouraged. Every effort should be made on the part of the tutor to show the student that tutors of both genders can do the job, but if a male student is more comfortable and more successful with a male tutor, then the male student should act on this preference, and this same allowance should be granted to the female student.

Second, although all tutors are encouraged to be facilitative, perhaps gender is influencing the styles of the tutors. There are two ways to safeguard against this. The first is the most obvious: have the tutor ask the student what the student wants to concentrate on in the tutorial. This obvious solution is perhaps the most beneficial one since control for the session and for the learning will be placed in the hands of the student, which is where it should be. Also, the chance that the tutor will

focus only on a certain aspect of the essay may also decrease. The second safeguard simply involves observing the techniques of each tutor. If after observing tutors at work with actual students non-facilitative or balanced methods are observed, then review with the tutor how successful a well-rounded tutor is in the tutorial. After all, if a student can be subconsciously influenced by societal stereotypes, could not a tutor be just as negatively influenced?

Overall, the goal is to train tutors to be models of positive behaviors with respect to more than just writing. In other words, when tutors model non-stereotypical behavior in the tutorial, the students are more likely to rely less on stereotypes and rely more on realities. Consequently, the writing center serves not only as an aid to the students' writing, but also as an influence on the students' view of gender. By starting from the writing center outward we can only serve to help make tutorials more effective while also making students more aware of the detrimental effects of basing judgments and behaviors on stereotypes.

<div align="right">

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TUTORS' COLUMN

The writing center's role with young writers

Young children love to write. Through drawing and scribbling their first stories, they begin to develop the skills they will need to become competent readers and writers. Cultivating the young writer's talents and energy is important as it provides children with a positive introduction to literacy. In the Writing Center at the Wyoming Center for Teaching and Learning at Laramie (WCTL-L), we are involved in nurturing the young writer.

As the WCTL-L prekindergarten students enter the Writing Center, they come with large red writing books in hand. These three ring binders provide plenty of lined writing paper for the children to use. The children learn from the beginning that their writing is valued and will be saved in this special book. Because a stimulating atmosphere is essential to encourage young writers, the Writing Center is located in the school Media Center—providing both a literature enriched environment and exposure to older students and adults serving as models of both reading and writing.

The children are given a great deal of freedom in selecting their topics. Writing from their personal experience is both exciting and stimulating. Typically, the young writers will begin by exploring the Center's environment. They might observe a special photo display, draw a picture about something they have just seen, share an original story, or visit with Fernando, the Writing Center's Iguana as he suns himself on the window sill. These types of activities serve as inspiration.

The children may discuss activities which are familiar and share topics that they feel are personally important and interesting. Often they talk about their families and friends. Young writers also become excited about fantasy characters found in stories and on television, such as Barney or Power Rangers. Units and themes that are being taught in the children's classroom may inspire ideas for drawing and writing. After they learn about transportation, trips to far off countries may become popular avenues to explore. Verbal brainstorming has begun.

We encourage the children to talk about what they see and feel not only with the adults present, but also to each other. The development of oral and written language is concurrent; therefore we encourage both kinds of exchanges in the Center. When children tell stories they often use pictures to represent their thoughts and words. Through drawing, the children begin to communicate. There has never been a shortage of ideas.

After the children draw, they either write about their picture independently or dictate their stories to an adult. In either case, the writer's words are used, not the adult's. We take care to respond to questions that the child asks, not to criticize or correct what he or she is working on. This encourages the children to enjoy writing in a risk-free environment.

When we work with the young writers in the Center, there are several adults present to interact with the children. This includes the Writing Center staff, teachers, and volunteers from the prekindergarten classroom. Conferencing with the children not only improves their writing, but encourages oral language growth as well. Asking specific questions about their writing such as "Tell me what is happening?" or using a prompt like "your story is exciting, what happened next?" is an effective method of getting the writer to respond in his or her own words. It also encourages the children to expand on their ideas. We find that the children enjoy sharing ideas and pictures with one another. Often the children will gather after they write to share their stories with the class. The Center also provides space to display student work. Through these opportunities to share their work, the writers are developing a sense of audience.

Children in the prekindergarten class range in age from three to five years old. Because of the different ages and developmental levels of the children, some will finish quickly while others take more time. Some children may only want to draw while others will dictate to an adult or use their own form of scribble writing. Some of the children are also beginning to write by themselves using inventive spelling. The young writers are given as much time as they need to draw and write. Adults will take the children back to class to read a story or to share their writing when it is completed. The children begin to understand the purpose of the Writing Center very early on in their school career.

The prekindergarten children visit the Center on a regular basis and are familiar with who we are and what we do. They are the youngest and some of the most enthusiastic members of the Writing Center family at WCTL-L. These children are discovering the joys of language development—both oral and written—with the assistance of the Writing Center.

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NWCA News
from Joan Mullin, President

As of this writing, many of us are gearing up for the conference, and there will be more news of that in next month's WLN. Even if you couldn't make the peaks of Utah in September though, we'll try to connect everyone to the conference through this column and by encouraging those who presented at the conference to submit their work for publication. We have to keep our conversations going . . . which brings me to a topic that our profession and others seem to be taking up in force: how we communicate.

A look at the conference presentations in and outside writing center circles and the articles in professional journals reveals a strand of discussion around maintaining personal interaction as a part of education. Of course the discussion is heightened by an increase in electronic classrooms and distance learning; the idea that these media flatten differences and allow voice equity has now been seriously challenged. Increased budgetary pressures are again increasing the size of classrooms at all levels, and pressures on faculty make it difficult to interact with students beyond office hours or free periods. A recent on-line discussion also pointed to the risks of personal involvement in light of the legal ramifications of "getting involved." What, some are asking, will be the educational consequences if there is less face to face, human interaction?

As NWCA itself has become a larger organization, we are finding it difficult to poll the opinions of and understand the challenges of our varied group. We have the on-line listserv, WCenter, and this year the executive board established an on-line list so we could discuss and make decisions more than twice a year at national meetings. But we haven't yet worked out whether we are truly connecting in the ways we ought to with those we should. This is both a plea for you who might not be connected with NWCA to at least join us at our meetings when you can, but also a plea to communicate with us: we welcome innovative ideas about how to stay connected to those who work in writing centers. Only by drawing on each others' wide ranging expertise can we all benefit and grow as a profession, and as people seeking to understand each other.

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Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

WRITING CENTER ETHICS

Do what I tell you because you control your own writing

Now that I have—in previous columns—identified a few of the administrative contexts that play significant roles in shaping writing center ethics, I would like to take a closer look at the contexts and situations that impact one of the most important functions of every writing center: the tutorial conference. While administrative contexts raise some perplexing ethical questions of their own, they are largely focused on matters relating to the location, operation, and business of the writing center rather than its primary function. Most of the ethical dilemmas which are confronted in writing centers are those which arise in tutorial conferences. When tutors meet with students to discuss texts, the writing center conference becomes a nexus where personalities, personal agendas, emotions, expectations, histories, and circumstances all collide. The kinds of collisions that occur and the circumstances which anticipate them are as complex and numerous as the students we conference with, but it is possible, I think, to suggest at least a tentative framework for understanding some of the contexts and corresponding ethical problems that arise in writing conferences. I classify these contexts into five categories, each of which may come into conflict with the agendas and/or philosophies of the writing center and writing center tutor and thereby pose ethical dilemmas: (1) tutor authority and directiveness, (2) student agendas and expectations, (3) faculty agendas and expectations, (4) personality problems, and (5) special needs. In this month's column, I'll consider the issue of tutor authority and directiveness; in upcoming columns, I'll come back to the remaining issues.

Tutor authority and directiveness

Different tutors have different approaches to the writing conference. Some are perpetually positive and supportive with student papers, no matter how good or bad the actual product might be. Others are more critical and confrontational with students about their work, constantly prodding them to think more carefully about what they've written and consider arguments they haven't yet addressed. Still others will shift back and forth in their approach, based on their past histories with students or their judgments of which stance seems most appropriate at any given moment (Scharton and Neuleib). I have seen all of these approaches used by some of my own tutors, and none of these approaches seems, in and of itself, inappropriate or out of line for what I want to see accomplished in the writing center. The "feel good" tutors generally receive far more positive evaluations from their students than do the "get tough" tutors, yet this is a quite different matter from saying that students with the first kind of tutor improve their writing more than those with the second. Directors need to be flexible about how their tutors work with students, just as tutors need to make sure that their teaching strategies and personal behaviors conform to the codes established by their institution and the instructional mission of the writing center as a whole.

Given this flexibility in the approaches tutors can take in conferences, it is possible to see how tutors might decide to adopt any one of a number of different roles in their interactions with students—expert, guide, scholar, mentor, academic adjunct, medic, counselor, psychologist, referee, or advocate—depending on the situation (Hawkins 289-90; Sollisch). Each of these tutorial roles, however, carries with it a corresponding set of social and behavioral codes that structure the tutor/student interaction. These codes determine the purpose of the conference, the balance of authority in the conference, and the criteria for determining whether the conference has been a success. Tutors taking on the role of "counselor," for example, might focus on the affective dimension of a student's writing task, attempting to ease writing anxieties, sympathize with the student's difficulties, or offer constructive advice about working through the writing process. In this role relationship, tutors and students will maintain roughly equal levels of authority; neither is likely to dominate the conversation and both will probably contribute equally to the resolution of the student's writing difficulty. Success is achieved when the student's psychological/emotional state has received the proper "adjustment." When tutors take on the role of "expert," however, the authoritative balance shifts dramatically. As the source of expert knowledge, the tutor is likely to exert a greater degree of control over the conference and be expected to direct the student to the "right" means of expression or the "best" rhetorical form. The student will contribute to the conference conversation, but less so than in the counselor/client role and, for the most part, only to ask questions that will produce authoritative responses. Fortunately, tutors will only rarely have conferences where they find themselves slipping into one of these roles to the exclusion of all others.

More likely, as I remarked above, tutors will move gradually from one role into another depending on the exigencies of the conference and their perceptions of what is likely to be most productive for the student at any given moment.

But herein lies the ethical conflict. Writing centers typically take it as an article of faith that students should control their own texts and that tutors should ask questions, make suggestions, and offer advice—not write the students' papers for them. Tutors should try to establish a peer/peer relationship with the students they see, not a teacher/student relationship. Writing center tutoring is—at least in theory—supposed to replace the hierarchical model of instruction (high-status teachers passing knowledge down to low-status students) with a collaborative model in which the tutors and students become co-learners. Yet a writing center's institutional position in the academic hierarchy makes such a model virtually impossible to attain. Writing centers are routinely promoted as places where students can get help from writing "experts," and tutors would not be hired to work in writing centers if they were not able to demonstrate some level of writing proficiency. Writing center tutors cannot help but be authorities in some senses, a circumstance that has led John Trimbur to wonder whether the words "peer" and "tutor" do not necessarily represent a contradiction in terms ("Peer Tutoring" 23).

Tutors must consider carefully, therefore, how and under what circumstances they will choose to exercise—or subvert—their own positions as authority figures. How directive should tutors be in conferences, and when can that directiveness be considered ethical? Should tutors be explicitly directive only when they see students expressing "offensive" ideas such as racism, sexism, or homophobia, as

David Rothgery contends? Or can they be directive under other circumstances as well? Is it, in fact, the case—as Ian Roberts claims—that tutors will always be directive in conferences, that directiveness is an inescapable feature of any tutorial situation?

> Not only are students' ideas reinforced differentially [in tutorial conferences], but questions asked of students cannot but have an impact upon the direction and pattern of students' thinking. Intentionally or not, the tutor's questions plant specific ideas and initiate particular patterns of thought. Tutors, then, cannot "support" their students' thinking without becoming partly responsible for the students' thought, and tutors surely encourage students to think as the tutors themselves do. If this were not the case, it would be difficult to see how a tutor could help improve students' writing abilities. (13)

If Roberts is correct in his assessment—and I believe he is—then the ethics of tutor response in conferences become even more complex and problematic. Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns, in "A Critique of Pure Tutoring," have recently added further fuel to this particular fire. They have challenged the writing center "orthodoxy" I described above, arguing that many disciplines (such as art, music, and by extension, writing) embrace explicit, directive teaching as a valuable pedagogical model. Drawing from the theoretical principles of social-constructionism and the practical examples of WAC and WID programs, they claim that "Directive tutoring is based upon the articulation of rhetorical processes in order to make literate disciplinary practice plain enough to be imitated, practiced, mastered, and questioned" (146). So when does a tutor's influence over a text go beyond the domain of acceptable "guidance" and enter the domain of unethical "control"? Indi-

vidual tutors will need to make judgments about where these shifting and sometimes permeable boundaries lie on a student-by-student if not a moment-by-moment basis. The "correct" path for ethical tutor directiveness seems to lie somewhere in the indeterminate middle, it seems. Be directive, but not too directive. Model practices and writing strategies for students, but don't take control of their papers. Make them feel good about their writing as it is, but challenge them to consider weaknesses and logical flaws.

Should we be discouraged by this indeterminacy, this apparent lack of any clear-cut answers? I think not. I think, as always, that the important thing is to be aware of our practices and to understand why we make the decisions we do in our tutoring. It is that understanding that will become our most important resource as we negotiate new contexts, new students, and new writing in the future.

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Learning to write, learning to teach: The writing center's contributions to writing across the curriculum

I do not work in a writing center, but I am a writing center fan. In my capacity as the writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) consultant at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, I have observed the crucial contributions that our writing center makes. Indeed, I can comment upon several specific ways in which our writing center has helped our WAC program.

First of all, the Writing Center has helped bolster faculty members' confidence in their ability to assign writing. In 1994, a group of people interested in WAC got together to form a WAC discussion group. The members came from business, mathematics, biology, chemistry, psychology, physical education, social work, music, applied studies, law, English, and nursing. In our discussions, one concern kept surfacing—how to emphasize writing when one was oneself not a teacher of writing. As one young professor said, "I can tell my students' writing is terrible! But I can't tell them how to fix it. I don't want to assign what I can't teach." Because Washburn has a dynamic and cooperative writing center, my reply to her was easy. She could assign writing, respond to the content, and then—if the writing were problematic—send her students to the Writing Center. She began to rely on skilled tutors in the Writing Center to provide the specific suggestions for improvement that she did not feel qualified to give. But as she discussed revisions with her students, she realized that

many of the things the tutors were saying were things she also had sensed. She developed more confidence in her own reactions to student writing and more willingness to articulate her response. Then she herself made an appointment in the Writing Center for a weekly tutorial. "I've always felt nervous about my writing," she said. "But now I can tell I'm getting better. And I'm enjoying it!"

Thanks to the Writing Center, that professor has become in some ways a better teacher of writing than many English teachers who learned to write so easily that the process seemed "natural." In contrast, this young professor can identify with the many students who struggle with writing. She has firsthand knowledge of the stages along the way, and she can offer her own experience as an inspiration and as a guide.

Secondly, the Writing Center has encouraged writing across the curriculum by lightening faculty's workload. For many members of the WAC group, themselves excellent writers, the issue was not one of knowing what to respond to student writers but of finding the time to do so. For these professors, too, the Writing Center was a godsend. It made it possible to assign writing and know that there would be help in responding to that writing.

In addition to facilitating initial faculty involvement and providing crucial

faculty support, the Washburn Writing Center has also helped our WAC program in another important way: It has helped make our students' experience of writing a pleasurable one. The WAC movement is based on the premise that there is a link between writing and thinking. Our WAC group's experience with an experimental assignment appeared to confirm this connection; at the same time, it also indicated the importance of a "pleasure component" in realizing the intellectual potential of a writing assignment.

After several years of meeting together, our group decided to experiment with a writing exchange among students. We wanted to see what would happen if our students wrote for readers other than ourselves. Some of us arranged for our students to exchange across classes; others worked within a single class. (For a detailed discussion of one of these exchanges, see Patti Konzem and Gary Baker, "Essay Exchanges to Improve Student Writing," *Kansas English* 81, Spring 1996: 64-69.) I decided to try an exchange within a course on the literature and film of the Viet Nam War. The students wrote about things that puzzled them about our subject matter and then replied to each other's queries. After the exchange, I asked students to write anonymous critiques.

I learned that apprehension was at first widespread. As one student wrote, "I was worried about this assignment

because your toughest critic is a fellow student, or at least mentally you perceive it that way." But students were able to take their queries and replies to the Writing Center before they exchanged them, so that anxiety could be allayed before it permeated the experience. The student who wrote "I don't like for other people to see my writing" initially had lots of company. But when that same student concluded "I didn't like this assignment," he was one of only four out of thirty-five. The other students had become enthusiastic about the exchange. "I found the response paper assignment very interesting, fun, and beneficial," one student wrote, while another said, "It is extremely fun to express yourself as we did in this exercise. In addition, it is even more exciting to be able to read

your classmate's reply." Over and over again, students used the words "fun," "excitement," and "enjoyment" in connection with the assignment, and they linked those pleasant emotions to intellectual growth. "I learned a tremendous amount" went one typical comment, while another referred to "an avalanche of other ideas."

It was clear that with this assignment writing and intellectual stimulation had gone hand in hand and that the experience had been one that students might wish to repeat. But the anxiety of "having other people see my writing" could have changed the tenor, replacing the pleasure of discovery with the fear of embarrassment, the worry of metaphorically going into a public place with fly open or slip showing. But our

companionable Writing Center was able to reassure students that they were at least presentable, and so students were able to focus instead on their own and others' ideas.

The Writing Center at Washburn University has thus been important to our WAC program, helping faculty to become more daring and effective teachers and students to become more adventuresome and enthusiastic learners.

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THE WRITING LAB
NEWSLETTER

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