

Tutors' Column: "Vocation in the Writing Center"

Jessica Jones, Lauren Becker, Alyssa Riley, and
Bridget Draxler

Monmouth College
Monmouth, Illinois

Between the ages of 18 and 22, we are faced with an important task: figuring out what we want to do with our lives. There is a lot of emphasis on finding a practical application for our skills and interests, but much less emphasis on finding what we can do that we will find meaningful and fulfilling. This is where vocation becomes part of the equation.

Vocation is, according to Frederick Buechner, "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹ For many of us, the writing center is that place. And, we propose, our work in the writing center can also help us discover what we are called to do next. This essay advocates the writing center as a space for vocational discernment, which can simultaneously help tutors see their tutoring as a vocation and help tutors explore questions about their future in ways that may not be available to them elsewhere.

In 2012, the Monmouth College Writing Center launched a year-long series called "Vocation in the Writing Center." While vocation is sometimes framed as a faith-based calling, we approached vocational discernment as a conversation and as a process of listening to the exchange between an internal voice and a call from our communities. The program included guest speakers, reflection journals, hands-on activities, a personality test, a résumé tutorial, tutor-led discussions, and learning exchanges with vocation-themed courses.² From this variety of sources, we were able to define vocation and vocational discernment and discover how vocation applies to our roles as writing center tutors.

Vocation is a life path—not necessarily a specific career or job—that gives our lives meaning and fulfillment. Vocation is, to us, not only the work you are called to do, but also the person you are called to be. And, importantly, vocation is neither static nor

bound to a specific career. For example, some of us may be called to help children, but we could fulfill that calling as teachers, social workers, or daycare providers. Or, we might serve children through volunteer activities in our communities. There is more than one path that can satisfy a vocation, and we might find different expressions for a calling at different points in our lives. Inversely, one career path might fit different callings for different people. For instance, tutors in the writing center are drawn to this work for different reasons: a desire to help others, a love for language, or an aptitude to work collaboratively with others. Discovering why we tutor, can help us discern our vocation.

Our research started with the *Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project* (PWTARP), directed by Harvey Kail, Paula Gillespie, and Bradley Hughes. *PWTARP*'s shift in focus from tutee to tutor as "student learner" has revolutionized study in the growing field of writing center training and administration. This research has paved the way for thinking about how tutoring and tutor training can be utilized as job preparation, skill development, and generally as a resume booster.

Like the *PWTARP* participants, tutors overwhelmingly agreed that being a tutor helped them to improve their writing and leadership skills, confidence, communication, teamwork, and ability to apply what they know. Students were also able to clearly articulate their personal growth. One respondent to our survey wrote: "As a tutor, one can learn to communicate with others, give constructive criticism, and handle challenging social situations. I have learned a lot about myself."

While previous research tends to focus on strategies for turning tutoring experience into careers, our initiative sought to explore the concept of vocation more deeply and to provide an opportunity for the tutors to find "a life of meaning and purpose."³ We explored the writing center as a place to not only develop job skills, but also concepts of self-awareness, self-identify, and confidence.

Part of the "Vocation in the Writing Center" program included an Institutional Review Board-approved local and national survey about vocational discernment in the writing center. Current peer tutors were asked questions about their career goals, the effects of tutoring on the development of various skills for these goals, and how tutoring has led to vocational discernment or reaffirmation.

The writing center can serve various roles in students' process of vocational discernment, sometimes confirming tutors are on the right path, but sometimes showing them they belong elsewhere. When asked whether tutoring has helped them to discern their career goals, one tutor, a future teacher, wrote: "I feel like every time I help someone in the writing center I reaffirm that I have made the right decision." Another student commented, "I think that tutoring...has also affirmed that I need to be working with people." For students like these, the vocation series didn't help them find their vocation, but it was still valuable, building a bridge between their current work as tutors and their future careers.

Another tutor "strongly disagreed" that her experiences as a tutor "confirmed for me that I am on the right career path." The "Vocation in the Writing Center" events helped this student to discover that the career she planned to pursue wasn't related to her calling. However, the activities still played a valuable role in her discernment process by reorienting her from a mistaken path.

The students who remained undecided about their career paths also found unexpected value in the vocational discernment activities. For some, learning that there may be more than one career that would make them happy, or learning that vocational discernment is a lifelong process, offered reassurance. One tutor responded after having completed the "Vocation in the Writing Center" program that it "has shown me that it is okay not to have all the answers to what I want to do with my life. It has shown me that I will end up where I need to be."

Working together as a community was vital for the tutors as we began our journey of vocational discernment. We shared ideas along the way amongst the group, and the tutors were able to develop into role models for each other. In addition, the tutors could offer insights to each other about their strengths and abilities; we learned that sometimes others can see things about us that we can't see ourselves. In addition, we talked with guest speakers, some of whom went through several paths before finding their calling in life. One student said, "I feel like talking about it really helps but I don't have very many chances to share my worries with people. Also, I really liked to know that not everyone else has it all figured out yet either."

An unexpected result of our research has been the comfort we have provided many of our tutors in realizing they are not alone

on this journey of vocational discernment. In our research, we learned that tutors—even those who are confident in their future career path—are hungry for conversations about vocational discernment. We learned that vocational discernment is as much about discovering what isn't our calling as what is. We learned that for students whose path is unclear, reassurance for the journey is more important than a roadmap to the destination. And, we learned that vocational discernment is an individual process of reflection that is best done in community.

Our writing center community has benefited from the vocational discernment activities and our research. By seeing how our work in the writing center is both itself a vocation and also part of a longer path of vocational discernment, we have become more intentional and reflective in our work as tutors. In addition, the writing center is uniquely situated to support tutors on our paths of discernment, by offering both hands-on experience and a supportive community of reflection at an important moment in our lives. Our discussions on vocation have reframed the way we view our writers, our fellow tutors, and ourselves. It is a change, we think, for the better.

1. Frequently quoted, Buechner's definition here is taken from Edward P. Hahnenberg's *Awakening Vocation*. Liturgical P: Collegeville MN, 2010.

2. For information about the events, journals, and survey, visit our website <blogs.monm.edu/writingatmc/writing-center/vocation-in-the-writing-center/>.

3. This definition of vocation is taken from Monmouth College's academic programs page, and stems from Monmouth's membership in NetVUE (*Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education*) since 2010.



Kail, Harvey, Paula Gillespie, and Bradley Hughes. *The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project*. U. of Wisconsin-Madison. <www.writing.wisc.edu/pwtarp/>. Web.