

A is for Alumni: Cultivating Past Advisors as Current Advocates

Mike Mattison

Wittenberg University
Springfield, Ohio



Were the fall semester of 2014 a movie, I could imagine myself as Benjamin Franklin Gates, the character played by Nicolas Cage in *National Treasure*. Surrounded by boxes of old files, I was elbow-deep in papers in a side room of our school’s library, digging for any sign of past Writing Center employees: a frayed name tag, a tattered attendance sheet, a crumpled memo. Anything that could give me another name to add to the list—a list of every advisor who had worked in the Wittenberg Writing Center since its founding in 1980. We did not have one on file, and attempts to recreate the list from other sources had been stymied: all the old employment records before 1995 had been destroyed, and the course for writing center advisors had not begun until 1990; there were at least ten years of advisors hidden away. All we had to go on were the random files left by the previous director, ones now stored in boxes in the basement of the library. So I searched.

The reason for creating the list was fairly straightforward: we wanted to host a reunion, celebrating thirty-five years of student writing advisors at Wittenberg¹. That reunion, though, was part of a larger plan, one that aimed to strengthen the relationships between the Writing Center, the school administration, the school’s advancement department, the school’s communication office, and our alumni. We wanted to cultivate the ties with our former advisors so that, yes, we could (selfishly) position the Writing Center as central to the school’s mission². And that plan had, and continues to have, many moving parts.

The writing center field has long recognized the value of its work for tutors beyond the walls of the writing center itself. Sue Dinitz and Jean Kiedaisch talk of how writing center staff benefit from talking with writers: “While tutoring and writing, independently, help students develop skills with wide relevance in the work world, practicing them in combination—tutoring writing—allows

for a mutual reinforcement of these skills.” And these skills are “central to success in almost any profession” (5). Paula Gillespie, Brad Hughes, and Harvey Kail have written about the Alumni Tutor Project, a research endeavor that has highlighted “detailed information on the skills, values, and abilities that tutors have taken with them and on the ways they adapted their knowledge of writing and collaborative learning to suit their needs” after graduation (40). More importantly, the authors have explained how to use this information with different populations, from administrators to colleagues to donors to ourselves. And we have at Wittenberg done such surveying; every year we ask the graduating seniors to fill out a questionnaire regarding their work, and we have previously polled several alumni on how their days in the Writing Center connected to their current work.

Yet we were looking for something more than survey results. It is one thing for writing center administrators to offer their research from these projects; it is another for the alumni themselves to offer their stories. We wanted to build from Gillespie, Hughes, and Kail’s work, to bring the alumni themselves into the conversations, so we started with a reunion.

That reunion idea was the result of collaboration with our school’s director of alumni relations. Over the course of several conversations, we talked about the best way of interacting with alumni. One of our first steps was writing an article on the Writing Center for the alumni newsletter. From there we began trying to track down the names of everyone who had worked in the Center. We wanted an email list so that we could send updates on the Writing Center, letting the group know of recent publications and conference presentations from current advisors; we also hoped that we could use the former advisors as a resource for current staff. Might they be able to offer advice about finding jobs, about using the skills gained in the Writing Center in the outside world? From those first steps came the idea for a reunion, one that was especially timely given our 35th anniversary.

Now, the preceding paragraph might give a simpler picture than intended. It would appear that the director of alumni relations and I sat down, agreed to a plan, and followed through. A collaboration. However, it’s fair to say that the Writing Center was never a priority for the alumni office, as the school had made a recent decision to focus on athletics and our president’s push for more professional programs at Wittenberg. We had to make our own concerted push to generate interest in the Writing Center. The advisors and I sent emails, made phone calls, and tried to

keep reminding the Alumni Office staff about deadlines. If there is a line between persistence and being a pest, we possibly crossed it a time or two, but we did manage to arrange everything for the reunion, from the guest list to the menu to the invitations to a celebratory video. Most of that work took up the spring of 2015, as we were planning the reunion to coincide with fall Homecoming. The director of alumni relations had said that a good turnout for an event such as this, at a small school like ours, would be about twenty. We had nearly sixty.

To return to the *National Treasure* reference, the reunion of Writing Center advisors was for us what the finding of the secret message on the back of the Declaration of Independence was for Ben Gates. There was something more to discover. To start, it was a marvelous feeling to be in that room, to watch writing advisors from the 1980s share stories with the current advisors. We had all of the decades represented, and in that space, the cross-generational connection was strengthened. Even better, we had both the director of alumni relations and the university president in as guests, so they saw first-hand the attachment to the Writing Center that these alums had. Our next step was to decipher how best to proceed.

The first idea was to build off the theme of generations. How could we showcase the longevity of the Writing Center? For this, we did not have to look far. One of the recent Center alums was working for the Office of University Communications, and one of her responsibilities was to create and edit the Wittenberg Magazine, the school's main publication. What we proposed was a cover story on the Writing Center, interviewing advisors from different years. I pitched the idea to our interim director of University Communications, and she seemed at least open to the idea. Then, I also enlisted the help of one of the alums from the reunion, a 2001 graduate, who currently serves on the Alumni Board. He then wrote to the interim director:

It was good to see you at Homecoming. While on campus, I had the honor of attending the 35th Writing Center Reunion, which was beautifully orchestrated . . . [the] Writing Center was an influential aspect of my Wittenberg education, and it was fun to see it given the recognition it deserves over the Homecoming weekend. Mike had an idea, and I would like to second it. And that's to do a Writing Center/Writer's Workshop story for the *Witt Magazine*. We could celebrate 35 Years of the Writing Center. Mike suggested featuring a student writing advisor from each decade the Writing Center has operated at Witt, and how the center influenced

them and what they're doing now. . . . The good news is that we have plenty of old photos in the archives!

Shortly after, one of the writers from the university's Office of Communications wrote to ask for the names and emails of past advisors. She wanted recommendations for people she could interview for the profile. It looked as if we were headed for a cover story.

Of course, not everything goes as expected. In the midst of our post-reunion planning, the president left the university. The reasons were several-fold, and her leaving put many other initiatives and projects on hold, including the *Wittenberg Magazine*.³ I received a few emails from the interim director about how they were assessing the magazine's status and would be in touch, but there has been no further word, and there has been no magazine. So as quickly as our hope of an in-depth cover story was lit, it was extinguished.

Publicity, though, is but one avenue we can travel. Another is fundraising. Gillespie, Hughes, and Kail briefly mention fundraising in their article, and they note that “[s]uccess in fundraising requires that writing center directors have vision, persistence, and patience, an understanding of fundraising principles, regular communications with alumni, and substantial rhetorical and institutional political savvy” (46). That's a long list of requirements, on top of what writing center directors already do. Yet it has been enlightening for me to sit down with members of our University Advancement office and hear how they speak of their work. As a small example, I once asked in an email how we could sell the work of the Writing Center, and I quickly had a reply: “Selling is the wrong verbiage. We want to remind them of their efforts and engage them to support the current writers through giving.”

So we weren't selling. But we were dealing with money. And we were dealing with what Ronald Burt (and others) would call attachment, the “emotional connection between a person and an organization” (620). People need to feel connected to Wittenberg in order to give money, and we had to determine the best way to talk with them about the Writing Center so that we could remind them of (or rekindle) their attachment. As Gillespie, Hughes, and Kail ask, “How does a writing center possibly fit into this pattern of identification and support?” (46).

For starters, we needed some concrete funding opportunities. If we asked people to give money, they needed to know what it would be used for. Here's an initial brainstorm list:

- An endowed advisorship. That's the same idea as an endowed chair, but for much less money. We'd need to generate \$2000-2500 per year, and that person's name could be given to an advisor position (we could even buy a small wooden chair to hang on the wall). The advisor holding the position would communicate with the donor, and if we had a few, we could think about a dinner each year. (If we somehow found twenty-five or so of these, we would have the employee budget covered.)
- A Writing Center travel fund. The advisors attend national and regional conferences, and the money would be used for travel, registration, and hotel costs.
- Sponsorship of our nonfiction journal, *Spectrum*, published through the Writing Center. The publication usually costs around \$4000 per year, so there could be a one-time sponsorship, or a larger donation could fund the journal perpetually.

These are the ideas that the staff of Advancement took with them when they went to talk with possible donors. They were looking, obviously, for people who valued writing, learning, collaboration. We collected all the names of past editors and contributors to *Spectrum*, as we hoped some of them would be interested. Then again, one group of people needed very little in terms of a reminder of their attachment: the writing advisors.

Here is where my thinking changed. For the past dozen years, at two different writing centers, I believe I have been most focused on publicizing our work to outsiders. Writing center administrators are, in many ways, salespeople. We have to pitch the writing center work so that others can understand and appreciate it. And, yes, support it. When I thought of donors, as Gillespie, Hughes, and Kail also seem to, it was of others. People who did not come from a writing center but could appreciate one. Yet the alumni who have worked in a writing center don't need a sale—that's the "wrong verbiage." We're not pitching anything to them. Instead, it's more like preaching to the choir. With my conversations with the Advancement staff, I was trying to figure out my sermon, and how to pass around the collection plate.

If that last image gives you pause, it did me, too. I have no problem talking about and advocating for the Writing Center. I'll do so anytime, anywhere. But this is different territory. This is asking for money from the people I had been talking about—the advisors. It seems too much like bringing your work home, of denigrating the writing center space by bringing money into it. We talk about coffee, couches, and conversations, not coins and coffers. Yet we

do also talk about the connection that develops between advisors and writers, between advisors and advisors, and between advisors and a writing center. And one of Burt's suggestions about building personal attachments is to "create emotional experiences at university that encourage interpersonal relationships" (641). Those are exactly the relationships that are created in our Writing Center, and that our alums mention when they write; they talk about the "family" of advisors, and they refer often and fondly to the two previous directors, Mimi Dixon and Maureen Fry.

As for my doing the asking, that role makes sense, too. Though Scott Gaier, who focused on alumni relations, does not examine alumni's connection to resource centers like a writing center,⁴ he does make an interesting suggestion regarding the classroom experience: because "alumni giving" is strongly connected to "academic satisfaction," then a school should consider using "faculty as a major stakeholder for soliciting gifts" (287). Yes, professors should ask for money. Students are connected to their teachers, and having that group ask for money could be more successful than having administrators or others do so. But, if professors can be possible fundraisers, why not writing center administrators? Or, for that matter, the advisors?

Our next endeavor put us into a position to ask for money: a phone-athon. One of our current advisors, Benjamin, also works for the Advancement office, and he is in charge of the phone room—Witt students regularly call alumni with updates and fundraising requests. He and I worked out a deal with the university that we could come to the phone room and call alums for an evening, and, whatever donations we received would go directly to the Writing Center. We used our guest list from the reunion for our call list, and Benjamin put together a script for us to use. Then, one spring evening, five advisors and I went and called our alums.

According to Benjamin, our evening was an "extreme success." We were talking mostly with more recent graduates, who don't have much money, and several who had not given in a few years, suggesting a possible dissatisfaction with the school. These are not people who give often, but we had a high success rate. And, in addition, the current advisors who worked the phones were again able to connect with previous advisors; through these conversations they had their connection to the Center strengthened, and that in turn may create alumni connections once current advisors graduate. Also, we learned that an account for Writing Center gifts did not exist, so we put in a request for one.

That brings us to now. To return once more to the movie reference: we will never find a hidden treasure. I am certain there is no underground vault at Wittenberg, and I am fairly certain that we will not find any alum with the wherewithal to fully fund the Writing Center. There is no Hollywood ending for us, no room full of precious metals. But there is some hope. For instance, we do now have our own account number for donations. People can donate directly to the Writing Center online, using the drop-down listing. That's a small change, but it's significant for us. We are now recognized in a manner that the university administration understands and appreciates. We have established relationships with the Advancement and Communication Offices, and I am having continuing conversations with members of both.

Most important, we have strengthened ties with our alumni. We have built upon the momentum of the reunion and now keep in touch through our Facebook page, periodic emails, and a yearly newsletter. Each of those communications brings a few responses from former advisors, and they, at times, are advocating for us. Just this semester, one of the alums, unprompted, sent an email to the Business Department, suggesting that all majors bring their portfolios to the Writing Center. He was a Business major and wanted to remind everyone of the benefits of an outside reader. To have another voice advocating for the work done in the Writing Center was a welcome change—a reward perhaps nearly as valuable as gold.

NOTES

1. Wittenberg is a liberal arts school with approximately 1800 students.
2. Wittenberg was, and is, going through a difficult transition period: lower enrollment, budget cuts, administrative turnover. Programs are being asked to justify their existence, and though there has not been any formal charge to the Writing Center to make such an argument, the times seem to call for an active approach.
3. A great deal of turnover occurred in the Office of Communications, including our former advisor.
4. Somebody should!



WORKS CITED

- Burt, Ronald S. "Attachment, Decay, and Social Network." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, vol. 22, no. 6, 2001, pp. 619-643.
- Dinitz, Sue, and Jean Kiedaisch. "Tutoring Writing as Career Development." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 34, no. 3, Nov. 2009, pp. 1-5.
- Gaier, Scott. "Alumni Satisfaction with Their Undergraduate Academic Experience and the Impact on Alumni Giving and Participation." *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2005, pp. 279-288.
- Gillespie, Paula, et al. "Nothing Marginal About This Writing Center Experience: Using Research About Peer Tutor Alumni to Educate Others." *Marginal Words, Marginal Work?: Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers*, edited by William J. Macauley, Jr., and Nicholas Mauriello. Hampton P, 2007, pp. 35-52.