

# Retaining Writing Center Consultants: A Taxonomy of Approaches

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At the end of the fall or spring term—it often happens. Consultants depart, usually because of graduation, but also because of student teaching, studying abroad, or internships. Directors plan for such staffing changes.

However, it is also true that some consultants may slip into directors' offices, with hang-dog looks, confessing they will not be returning to the center, or in the last week of the term, they shoot their directors an email: "I won't be working next term. Thanks for the experience. It's been fun." And with such a message, the consultants are gone. Of course, students—as part of their growth and development—will leave the writing center to explore other options. But, as a center director, I wanted to discover strategies in order to foster as satisfying a work environment as possible so I can minimize such attrition and its impact on staffing.

To discover what other directors do to retain staff, I emailed members of my state writing center organization—the South Carolina [affectionately nicknamed Palmetto State] Writing Center Association. Then, using these directors' suggestions for retention, I also sent out an anonymous survey to the WCenter listserv to determine what methods directors employ to limit attrition of staff. While only 29 directors responded to the WCenter survey, those respondents represent a wide range of institutions, with 58.6% from public institutions (four-year school, four-year master, four-year masters/Ph.D.) and 41.4% from private ones (four-year school, four-year master, four-year masters/Ph.D.), and they use various models for staffing: undergraduates (89.2%), graduate students (56.7%), and/or professional tutors (44.8%).<sup>1</sup> The emails to directors in my state and the WCenter survey responses indicate that directors' approaches to maintaining a stable number of workers fall into three categories: philosophical inducements, proactive retention, and tangible awards. Knowing about these strategies for minimizing attrition helps directors

evaluate their efforts to retain consultants and to manage their centers.

### **PHILOSOPHICAL INDUCEMENTS**

Overwhelmingly, the email and survey responses indicate that to keep consultants, directors often use philosophical inducements, such as helping their consultants comprehend the centers' long-term goals and discussing with consultants how they fit within these ideals. The survey shows 79.3% of the responding directors provide consultants with their center's conceptual framework or its "big picture" so that consultants understand the culture of which they are a part. On the survey directors report they depict their centers as "a warm and comfortable place for those who love writing" (anonymous director) or as a place that assists students: "I think many [consultants] come back [to work in the center] because they appreciate helping others; they want to continue in that role" (anonymous director). In addition to their centers' goals, directors using a philosophical approach to consultant attrition also spend a great deal of time helping consultants understand the most important attributes they expect their staff to possess in order to conduct successful sessions (79%). Emily Harbin, at Converse College, explains, "My attitude is that if tutors see their work as meaningful and fulfilling, they will want to keep doing it, even without incentives. I want the person who would do this job for free because I cannot offer them anything other than minimum wage."

Another philosophical inducement for minimizing staff turnover is showing consultants they are part of something larger than themselves: a long tradition of consultants (69%). Allan Nail, Columbia College, states his method of achieving this goal: "[W]e work very hard to make the Writing Lab a community to be a part of, and create/maintain certain traditions that give tutors a sense of 'ownership' of the success of the center beyond just being employed." Directors' stressing the value of community helps consultants see their centers as places that are "collegial and collaborative," where consultants can "chat and hang out" (anonymous director). According to the survey, directors also make sure that they present the philosophy of the center during the very first training sessions (79%) before jumping into the do's and don't's of conducting consultations. As one anonymous director states, "The emphasis [is] on learning and growth not just a job." Such strategies help consultants comprehend a center's culture.

Another option for helping consultants see their work in a larger context occurs when directors engage consultants in a “social justice agenda” (Lori Salem 38), such as fostering literacy in the community by volunteering to work with students in primary or secondary schools. As an anonymous director explains, “I help [consultants] find ways to contribute their knowledge and skills in the WC beyond their consulting/tutoring.” For those centers that pursue this philosophy, 17% of the respondents report that outreach is, indeed, a major retention tool for them. Feeling that the center is assisting others beyond the ivied walls of the college or university may, possibly, lead to retention of staff.

Also, to establish the center’s culture, directors are stressing the job’s exclusivity: they emphasize that not all students are qualified or even suitable to work in the center. As an anonymous survey responder states, “For undergrads, the position has a certain prestige because it is competitive (difficult to get hired) and because they get to work with faculty in a way that emphasizes the [consultants’] own writing abilities,” while another director describes how being consultants was “kind of like belonging to a club or an honor society.” An important retention strategy, then, is appealing to consultants’ growing sense of working on a team to accomplish important goals.

Another vital philosophical method for minimizing attrition is to empower consultants: like all workers, consultants should experience a “real sense of control” (Aldag and Kuzahara 467) so they feel they are contributing to their centers. Different techniques help achieve this form of retention, such as asking consultants to create handouts (or other materials such as on-line PowerPoints) (86.2%), to conduct workshops for fellow consultants (75.9%), to make presentations at conferences (65.5%), and to train new consultants (65.5%). Other empowering methods, as revealed by the survey, include having consultants work as mini-administrators by observing and evaluating fellow consultants in action (55.2%) so that “they share in the governance of the center” (anonymous director). As one director indicates, these techniques help them view consultants “as fellow professionals and intellectuals. I assume their intellectual engagement and recognize the knowledge and resources each of them brings to the table.” The WCenter survey also shows that the least used method for empowerment is to have consultants interview and hire new consultants, chosen by only 37.9% of the directors. Overall, though, directors are engaged in “particip[ant] management” (Aldag and Kuzuhara 468), where consultants

are part of the center's structure and operation. As a result, the "writing center is something consultants like being a part of" (anonymous director).

Along with empowering their consultants, directors can also lessen attrition by encouraging self-efficacy; that is, by helping employees believe they can achieve a task on their own (Ramon Aldag and Loren Kuzuhara 468). If a marathon runner thinks she can win her race, she trains harder. Directors are certainly enacting this approach. Leigh Ryan, co-author of *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, says, "I'm ALWAYS seeking out [tutors] to praise their tutoring (especially newer tutors) and any other things of note that they do. Everyone likes to hear good comments, and tutors are more apt to try harder and to stay when they are noticed and appreciated." When consultants handle a difficult consultation well, survey responses show that directors quickly praise the worker (96.9%), thereby fostering self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy—a valuable retention tool—is also achieved when consultants receive concrete evidence as to how they are developing as workers. One method for demonstrating such growth, especially when time and funds are limited, is the awarding of Digital Badges for completing certain requirements like facilitating an ESL workshop, leading staff meetings, or publishing an article (Conard-Salvo and Bomkamp). These badges, displayed in different media, such as LinkedIn, Mozilla, and Backpack, or on electronic résumés and curriculum vitae, let consultants describe how they achieved their badges, making their accomplishments more visible than a line on their résumés can be (Conard-Salvo and Bomkamp 9). Besides Digital Badges, directors can show consultants are developing by encouraging them to achieve certification through organizations such as the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), the National Peer Tutoring Association (NPTA), or the Association for the Tutoring Profession (ATP). For example, as consultants move up through CRLA's regular, advanced, and master levels of certification, they can experience proof of their growth. The website for the CRLA Tutor Program Certification suggests that linking certification to wages would be a powerful means to eliminate attrition: "[T]his [level of certification] also helps with *retention* of tutors" (emphasis added, "CRLA,"). However, on the survey, only 4% of the directors chose certification as means of retention. It appears, then, directors prefer to enact self-efficacy with immediate praise rather than with a pursuit of certification levels, especially since certification entails consultants' undergoing a sustained period of

training before receiving validation and reassurance about their work.

Finally, another form of self-efficacy occurs when workers undergo a “vicarious experience” (Aldag and Kuzuhara 468). Seeing others succeeding on the job is a major incentive to do well (Aldag and Kuzuhara 468). When consultants observe experienced consultants successfully handling an apathetic client, for example, they feel they too can deal with such clients. The survey shows that 82.8% of directors use this technique of having inexperienced consultants watch those who are dealing with difficult sessions (e.g. apathetic clients). Experienced consultants acting as role models is a powerful inducement for observers to better understand how to do well at one’s job; of course, once the consultants move from the observer role to experience success themselves, they feel encouraged to stick around the center.

### **PROACTIVE RETENTION**

After examining the responses to my survey, I concluded that directors rely on more than presenting a big picture and empowering their consultants when encouraging retention. Directors report they are also being proactive, taking specific, concrete steps so that there is as little attrition as possible. Being proactive begins when directors interview for new consultants. Directors describe how they try to weed out students by asking prospective consultants to commit to a minimum number of hours per week (67.9%) and for a minimum number of terms (25%). In addition, directors often widen the cast of their nets. While first year students sometimes lack the maturity to work in centers, Harbin suggests that centers should still consider hiring them in their second term, if the skills are there, because freshmen are the seed-corn who often become the long-time consultants so vital to a center’s success. More than half of the survey respondents say they are using this option (57.1%) as a way to ensure consultants have long-term employment in the center and time to develop their consulting skills and abilities.

Directors are proactive in another way; they determine whether or not consultants are satisfied in their jobs so that changes can be carried out, if possible, to increase retention. Directors can tap into consultants’ perceptions of their work experience by asking departing consultants to complete the oft-used exit interview. Human Resource expert Susan M. Heathfield describes the benefits: “Exit interviews are key to organization improvement since rarely will you receive such frank feedback from current employees.” Departing employees are often much more open,

“more forthcoming, constructive and objective than staff still in their jobs” (Chapman). Though the questions should not be numerous, they can focus on issues like “What is your main reason for leaving?”; “What specific suggestions would you have for how the organization [center] could manage this situation/these issues better in the future?”; “What extra responsibility would you have welcomed that you were not given?”; and “What training would you have liked or needed that you did not get, and what effect would this have had?” (Chapman). Completed anonymously, exit surveys reveal problems that could lead to staff turnover. Curiously, though, the WCenter survey shows directors do not readily use such exit interviews. To the question, “As a director, I try to determine consultants’ satisfaction with their work in the center (‘job satisfaction’) by asking departing consultants to fill out an exit interview, anonymously,” only 7% said “yes,” while 42.9% selected “no,” 21.4% “sometimes,” and 10.7% never use an exit interview.

Although formal exit surveys are not being widely distributed, directors are applying other techniques to secure consultants’ feedback. According to the WCenter survey, directors encourage consultants to describe their problems at monthly or weekly staff meetings so that directors and consultants can discuss the difficulties. As a director states, “My tutors are not shy about sharing dissatisfaction.” Another oft-cited means for determining job satisfaction is by having consultants keep a journal (electronic or paper) where, as one director notes:

Tutors are asked to give an overview of the month, present the most challenging session and the most rewarding session, ask questions about anything WC related, note personal strengths and struggles that month, etc. This journal has become a direct line of conversation between each tutor and me.

One director even conducts “a learning and development review every other term” so consultants understand how their writing center work relates to them “as students and professionals” and so “students [can] reflect on and evaluate their experience/performance and set goals for the future” (anonymous director). Job satisfaction is also measured when, “at the end of each semester, tutors write out which activities (tutoring, training meetings, processes) went well and which did not. I make changes by reflecting on their [the consultants’] anonymous feedback” (anonymous director). Informal face-to-face contact is

also valuable: “I try to chat with tutors as often as possible by dropping in to see them, and I also hold one-to-one meetings to catch up with what’s happening with them in life and in the WC” (anonymous director). Thus, instead of waiting until consultants are already leaving the center, directors are conducting “exit” interviews through methods that are effective for generating immediate improvements to a center.

### **OUT-AND-OUT TANGIBLE AWARDS**

Besides fostering a philosophical, empowering, proactive culture, directors—based on the survey and the emails—are using incentives that can be characterized by the label Bravo Zulu (Aldag and Kuzuhara 469). Taken from the U.S. Navy’s custom of raising the two flags Bravo (“well”) and Zulu (“done”) to signal approval of other ships’ activities, the Bravo Zulu approach encourages directors to provide tangible rewards so that they “create an environment in which employees feel valued and believe they can make a difference” (Aldag and Kuzuhara 469).

For centers, the practice of Bravo Zulu—or what might be called out-and-out bribes—is nothing new. According to the survey, the most used incentive is the salary (79%), along with the promise of annual raises (24.1%), if directors have some control over salaries. Other frequently used Bravo Zulu methods are “an emphasis on the network of connections the consultants form among themselves” (69%) and a promise from directors to write a letter of recommendation (62.1%). For the consultants’ other future needs, directors show them that working with multi-media writing projects adds technical skills to their resumes (20.7%). Appealing to both the consultants’ pocketbooks and their futures appears, then, to be key retention techniques. Another effective bribe is a promise to help consultants manage their time. Directors tell consultants they will receive their preferred writing center schedules and can even apply for graduate assistantships, if they return for a new term (55.7% and 13.8%, respectively). Directors did report other means to retain staff, like appealing to the consultants’ hunger by having the workplace well stocked with food and soda (34.5%), holding end-of-term award ceremonies, and giving out free t-shirts “to advertise their association with the center” (anonymous director). These activities show directors are trying to make their centers “a friendly and rewarding place to work, yet also a demanding one” (anonymous director).

### **CONCLUSION**

For all directors, retention of trained consultants is a goal, a desire, an ideal. In fact, the survey reveals that directors are

fairly successful at keeping their consultants: “We have little difficulty with retaining tutors—most are unhappy to leave when they graduate” (anonymous director). Unfortunately, though, it is difficult to know if any one technique is responsible for minimizing attrition. After all, consultants will leave the center, eventually. Meanwhile, directors—based on the emails and the WCenter survey—show that they are acutely aware of attrition and are using the strategies of philosophical inducements, proactive retention, and, even bribes, so that they may—just may—minimize the loss of trained consultants in order to build stronger, more sustained centers.

## NOTES

1. Multiple answers were allowed. IRB approval was received for the survey.



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