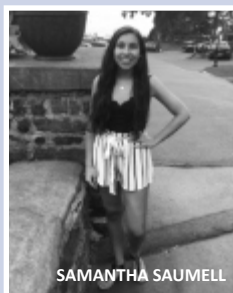


Tutors' Column: "Finding Where You Belong"

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College is a stressful time for many students, but for the “39% attending their first four-year college” who decide to transfer, there is an extra layer of stress and fear that comes along with the realization that they are going to have to start college all over again (Dolan). As a transfer student, I was filled with fears and was presented with many hardships that I would have to overcome. Before beginning my new school, I realized, as David McMillan and David Chavis suggest, “that there are people who belong and people who do not,” and I felt that no matter what, I would be among the latter (9). I was forced to put myself out there and face the fear of being “outcast from a group of people” who had already had time to get to know each other (Dolan). I knew I would feel out of place, and I was worried that my biggest fear of all, changing schools and still not finding a sense of belonging, could possibly come true. This fear sparked a desire within me to find my purpose on campus. These feelings are what eventually led me to become a writing center tutor, one who values ensuring others never feel as if they don’t belong, and that is truly where my story begins.

I learned all about the writing center from one of my English professors. After hearing about the values that guide writing center pedagogy, I began to consider becoming a tutor with the hope of finding where I belonged. For me, belonging is defined as a feeling of acceptance and purpose, and feeling as if where you are is where you are meant to be. Essentially, I hoped that if I could find something to help me feel like less of a wanderer, then maybe things would get better. Sadly, transfer students aren’t the only ones who feel out of place on college campuses. There are many students who aren’t quite sure if they are college material, and they struggle to find where they fit in. I prayed that tutoring would be the answer to finding out where I belonged.

My role as a tutor has been significantly impacted by my experience as a transfer student. Imagine just for a second that you have to start all over again. You walk onto a new campus filled with people you don't know, and you walk around like you know where you are going. Frankie Laanan explains that even though transfer students have experienced college life before, "transferring requires numerous adjustments to the new.... 'institutional culture,' such as meeting new friends, getting used to different class sizes, ... and learning to navigate a new campus" and social life (qtd. in Hardegre 16). When I transferred, I had to adjust to a whole new way of life in a sense, since no two college campuses are the same. I remember feeling like I would never belong anywhere, and because of that gut-wrenching feeling, I have made it my mission as a tutor to never let anyone else feel as if they don't belong.

The idea of helping all writers gain a sense of belonging is one of the main values that guides my tutoring appointments. Often tutors focus on both higher-level and lower-level concerns. Although addressing these concerns is important, my experience as a transfer student has caused me to put implementing a caring tutoring approach at the top of my priority list.

While many tutors use this approach, for me this strategy is personal. Having been that lost person, looking for someone to reach out and praying that I would belong somewhere, I use this strategy to prevent writers from feeling like I did. This approach refers to the idea that a tutor can help a student with their writing while also showing them that they care about other aspects of their life. Renee Pistone emphasizes that "[t]his approach results in a strengthened inter-personal relationship that is more effective at addressing a writer's heartfelt needs in addition to insecurities about writing" (10). It is important to remember that any writer who is in a new environment and who is trying to find their place may feel uncomfortable, and this can make it harder for them to share a piece of writing with me, a complete stranger. Transferring schools has led me to know the feeling of being uncomfortable a little too well, which is why I do everything in my power to help writers feel like they belong.

I implement a caring approach through the use of conversation and asking questions. Before I begin any of my appointments, I always try to get the writer talking because I have found that writers feel more comfortable if they feel like they can connect to you in one way or another. As a transfer student, I assumed there were many times when people on campus just didn't want to get to know me. This experience often left me questioning myself, which

is why I always try to genuinely get to know who I am working with. I don't look at the sessions as thirty minutes and that's it. I hope to form connections that will keep people wanting to come back.

Transfer students are often expected to know how the campus and everything within it works. You're supposed to know what clubs to join, what games to go to, and who you should talk to. But this secret code is something that is hard to decipher. There were times when I tried asking people questions, but I always felt uncomfortable. Sometimes they would answer, and I would feel stupid for asking, like somehow I should have known the answer. I have realized that the way I felt in those moments is the exact same way a writer may feel during their writing center appointment. They may feel like asking a question will make them look stupid, or that they should have known how to correctly write their paper. I try to do everything I can to stop a writer from feeling this way. By asking questions I am putting the misunderstanding back on me, rather than on the writer. Taking time to ask questions allows writers to feel like you care, indicates that you are interested in their writing, and encourages them to ask questions too. As a tutor I have realized that I have the power to help writers in more ways than one. Writers are able to see that writing is not about being right or wrong, it is a journey. I want to help them see that no matter what, they are not traveling this journey alone. Rather, they have the support of an entire writing center community behind them. This feeling of community is something that I was missing and therefore is something that I strive to give to others.

I have come to realize that by helping writers feel like someone on campus cares for them, in return I have found my own purpose. Through tutoring, I have been able to meet people I would have never met otherwise. For transfer students, meeting people and finding a place where they feel like they fit in can be the hardest part. But when I am tutoring and a writer looks at me with a smile on their face and expresses how much they enjoyed the appointment and want to come back, it shows me that I have found where I am supposed to be. Terrell Strayhorn defines a sense of belonging as referring "to a student's perceived social support on campus... and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community" (4). Tutoring has allowed me to feel like I matter, and that has allowed me to find my sense of belonging, something I had been missing for quite some time.

Transferring and working at the writing center has proven to me that life may not always go as planned, but sometimes taking a

different road can lead you to discover where you were always meant to be.

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