



## Tutors' Column: "Writing Center Administration: Demystifying Success"

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As an English MA student, I paid several visits to the Writing Studio at the University of Arkansas to tailor my course assignments and projects. My experience as a student writer seeking help led me to working as an intern there. What drew my attention to the Writing Studio is the *pedagogy of empathy*, which welcomes students of diverse backgrounds, identities, programs, and degrees to meet with the consultants and work on a wide variety of writings (Leake). During Fall 2023, I enrolled in a graduate internship that counts as a three-credit course, and it required me to work for ten hours weekly with the Writing Studio. The opportunity to work with the Writing Studio as an intern allowed me to explore the studio further, including learning its values and mission, virtually touring other writing centers in the US, participating in College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) training, and researching English language learners' needs. As an international student and aspirant to contribute to higher education, I intend to introduce writing center scholarship and practice to help students in my home country, Bangladesh. As such, I was very curious and focused on learning how a writing center administration should function. Through my writing center internship, I developed an administrative toolkit, informed by the pedagogy of empathy, which makes a writing center successful in serving the student community.

With the progress of my internship, I began to see a connection between the skill sets that consultants support and the Writing Studio's recruitment principles in order to support a diverse student population. I was assigned to observe a couple of consultations between the Writing Studio consultants and students for a week. One important aspect I observed is that the Writing Studio is not a "fix-it shop," which some students believe it to be (North 435); rather, consultants at the Writing Studio work on a whole range of skill sets, such as: supporting students with drafting thesis statements, working through their revisions, and formatting citations according to various citation methods. In addition, the consultants facilitate pre-writing support, that is, when students show up at the Writing Studio before they start their first draft of the projects. Over the course of a week, I observed five consultations by four consultants, each from a different program: psychology, anthropology, creative writing, and English. Louise Z. Smith discusses the value of this diversity in consultants' recruitment in her article "Independence and Collaboration: Why We Should Decentralize Writing Center," where she recommends that writing center graduate and undergraduate consultants be recruited from all departments, not just from English (5). This disciplinary diversity is important to better support students working across different academic programs with distinctive academic terms, keywords, phrases, and styles. I believe the recruitment of consultants from various academic backgrounds helps diversify the writing support offered to the student population on campus in addition to ensuring emotional support and encouragement.

During my observation, in addition to supporting students' writing skills, I recognized that consultants employed *empathetic listening*, regardless of the students' color, creed, race, sexual, and ethnic orientations. Consultants' empathetic listening cultivated confidence to help students grow into self-reliant writers for future assignments and projects. I recall a session when a student felt reassured by the consultant who was listening to her attentively and non-judgmentally, while also demonstrating emotional support through eye contact and body language. Moreover, consultants worked with students on how to solve problems together instead of editing and proofreading their assignments. This collaboration instilled confidence so that students can solve problems themselves. As a result, I noticed at least two students were sighing with a sort of relief from the stress of their projects. Albert Bandura, in this regard, believes that self-efficacy is influenced not only by the student's own physiological and emotional reactions to a task but also by past experience and verbal feedback from others (cited in Martinez et al. 352).

Furthering their pedagogy of empathy, the Writing Studio at the University of Arkansas is committed to protecting the identities and credentials of the students who visit it. As a part of this commitment, the Writing Studio provides graduate interns and new consultants with College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) Level-I training, in which I had the privilege to participate. The Writing Studio Coordinator facilitated the training that involved discussing the challenges, limitations, and approaches with the students. I appreciated being introduced to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 during the eight-week-long training sessions. FERPA—a federal law that applies to all educational institutions in the US—is highly prioritized in the US educational environments, such as writing centers where consultants and students exchange personal documents, because it protects the academic results, personal records, and credentials of the students from being shared with anyone else without the consent of the concerned students (U.S. Department of Education 3). A large number of students from different programs and academic departments visit the Writing Studio to have their assignments, projects, or academic papers reviewed by consultants and guided to their final submissions. The CRLA Level-I training also included some consultation tools like identifying students' challenges and strengths, understanding their research argument or project instructions, creating a collaborative learning atmosphere, and providing need-based feedback. These strategies are intended to improve the critical writing skills and protect the identities and records of the students. It feels great that the Writing Studio makes the interns, consultants, and admins aware of the privacy of students' records and credentials through training. Protecting the privacy of academic credentials in this manner is an important prerequisite on which trust between writing center consultants and students can be built and makes the writing center a safe and reliable place for the students community.

Among other core practices, the Writing Studio's attempt to facilitate need-based support for English Language Learners (ELL) intrigued me. The Writing Studio was planning to start a pedagogical recalibration initiative in Fall 2023 for students who speak and write English as a second language. The Studio could have simply jumped on the project; instead, it followed a methodological process. The Writing Studio was offering special writing consultations to the ELL students on Thursdays from 6:45 PM to 9:00 PM. To best plan for this recalibration initiative, the Writing Studio at the University of Arkansas distributed a questionnaire among multilingual students to further assess their needs. As a part of the project, the Studio asked me—since I was interested in the needs of ELL students—to carry out a needs assessment informed by scholarship and existing frameworks. I also leveraged my role as a graduate intern to research US writing centers by visiting multiple centers' websites to learn about the services they provide with ELL students. It was a wonderful learning experience for me to explore writing center scholarship and

virtually tour other writing centers. As the next step, I was asked to write an ELL report reflecting my findings. It amazed me that the Writing Studio would use my needs assessment to advance the process to its reporting authority. My major focus of my own work was writing center administration, and so I found this process very effective—that is, doing some groundwork using relevant scholarship and observing others before taking any fresh initiatives.

The Writing Studio at the University of Arkansas has been a place of friendship, empathy, and growing together, where the mutual cooperation of the interns, consultants, and administrators made it one of my two best places on campus. I really enjoyed the *community sense*, as if everyone is always ready to help each other at the Writing Studio, furthering the work of writing center scholar Judith Summerfield who states, “The nature of the writing center, then, is community” (7). I observed wonderful cooperative vibes among the consultants, admins, and interns in many cases, like sharing resources and exchanging duty rosters. The writing consultants and students also develop a good rapport during consultation hours; at least, this is what happened to me when I consulted with some consultants for my academic writing. To conclude with a focus on writing center administration, I believe fostering a sense of everyone-for-all is the best mantra of a successful writing center.

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