

COLLEAGUES, CLASSMATES, AND FRIENDS: GRADUATE VERSUS UNDERGRADUATE TUTOR IDENTITIES AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

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Abstract

This study provides a new framework for thinking about the value of writing center work by illuminating how tutors define and negotiate their various and emergent identities as students and as professionals. We build on conversations about tutor identity to argue that tutors' multiple roles affect the dynamics of the writing center as a whole. From interviews with graduate and undergraduate tutors about professionalization and the writing center, we reveal that the tutors' level of resistance to or acceptance of writing center work impacts the extent to which they see themselves as burgeoning professionals within that space and, concomitantly, affects the sense of community in the writing center. At our site of study, undergraduate tutors who self-selected into writing center employment generally had much more positive associations with their writing center experiences than their graduate student counterparts, who were often compelled to work in the center as part of their assistantships. We argue then that while writing centers can be valuable in building the professional identities of both undergraduate and graduate tutors, the ways in which these different populations affect our centers is significant. As such, writing center professionals at all levels should work to acknowledge different identities and foster community among tutors who come to us with multiple backgrounds, purposes, and agendas.

After two and a half years as a tutor, senior social work major Adam (all names are pseudonyms) is excited to graduate from college but sad to be leaving the writing center. It was, he says, the first "professional atmosphere" he worked in. For Adam, the writing center was a turning point from being a worker in a job to being a professional in a community of fellow professionals.

In contrast, international graduate student Aileen sees her first semester in the writing center only as a requirement of her teaching assistantship. When asked why she tutored, she comments that it was mandatory, stating that she worked there "because [she] didn't have any option." She goes on to explain that ten hours of her assistantship were spent in a mentor's first-year writing class, but "the other ten hours should be covered by something somewhere" and that something happened to be the writing center. Although Aileen later came to appreciate writing center work, her initial experience with the writing center is not uncommon for graduate teaching assistants.

These two stories appear separate, disconnected, and representative of different tutor experiences, yet

they both shaped the dynamics of the same writing center. This center at a mid-sized Midwestern university is housed within an English department and has a staff comprised of both undergraduate and graduate student tutors. Many of these graduate student tutors are not there by choice; rather, they are teaching assistants required to complete a semester's worth of tutoring before they can begin teaching composition courses. We recognize that other centers operate with similar bifurcations; although graduate and undergraduate tutors make up our center's staff, many other centers operate with a mixed personnel of undergraduate, graduate, and/or professional tutors. However, even centers with a "homogeneous" tutor population (e.g., all undergraduate students) still employ vastly different majors, personalities, and levels of experience. When we look at the experiences of Adam and Aileen—two students who have disparate perceptions of their identities in relation to the center—what can they show us about the multifaceted nature of our writing center communities? What does the tension between these different tutor identities mean for our writing centers?

To understand different identities of tutors and how they develop in relationship to the professional space of a writing center, we combine data from two sets of interviews to answer the following research questions: 1) how do undergraduate and graduate tutors negotiate and define professional identities in relation to writing center work? and 2) how does compulsory versus self-selected employment in the writing center impact professional identity development? We build on previous research about tutor identity to show how the identities that emerged from our data (colleagues, classmates, and friends) affect the dynamics of the writing center as a whole. We hypothesized, and the findings supported, that despite their seemingly higher professional status, graduate students who worked in the center as part of a requirement were less likely than self-selected undergraduates to incorporate writing center work into their professional identities. As a result of these differences, we argue that, as directors consider tutor-training and community building, they should be aware

of and respond to the different identity positions that tutors take in relation to the writing center. They can also be more cognizant of the ways that these identities can affect the dynamics of the center and develop programs to ensure the continued professionalization of all writing center staff.

Tutor Identities and the Writing Center

Anne Ellen Geller et al. conceptualize writing centers as spaces where different identities that are “in constant motion” interact (55). They draw on Thomas Michael Conroy, Neal Lerner, and Pamela J. Siska to talk about the “difficult boundary positions between student and professional, between tutor and professor stances, between full-fledged members of a profession and peripheral participants” (Geller et al. 68). While the literature often addresses identity conflicts of graduate students in the writing center, Geller et al. argue that such conflicts are not exclusive to graduate students. Rather, they are natural when individuals negotiate the relationship between one identity and their various other communities. Although both graduate student tutors and undergraduate tutors engage in this process of negotiation, it is important to remember that they may approach that negotiation differently. First, changing from an undergraduate to a graduate student identity can be difficult for some students (Mattison; Rollins, Smith, and Westabrook). This shift may mean embracing the identity of researcher but may also involve taking on the somewhat conflicting identity of teacher. Students in a study by Jody D. Nyquist et al. felt conflict between the roles of teacher and researcher, a conflict faculty advisors reinforced by encouraging students to focus on research over teaching (20). This tension is certainly present when graduate students from a variety of research traditions and disciplines are asked to teach composition. Jennifer Grouling argues that graduate students may be frustrated if they have uncovered methods for being successful students but cannot find a “hidden formula” for teaching. They also may resist teaching when that identity conflicts with the way they see themselves as students, such as a TA in Grouling’s study who had trouble transitioning into a professional role at that same university where she had been an undergraduate student (Grouling). When an identity as writing center tutor gets added to that of teaching assistant and graduate student, the professionalization of the graduate TA becomes even more complex.

Graduate student identities are affected by the fact that writing center employment is often a compulsory pre-teaching requirement for new TAs. In Melissa Ianetta, Michael McCamley, and Catherine Quick’s

study, fifteen of twenty-eight writing program administrators surveyed reported that their training for TAs “always or sometimes” required mandatory work in the writing center (112). There are clear advantages to this system. Irene Clark asserts that “it provides opportunities to learn through firsthand observation how the writing process actually works” (347). Muriel Harris indicates that tutors receive insight as a result of being exposed to other instructors’ assignments and ways of commenting on essays (199). Jule Wallis and Adrienne Jenkins, whose institution has such a requirement, suggest that tutors gain helpful insight into students’ ways of knowledge acquisition. They note, “In sessions, GTAs learn what works best: what questions lead to engagement, what questions encourage active learning, what strategies lead to collaboration and revisions, and what approaches and responses create critical thinking” (168). We wonder, however, what it means for writing center and tutor identity when this role is in the service of learning how to teach.

In his essay “Just Between Me and Me”—as the title of the piece might imply—Michael Mattison presents an overview of the various bifurcations of identity that he felt resulted from his work as both a graduate student tutor and teaching assistant. Mattison notes that, “As much as you might want to lean towards the student-side of your life and commiserate with the student writers who come into the center... you’ll be blocked by the fact that you teach. And your relationship with your tutee will be influenced if they know you teach” (13-14). Mattison argues that, as a result, graduate student tutors often must view their “peer” designation as ambiguous. In addition, by encountering writing center work as a training program for teaching, it may be difficult for TAs to develop a professional identity as tutor, seeing it only as a transitional step to the professional identity of teacher. Some graduate students may also have no larger interest in either teaching or tutoring following the completion of their degree(s). Christopher LeCluyse and Sue Mendelsohn argue that many graduate student tutors “may not necessarily see writing center work as professional development, and, indeed, most of the graduate consultants are not looking for careers in writing programs” (107). These perceptions ultimately impact the labor and agency of the writing center, as “Centers that rely on TA training programs for their writing center staffs can lack continuity... Mandating writing center work as part of TA preparation disempowers the writing center by removing its ability to select tutors on the basis of ability and interest” (Ianetta, McCamley, and Quick 119). In sum, placing graduate students in the writing center, especially those

who also teach and who are compelled to tutor in service of that teaching, will not be without consequences, both in terms of how tutors choose to identify and understand their various and shifting roles, and how these students impact the overall activity, cohesiveness, and mission of the writing center.

The identities of undergraduate tutors are also important and have been examined by writing center scholars. Bradley Hughes, Paula Gillespie, and Harvey Kail's Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project shows that "undergraduate peer tutors are creating one of the most important experiences in their undergraduate careers, a complex, multi-faceted experience whose influence persists not just years but decades after graduation" (13). They suggest that these influences include social attributes (such as listening and increased confidence) as well as pre-professional development and collegiality (gaining skills and collaboration techniques that transfer to professions) (14). Lauren Fitzgerald's 2012 IWCA keynote also speaks of the writing center as a space for undergraduates to begin forming professional identities. Writing centers, she argues, should support undergraduate research efforts because, by attending conferences and being directly involved with writing center practice, undergraduates develop professional identities differently from other academic experiences. Fitzgerald suggests that efforts to promote undergraduate research ultimately "replace traditional archetypes of teacher and student with a collaborative investigative mode" as well as "motivate students to learn by doing" (29). In sum, both Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail and Fitzgerald suggest that the potential for undergraduate students to form identifications—including developing social, professional, and academic skills—is heightened by work as a tutor, and the writing center thus emerges as an important and unique space to engage in conversations about undergraduate identity development.

The literature on tutor identity, then, seems to suggest that while all tutors can find value in their writing center experiences, they must also navigate their identities in relation to the other roles that they fulfill both on and off campus. In our study, we hope to jointly consider graduate and undergraduate students' experiences in the writing center, and push against the possible tacit assumption that, by virtue of their more advanced educational experiences, graduate students are inherently more adept or invested tutors than their undergraduate counterparts. Our work therefore follows up on and connects these trends in the literature by interviewing and comparing data between undergraduate and graduate student tutors.

Site of Study

In order to set the stage for our results, it is important to explain the makeup of our tutors and our tutor training at the time of our study. At a public Midwestern university of approximately 22,000 students, our writing center is physically located in and funded by the English department, but has clients from all different majors and years, from freshmen through graduate students. We typically function with between fifteen and twenty tutors, including two graduate student assistant directors, and a varying number of graduate and undergraduate tutors. In the fall, new TAs without prior composition teaching experience are assigned to work ten hours in the writing center. This means that we have an influx of up to fifteen graduate students while maintaining a small undergraduate staff (around five tutors). In the spring, however, the graduate students leave to teach composition, and we often hire up to ten new undergraduate tutors. While the graduate students all come from English—we have programs in rhetoric and composition, linguistics, TESOL, literature, and creative writing—our undergraduate tutors are pursuing multiple majors. Thus, our makeup varies significantly between semesters, a point addressed in our study.

In terms of training, graduate students are assigned to the writing center during the semester that they prepare to teach. In that same semester, they work with a mentor in a composition class and take a practicum course. The practicum readings often include pedagogical theory from both education and composition, and may include some writing center pedagogy. Undergraduate tutors are not required to take a course on writing center theory and practice; however, we often require scholarly articles to be read as a part of our training orientation and meetings. Initial training sessions for TAs last half a day as a part of TA orientation, and all tutors participate in bimonthly hour-long meetings. New tutors (both graduate and undergraduate) are also required to observe tutoring sessions for a couple of weeks before beginning tutoring themselves.¹

Our writing center provides a relaxed environment with couches, a microwave, and a coffee maker; in short, it is an environment where tutors can congregate. In terms of how the staff dynamic impacted the social atmosphere of our writing center, casual observations revealed that, both during meetings and between tutoring sessions, graduate student tutors tended to gather together separately, often taking up the entire couch area with an undergraduate student left alone at a table across the center. While this might be the natural consequence of shared coursework and

interests, this physical separation from undergraduate tutors was often apparent during the course of our study.

Methodology

This study brings together research from two different IRB-approved studies, both of which used semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews of writing center tutors.² The first focused more broadly on the question of professional identity in the writing center with both graduate and undergraduate participants, and the second focused more specifically on the role of graduate TAs in the writing center. While not identical, both data sets looked at professional identity and the relationship between work as tutors and other elements of the participants' lives. We therefore felt that the data sets spoke to each other in interesting ways and could be studied together. The first yielded a total of seven interviews, two with English TAs, one with an hourly graduate student worker, and four with undergraduate tutors. Of these participants, only two were not seeking English degrees, but both had an interest in education. The second data set also consisted of seven interviews; however, all of the participants were English TAs who had spent one to two semesters in the writing center as a part of their assistantship. Although our data is skewed toward TAs in terms of participant numbers, our interviews with the undergraduate tutors were involved and fruitful. The interviews took place over three years (2011-2014) so that the participants did not represent any one cohort of writing tutors.

Grouling gathered the first set of data over two different years, recruiting current and former tutors via email. These tutors were asked a variety of questions that varied somewhat based on the participant's background. Key questions included:

1. Describe your reaction when you discovered you would be working at the Writing Center.
2. Describe your interactions working with other tutors. How did these relationships affect your tutoring practices?
3. (If teaching) How did tutoring in the Writing Center affect your teaching practices?
4. What are your future career goals? How do you see your work at the Writing Center affecting this?

Buck gathered the second set of data by selecting participants based on their responses to a recruitment email that was sent to all teaching assistants in the English department. These interviews did not cover as

much territory as Grouling's interviews. For example, in addition to the questions above, Grouling asked participants to describe a typical tutoring session and to define "composition," neither of which overlapped with Buck's interviews and were not relevant to the new combined study. However, Buck did ask a series of questions about shifting identities, as perceived through the lens of writing center work, that paralleled those asked by Grouling. Some key questions included:

1. What brought you to tutor in the Writing Center?
 - a) Probing question: Was this the only reason that you worked there?
2. In your view, what was the purpose of working in the Center?
3. Could you describe in what ways you view your work in the Writing Center as intersecting with your teaching practices? (By "intersecting," I mean: how do you translate your experiences as a tutor into your teaching practices?)
 - a) Probing question: What do you think is the meaning of working in the Writing Center as it relates to your teaching experiences?

We each transcribed our interviews and then analyzed the data collaboratively. Drawing from Saldana's method of using "first impressions" for initial coding and returning to the data multiple times to further refine the most salient themes, we completed a first pass coding by pulling emergent themes from the data (4, 8). We used coding memos and meetings to discuss the themes, and through this process we identified three general categories: reasons for tutoring, different communities that tutors identified with, and skills learned in the writing center that transferred to other contexts. Although reasons for tutoring and transferable skills were both important, we felt that they both related to the identification with different communities. For example, tutors joined the writing center because of their connection to their academic community of graduate students who were required to tutor or because they were connected to a social community and had friends who already tutored. Similarly, skills were transferred to professional communities that related to a student's career or to academic communities as tutors discovered things about their own writing processes. Thus, our second pass coding involved color-coding for different communities. We looked for moments when participants seemed to be relating to academic communities, professional community in the writing

center, professional communities other than the writing center, and social communities as defined below:

Red = Academic Communities. Includes references to courses, degree requirements, attending conferences, and conducting research.

Green = Professional Writing Center. Includes discussion of a professional identity as a tutor, use of writing center jargon, discussion of training/improving tutoring, and learning from other tutors as colleagues.

Blue = Other Professional Communities. Includes discussion of career goals outside the center, including teaching as a career.

Yellow = Social Communities. Includes references to friends, social interaction both in and outside the writing center.

Finally, we decided that what was particularly striking in our data was the way that individual identity related to these different communities. We therefore returned to the data to look for how tutors expressed different identities and how they functioned in relationship to the communities we had previously identified. Those identities were colleagues (which related to the professional community of the writing center), students (which related to courses and the academic community), and friends (which related to the social community). We pulled these terms directly from our transcripts, but our coding also included times when participants implied these concepts by talking about that type of relationship. For example, mentioning “hanging out” with a fellow tutor socially was coded as “friend.” While other identities were expressed in our data, we feel these three identities—because of their relationship to the different types of communities we identified in our coding—are most informative for discussing the way that writing tutor identity interacts with writing center practice.

Like most empirical research, this study is limited both by the scope and setting of our data. Our interviewees, for the most part, only had experiences working at our writing center, which is situated within and necessarily impacted by its location, its student population, and its larger relationship to its mid-size Midwestern university. Similarly, our approaches to this research were necessarily informed by our own experiences in this and other writing centers, as a former director (Grouling) and former assistant

director/graduate tutor (Buck). Our own casual observations in these roles often worked in concert with our formal data. In addition, our roles and relative levels of institutional authority might then have impacted the ways that participants responded, as Grouling was an assistant professor/supervisor and Buck was the interviewees’ peer, who interacted with many of the participants in both social and academic settings. While our experiences and those of our participants exist within this context, we believe that other writing centers that employ both undergraduate tutors and graduate teaching assistants will find them familiar and that similar methods could be used to study identity at other institutions.

Resisting Professional Identity in the Writing Center

Based on our research, the ways in which participants came to be tutors had a clear effect on their professional identities. The clearest difference was that the graduate students were required to work in the center their first semester as a part of their assistantship while undergraduates applied. When asked about beginning their work at the writing center, all but one of the undergraduates talked about applying because they felt it would be a rewarding professional experience, while all but one of the graduate assistants first expressed that it was a requirement. Undergraduate Elaine expressed a deep desire to help other students and forward her career in teaching. Another English education major, Mary, cited her desire to improve her skills conferencing with students as her motivation for applying to the writing center. Social work major Adam didn’t originally apply because of his career but did explain that his love of writing led him to explore the job.

In contrast, for TAs, the connection between teaching and the writing center was something that was deemed good for them as decided by the department, not something they chose. When asked about why they worked in the writing center, eight of the nine TAs interviewed responded that they were required to do so as a part of their assistantship. Kent stated, “First and foremost it was a requirement, but I also think that considering what needed to happen in terms of preparing people to teach it makes sense to start in [that] environment.” Others took a more cynical approach. Rosalind, for example, stated, “It was required— [the WPA] said that if you wanted funding this is what you have to do!” TAs often followed up by explaining that the writing center was a place for the department to put them while they learned to teach, either seeing this as busy work or as a positive

opportunity. Madison commented directly on this tension:

I think there are two ways that you could argue it. I think the nice-sounding way is that it sort of allowed us to get experience working with other students who are at the college level and just ease us into the whole interaction [...] The other thing is that [...] I mean, they have to pay us anyway because we're on an assistantship and they're not comfortable with us teaching for the first semester, which I totally understand, and they're like, "Let's put you to work in the Writing Center!"

Madison also experienced difficulties transferring what she learned working in the center to her teaching experiences. She claimed that since tutoring is "very other person-focused," and she has a "sarcastic" personality, she had "a much easier time working one-on-one with that person than [...] in front of an entire class of students who don't [...] take [her] seriously." Rather than embrace tutoring because she likes one-on-one interactions, however, Madison seemed to have a negative view of her writing center work due to her struggle to explicitly connect her tutoring experience to the classroom. This frustration was compounded by the fact that Madison, and other TAs, had not chosen writing center work for themselves.

It is not uncommon for TAs to struggle with their role as both students and teachers during teacher-training and in the practicum course (Grouling). It is not that classrooms cannot ever be professional spaces, but Grouling defines the student identity of TAs as one where they look for right answers from the WPA on how to teach rather than develop their own practices. Many of the TAs we interviewed also expressed student rather than professional roles, seeing the writing center as a way to learn what the WPA wanted them to learn about teaching. Kent explained his time in the writing center as "taking what you learned in [practicum] and putting it in a holding pattern until you get in front of the classroom." When writing center tutoring is made a part of that practicum experience, TAs such as Jillian view it as "a grace period to get our feet wet." Just as the classroom is often a pre-professional space, so too the writing center becomes a space where TAs view themselves as students learning the "real" work of teaching rather than as professionals doing the real work of tutoring. TAs may struggle to see writing center work as its own valid enterprise or tutoring as a possible long-term identity for themselves. By approaching tutoring from this mindset, TAs often see tutoring as valuable only in

learning the right way to teach and become frustrated when direct connections do not present themselves. These TAs may thus have a more negative and resistant view to working in the writing center, as evidenced by Madison's reactions.

In addition, the amount of time that a tutor spent in the center affected the way they related to that space. Many TAs only tutored during the required semester, knowing they would soon move on to something else. Even undergraduate tutors who initially were just looking for a job seemed more likely to see their writing center work as a part of their professional identity than required TAs, in part because they often worked there longer.

Developing Professional Identity in the Writing Center

In contrast to the TAs who were required to work in the writing center, our undergraduate tutors self-selected into employment. Although they made connections between their majors and careers and the writing center, they did not necessarily approach tutoring with the expectation that it would prepare them for other areas of work. While multiple TAs stressed that they worked in the writing center because the English department needed a pre-teaching "job" for them, several undergraduate participants referred to the writing center as more than just a job. For example, Adam explained that he came to the writing center looking for a position that would be more rewarding than his previous job working in an office that coordinated events on campus. However, in addition to a rewarding job, he found a whole field of study that he did not know existed. "I was really surprised at first," Adam stated, "like this deep subculture I didn't realize existed [...] there are papers and studies on writing centers. They're taking themselves really seriously. I gained an appreciation for that." This shift to see himself as not just a writing center employee but as a member of a "subculture" that studies writing centers is a key shift toward a professional identity.

While English education major Elaine made similar connections as TAs in terms of being able to test out teaching techniques and learn about students, one of the most interesting parts of her interview is the way she presents herself as a writing center professional in contrast with the professional community of high school teachers. Rather than seeing the writing center as an identity that leads to teaching, she actually favors her writing center identity as a larger part of her professional philosophy and practice. For example, when talking about misconceptions about the center, Elaine stated, "We don't do that." In contrast, when

talking about high school teachers, Elaine distanced herself using the pronoun “they” instead of “we.” She set herself in contrast with other teachers at several points in her interview. She values walking around and giving students individual attention while her teaching supervisor stays behind the desk; she values multimodality (something we address in our center) while “English teachers” don’t accept this as real reading or writing. She expressed frustration when teachers tell her that they do not engage with material that is not on standardized tests. When these teachers say “we don’t do that,” Elaine pushes back as someone with a professional identity outside that “we.” Elaine is more a part of the “we” of writing center tutors than high school teachers. She talked excitedly about how she will incorporate conferences, instill confidence in student writers, and focus on the writing process (all writing center values) once she gets her own classroom. It is clear that Elaine is invested in the part of her professional identity that comes from tutoring and that it has become a true part of her professional identity not just a stepping stone. In fact, she even mentioned developing a writing center in a high school.

Going to conferences was another important component that helped undergraduates see themselves as professionals and the writing center as a professional space. While this could have been beneficial to graduate tutors as well, they were less likely to attend conferences if they only worked a single semester in the center. Undergraduate tutor Mary directly referenced the difference between student and colleague identities when talking about her experience attending a writing center conference:

Also, by attending the WC conference I got to know people from our WC better. Instead of being just a student, I was now, like, kind of a colleague or a coworker. I didn’t feel so young anymore, but part of something bigger than just going to class and sleeping.

This example shows the power of such professional development activities in adopting the identity of a professional in the writing center. Mary takes this identity seriously. While she is a good student, Mary’s student identity is shown as less professional here, associated only with “going to class and sleeping,” presumably not at the same time.

While it might be expected that English education majors would find writing center tutoring a valuable professional experience, one might think that, as a social work major, Adam would have more difficulty embracing the identity of a writing center professional.

However, more than anyone, he continually used the word “professional” to describe the space of the writing center. He saw his writing center work as a part of his overall growing identity as a professional, even as the origin for it. For example, as an individual who hopes to be a school counselor, Adam realized that nurturing would be an important part of his career. Just as Mary contrasted the role of student with that of colleague, Adam directly contrasted the role of friend with the role of professional. It is in the writing center where Adam felt like he learned the difference between nurturing a friend and nurturing in a professional context:

The writing center really was the first place where I was able to develop that, what does it look like to be nurturing in an appropriate way in a professional setting [...] And I think that’s essential in the social work field because at the core of what we’re doing as social workers is developing relationships with people, and so, it’s really important to, like on a deeper level, be separating personal and professional.

In some ways, this may be seen as an example of a skill that Adam developed in the writing center that transfers to his career. However, the way that Adam talked about this experience seems to go beyond just learning a skill. Educational theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger argue that “learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are aspects of the same phenomenon” (115). Adam fully learns here because he is able to shift his identity, to separate personal and professional “on a deeper level” and understand what it looks like to be a professional.

The challenge is that it really takes time to construct professional identities as Elaine, Mary, and Adam have. Certainly a part of the resistance we saw with TAs in the writing center is because they approached it as a requirement; however, it may be too much to expect TAs to develop a professional identity as a writing center tutor in just one semester. As Willis and Jenkins note in advocating for ongoing mentoring and collaborations, “teacher training should occur throughout a GTA’s career and at multiple nodes of interaction. [We] acknowledge the complex processes GTAs experience as they encounter new roles and responsibilities as well as the complexities of programs providing support for GTAs” (162). Again, learning to be an effective and invested teacher or tutor is an ongoing process and may take varying amounts of time for different people—for some, this identity may never develop. Even those TAs who later came back and applied for positions as assistant directors of the center

sometimes only began with a vague interest. Graduate tutor Jillian explained in a follow-up interview that she was interested in an administrative position but was too afraid to apply since “it wasn’t [her] specialization.” It wasn’t a part of her professional identity (or specialization) yet. As a result of being invited to apply by the director, Jillian gained confidence and saw the potential for herself to develop into a writing center professional. This identity was solidified when she helped interview tutors for openings in the spring semester. She began to see the center as “a community of writers supporting each other.” The identity of “writer” was a key part of Jillian’s professional identity, and she began to connect that professional identity with one of writing center administrator: “I began to look at my AD position as situated within this community as I participated in it, instead of being isolated as an authority figure behind the desk who answered the phone or an occasional tutor question.” As an assistant director, Jillian had both the time and a position of trust that helped her to identify as a writing center professional within a community of other professionals.

Combining Professional Identity and Friendship

Tutors also build their sense of themselves as colleagues by learning from each other, and being comfortable with one another socially can help foster a sense of community. Mary talked about specific techniques used by other tutors that she added to her repertoire. For example, she learned Chicago citation style from Nancy, an hourly graduate student tutor getting a Ph.D. in music. Elaine mentioned that she valued the calm nature that Adam had in working with his clients. Victor, who worked at another writing center before starting his Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition and becoming an assistant director at our writing center (and who has since taken a position as a writing center director), explained that he felt that this sense of collegiality is not inherent to writing center work. Rather there was some ineffable quality that fostered that environment at our center:

I think here, especially in our writing center, there’s a really cool atmosphere of collaboration, and helping each other and learning from each other [...] I feel like at [former writing center], I worked with a lot of really nice, really cool, really smart people, too, but it didn’t quite happen that way, so I’m not sure why. [...] In our writing center people are

really eager to learn from each other and to help each other.

Could the ineffable quality that Victor associates with our writing center represent a combination of professionalism and friendship?

As Beth Godbee writes, in discussing what role friendship can play in the writing center, “Our working relationships have developed through learning about and respecting each other... It is in life experience and our basic humanity that we find equality. Rather than striving for peerness (sameness), we should get to know writers as people and work toward friendship” (15). Although Godbee describes here the (possible) relationships between tutor and writer, this idea of complicating peerness could extend to tutor-to-tutor relationships as well. One of the reasons Adam called the writing center “the first professional atmosphere” he worked in was that he met “colleagues who became friends.” Adam explained that “seeing how different people can come together” from backgrounds such as “law, theater, and social work” and form friendships was not something he had expected but was something he really valued. Nancy, a music student, noted that “we’re all eggheads, in a good way,” and that the writing center is a place to have great conversations with other intelligent people. Likewise, Adam mentioned that he “just really enjoyed being with peers who also loved writing and loved helping people.” Adam talked about the importance of “hanging out” when clients failed to show up for appointments. He noted that this time is not only productive for building friendships, but that it also “spilled over into being beneficial for the clients” by creating an overall welcoming and friendly atmosphere. Rich noted that tutors become close because they “notice the same stuff, and have some of the same beefs with clients.” When shared repertoires failed, and problems arose, tutors felt able to discuss those issues and that discussion helped them feel close to the community in the writing center. At times these connections extended to social communities outside the writing center. Adam mentioned hanging out with fellow tutors outside of the center, and Rich noted that working in the center was a way to get to know other first-year graduate students and form social relationships. However, most seemed to agree that the social friendships formed in the center helped tutors be comfortable with one another when they needed professional support as tutors—asking for advice, sharing common struggles, and sharing a love of helping others with writing.

However, there were also some indications that social relationships were strained between graduate student tutors and undergraduates and that this

affected the overall sense of professional community in the center. Mary and Elaine shared this sense of comradeship with undergraduates (and even the non-TA graduate tutor, Nancy), but both were acutely aware of the difference between the fall semester with a high number of graduate teaching assistants, and the spring with more undergraduate tutors. Elaine talked about feeling left out of conversations with the graduate students, particularly the TAs. Mary, who was overall very positive about the welcoming social atmosphere of the center, mentioned that during the semester with the graduate students she “didn’t feel that sense of community” that she so valued. Victor referred to his former writing center community as one of “isolated” individuals, people working together but not necessarily interacting. Whether or not that social interaction extends to after hours, it seems important that tutors are able to interact socially as “colleagues who become friends” within our writing center, and those relationships were harder for some undergraduates to develop when the primary tutors were graduate student TAs.

Conclusion: Connecting Social, Academic and Professional Identities

From our study, as well as previous research, we conclude that there are important differences in the ways that the undergraduate participants perceive their professional identity in the writing center. While graduate student tutors seemed to largely value their employment, at our university where writing center work is mandatory for new TAs, many saw their experiences as related primarily to developing a teaching identity. These students adopted the identities of classmates and friends, but as undergraduate Mary noted in her interview, “It wasn’t the tutoring center that brought them together.” She saw the graduate students as classmates to each other who were brought together by common courses rather than as colleagues in the center. This difference in how tutors came to the writing center had a real, tangible effect on the professional community. Mary and Elaine both expressed difficulty interacting with their graduate student colleagues who formed their own groups on the couches talking about their courses rather than their tutoring. They expressed that they were less likely to seek help from or share strategies for tutoring with the graduate student TAs because of this separation. In this interaction, we see one way that different identities in the writing center can impact our writing center communities. Undergraduates felt excluded from and separate from the graduate student tutors, which

diminished their sense of each other as fellow professionals.

As this study demonstrates, compulsory graduate student employment could ultimately reinforce the concept of the writing center as merely a place to “test the waters” en route to a larger professional goal, as opposed to supporting a view of the writing center as an independent professional setting and academic community. While the same might seem true for undergraduates, this study suggests that those who spend more time in the writing center and who are voluntarily employed there are able to better view the center as its own professional space, which we believe is ideal. Indeed, that space serves a significant role in their lives as it is often the first real professional site they interact with. As such, the writing center occupies a crucial role in the professional development of undergraduate tutors, as also suggested by Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail. Similarly, the graduate student participants who elected to pursue assistant director positions in the writing center developed a greater sense of professional identity based on these new experiences. For example, international graduate student Aileen now hopes to start a writing center in her native country, and she noted that, “Only by gaining administrative experience will [she] stand a chance of knowing what types of work are included in the establishment and operation of a center.” She also saw in her administrative role the potential for activism in terms of developing more resources for ESL students, as well as the opportunity to “help ESL students on our campus on a larger scale.” This voluntary employment and greater time commitment will lead to stronger professional identity in the center.

While this study is not intended as an argument against the presence of graduate students in the writing center, directors and tutors should be aware of the dynamics established by a staff with diverse academic and professional experiences. As suggested by Ianetta, McCamley, and Quick, compulsory graduate student employment might negate the writing center’s ability to select tutors who are both interested in writing center work and possess the skills to be effective tutors, thus also devaluing the writing center as an independent and important professional community. For us, an ideal center is a professional community, one in which all tutors are recognized as professionals themselves. In order to create this environment, our participants’ experiences suggest that any opportunities for tutors to engage in professional work beyond tutoring—perhaps by doing research on/in the center that leads to a conference presentation as Mary talked about in her interview—could help them build their identities not just as professionals, but as professionals specifically

within a writing center space. As recent publications in the field, such as Jackie Grutsch McKinney's *Strategies for Writing Center Research* (2015) and Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta's *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research* (2015) illustrate, engaging in research can be one way for students to view the writing center as a space for legitimate and rigorous academic inquiry. We would therefore encourage both tutors and administrators to seize on opportunities for developing research practices within the Writing Center, via recurring workshops or training sessions. In addition, our work suggests that social dynamics are also important in making the writing center a professional space. When tutors feel like they can draw on one another's professional expertise and not be excluded socially, they become colleagues rather than isolated students (graduate students vs. undergraduates, English majors vs. non-English majors, etc.).

We suggest that directors and tutors be aware of this dynamic and work actively to build community among tutors of various backgrounds, particularly between undergraduate and graduate tutors. In more recent communication with Jillian in her role as Assistant Director, she noted that new steps are being taken to better integrate the new graduate assistants with the existing staff of undergraduate tutors. The assistant directors and director will write welcome letters to the new TAs, as well as work during both the fall orientation session and weekly staff meetings to address any perceived divides in the two groups. Graduate assistant directors are therefore in a unique role to help bridge the gap between graduate and undergraduate tutors. They can be on the look-out for instances where graduate students may drift to talking about their schoolwork while an isolated undergraduate looks on, and they can model their own professionalism.

Soon after both sets of interviews were completed, the center moved to a new location in the building. Buck was able to informally observe some of the ways that this new layout impacted tutor relationships. A former office was converted into a lounge for tutors, and this seemed to have the effect of creating a place where graduate and undergraduate tutors could more easily co-mingle, perhaps emphasizing the importance of space in facilitating connections where they might not naturally exist. Future studies might investigate the role that space plays in facilitating different types of relationships among tutors.

A mentoring program where experienced tutors—regardless of their academic standing—are paired up with first-time undergraduate and graduate tutors could help facilitate learning and mitigate (possible) inherent hierarchies. Programs like this can encourage tutors to

be more active in breaking down identity-based barriers themselves. For example, new graduate student tutors can actively seek out undergraduate mentors for their expertise while undergraduates may learn from graduate tutors about their experiences in the classroom or learning rhetoric and composition pedagogy. Additionally, at institutions where tutors must complete a credit-bearing course, cross-listing the class as a graduate seminar would enable graduate and undergraduate students to train and learn together. Even if the relationships between graduate and undergraduate students never ultimately turn into friendships, they create a sense of collegiality and professionalism in the center. While not all centers harbor this dynamic between graduate and undergraduate tutors specifically, we hope that the takeaway here is that directors must be active in understanding and responding to the various identities maintained and developed in their center. In a writing center setting that includes a variety of labor (graduate and undergraduate, compulsory and self-selected), however, empowering the center—and all the individuals who work within it—will always remain challenging.

Notes

1. Courses in writing center studies have been added at both the undergraduate and graduate levels since our study, but neither is currently required for employment in the Writing Center.
2. We did not share identifying information from our studies with each other. Rather we used transcribed copies of the interviews with identifying information removed.

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