

THE UNDERGRADUATE AS ADMINISTRATOR: RECOLLECTIONS AND LESSONS OF A GRADUATING SENIOR

Andrea Theresa Gannon
Southwestern University
andreatgannon@gmail.com

“The Teaching of Writing,” an upper level rhetoric and composition course that I took on a whim during my first year at Southwestern University (SU), was the spark that ignited my career path in writing centers. Although I was hesitant in the beginning, I was intrigued by the course description, which promised exploration of writing center pedagogy as well as an on campus job for qualified students. After taking the class, I participated in an internship at SU’s Debby Ellis Writing Center (DEWC), which eventually led to a job as a consultant, and subsequently, my current position as an assistant student director. It is from the undergraduate viewpoint of a client, intern, consultant, and student director that I explain how the DEWC has adapted writing center theory to meet shifting student needs at SU, a small liberal arts college with fewer than 1400 undergraduate students. Additionally, in order to increase my understanding of how the DEWC operated before my time as an administrator, I interviewed two former DEWC assistant student directors, Leslie Lube and Graham Oliver, to learn how they successfully applied graduate student writing center pedagogy to an institution that consisted of undergraduate consultants assisting undergraduate clients. Their experiences as administrators helped shape DEWC processes at SU from 2009 to 2011, providing me with a firm foundation to build on during the 2012 and 2013 school years.

In “The Teaching of Writing,” I learned about the broad scope of teaching methodologies in writing centers as well as the anticipated needs of the students who visited. However, I found that much of the existing scholarship on writing centers is often directed toward programming in which graduate students assist undergraduate clients. This scholarship is most useful when it is applied to SU’s writing center in ways that address the particular needs of an undergraduate only institution. SU benefits most from theory surrounding peer tutoring and cross disciplinary collaboration that has been adjusted with attentiveness to the needs of such a small community. The practical experience of observing and participating in the DEWC has helped me to gain a sense of what students in a small liberal arts college expect from their

peer consultants as well as the ways in which theory focused upon graduate consultants can be usefully channeled into the undergraduate consultant atmosphere.

The role of an assistant student director at an undergraduate institution involves increased responsibility at the same level of hourly pay, a choice that reflects the dedication and commitment of the students who elect to fulfill the role. It is the undergraduate assistant student director’s duty to structure writing center programming while supervising staff members, performing consultations, facilitating successful issue management, and maintaining scheduling as well as advertising for the writing center. The opportunities for change that are available to undergraduate assistant student directors, with the support of their faculty supervisors, are informed by the guidelines of the IWCA Position Statement of Graduate Student Writing Center Administration. I would like to highlight the importance of number five on the list, which states, “Graduate assistant directors should be given responsibilities that are vital to the work and vision of the writing center; assistant directorships should not be primarily clerical” (IWCA). Assistant student directors at undergraduate institutions must do more than paperwork. At SU, small size is a vital factor of consideration in writing center programming, and assistant student directors have to be conscious that this small size means the separation between the roles of student and consultant can be ambiguously defined.

The DEWC is situated in an environment in which the size of the community is advantageous for students. However, the size also reinforces the importance of making sure that the role of the student as a consultant and the role of the student as a peer are distinct. At times, lines of authority can be unclear because both the consultants and clients are undergraduates. Issues of balance can be common sources of conflict, and as Michael Mattison remarks, “It’s not a matter of switching positions so much as acknowledging the multiplicity of positions and noticing the overlaps and connections—and disconnections” (16). The positive aspects are that students may be able to better relate to their

consultants, thus creating a better space for gentle guidance. Because they are receiving help from peers, students may be less intimidated and more forthcoming; they view the consultant as someone who is on the same side of academia—that is, coming from the undergraduate perspective. This is a significant plus of working with undergraduate clients as an undergraduate consultant. However, undergraduate students must take care to uphold the integrity of their positions as consultants, and undergraduate assistant directors must ensure that lines of authority are maintained in these instances. It is helpful to view the consultant as a student with similar academic goals plus the added advantage of special training that qualifies him or her to work as a writing center staff member; this benefits both the student consultant and client, creating opportunities for strengthened communication and successful consultations. One important responsibility of an assistant student director is to keep this community scope in mind when addressing shifting student issues. In terms of pedagogy, the ways in which composition and rhetoric studies predict and theorize about writing center activities do not always most accurately portray what actually happens when graduate students are removed from the equation.

In order to effectively help writers at undergraduate only institutions, student administrators must focus on tailoring methodologies that encompass issues of authority and visibility within such a close-knit community. Leslie Lube, class of 2010, and Graham Oliver, class of 2011, chose to focus on two different issues within the DEWC before graduating from SU. Remodeling existing writing center theory to fit within the parameters of SU's undergraduate only culture, Leslie chose to focus on students' perceptions of how the DEWC could help them, and Graham worked on making the DEWC more accessible to a diverse and busy student body. When I asked Leslie about the biggest issues that she faced during her time as an assistant student director, she noted that "the most difficult consultations were with students who expected all of our corrections or suggestions to be black and white—a grammatical error or a problematic citation. These students seemed uncomfortable with and sometimes even resistant to addressing deeper issues with their writing style. It seemed as if many students preferred tangible proofreading marks as opposed to a discussion about the flow of a paragraph or the structure of a sentence." During her administration, Leslie spent time publicizing that the DEWC was more than simply a spelling or grammar check station.

This is very much in tune with Stephen North's call for a "pedagogy of direct intervention" with a specific application to the undergraduate-centered environment of the DEWC (39). By working to increase the comfort levels of clients with mutual dialogue and to portray the DEWC as a place where all student writers could receive guidance from specially trained undergraduates, Leslie focused on encouraging consultants to be more engaging which effectively transformed clients' attitudes about visiting SU's writing center. The DEWC's practices embody North's suggested strategy, emphasizing that "[w]hereas in the 'old' center instruction tends to take place after or apart from writing, and tends to focus on the correction of textual problems, in the 'new' center the teaching takes place as much as possible during writing, during the activity being learned, and tends to focus upon the activity itself" (39). Each semester, the DEWC continues to remind undergraduates that the consultants at the writing center can help students at all stages of the writing and researching process.

Graham elected to address problems of visibility and accessibility on campus in order to reach more clientele. With a background in information technology, he instituted a scheduling system that allowed students to make appointments outside of traditional writing center hours, thus increasing the DEWC's availability and offering more opportunities for students to receive writing guidance. This system is still in place today and partially accounts for increases in writing center visits.

When I asked what else he would have liked to have done as an assistant student director, Graham remarked, "In a perfect world, at a small undergraduate college, I would have had the writing center integrate with the campus lit[erary] mag[azine], the English honor society, and maybe the campus newspaper. By pooling those resources, we could have offered a significantly better experience for each group and each group's 'customers.'" Graham's plan highlights the importance of Andrea Lunsford's collaboration ideology. An intra-campus dialogue would invite conversations and negotiations while supporting Lunsford's well-researched claims that "[c]ollaboration aids in problem finding as well as problem solving [...] collaboration promotes excellence" (49).

Leslie's and Graham's approaches both involved increasing interest in the DEWC through the development and emphasis of services that directly responded to students' needs. They kept the conversation open beyond the span of the consultation so that the students could communicate

their wishes. Graham and Leslie's actions reiterated the following: the role of a student administrator at a small liberal arts college entails finding creative ways to harness the closeness of the undergraduate community in order to identify and work through significant issues. The DEWC benefited from its position within the small community of SU because questions of perception and accessibility were easily unraveled and effectively addressed through the concentrated application of traditional writing center methodologies. Leslie and Graham's work provided a steady background that allowed the DEWC to thrive despite a major change in curriculum that took place during my time as an assistant student director.

In 2012, the SU academic community experienced a significant curriculum shift when the entry level first year writing course, "College Writing," was eliminated in favor of a new, multi-disciplinary approach to teaching writing. Students began actively seeking more assistance in the writing process and visits to the writing center increased as adjustments made by the DEWC addressed an updated set of academic strategies and requirements. The DEWC's adjustments provided an avenue to reach a wider audience in ways that were more useful to a diverse array of changing student needs. In particular, three retooled and updated services that the DEWC began to provide during my time as an assistant student director further integrated the DEWC into the refashioned SU community; these changes were intended to bolster the modifications instituted by Leslie and Graham and were geared toward current and future issues that might arise in a curriculum that now featured a significant amount of writing and no entry level guidance class.

First, the DEWC began offering writing center presentations to first year and advanced entry seminar classes. The purpose of these presentations was not only to inform students about DEWC basics, such as location and services, but also to show students that they did not have to make the transition from high school writing to college writing alone. Despite the discontinuation of the traditional entry level writing course at SU, the DEWC stepped up to provide students with the tools and guidance that would help them gain a foothold in academic rhetoric. Second, given the writing intensive nature of courses at a small liberal arts college like SU, the DEWC administration began to see more students across a variety of disciplines and therefore decided to meet these students' needs by expanding the DEWC consultant expertise base. Aside from hiring students who excelled in "The Teaching of Writing," the DEWC recruited an International Studies major, students with

Art History backgrounds, and a Science-specific consultant in order to provide specialized help to clients from disciplines other than English. These specialized consultants quickly became essential elements of what the DEWC offered to clients; the well-roundedness of SU's writing center consultants has proven to be highly beneficial and encouraging to students with assignments from a range of disciplines. A third and final new DEWC feature entailed collaborating specifically with faculty to help them develop prompts, and exercises that helped students to better understand what professors sought in their writing. Through these collaborations, consultants were more fully equipped to provide guidance that was in line with professors' expectations.

Some of these steps are certainly possible in writing center environments at larger institutions, but both the speed and success of the DEWC's adaptations highlights how the small liberal arts college atmosphere is highly conducive to restructuring programming when large curriculum changes occur. The elimination of "College Writing" meant that the DEWC had to have an updated function at SU, and it was up to undergraduate assistant student directors to make the necessary changes. Several years of assistant student directors reinforced the DEWC in such a way that it could handle an influx of first year writers while maintaining an organic learning environment that was true to applied writing center theory as well as the comprehensive small liberal arts college mission. Additionally, DEWC's location within such a small community meant relying on the backing of students, faculty, and staff within that sphere, and indeed, the DEWC changes flourished with the support of the SU network.

Whether the writing center is run by graduate or undergraduate assistant student directors, Melissa Nicolas' astute observation that "traditional academic roles become blurred because writing centers' existence outside of the traditional classroom yet still within the institution mark them as liminal spaces" still holds true (2). Through my experiences with the Debby Ellis Writing Center at Southwestern University, I have had the opportunity to contribute to a collaborative effort of past, present, and future assistant student directors. Such strong frameworks enable writing centers at small liberal arts colleges to create comprehensive rhetoric and composition programming that provides a solid foundation of methodology and applied theory that future administrators will continue to develop with new twists of innovation.

Works Cited

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