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From Consulting to Mentoring: The Writing Center and the Classroom

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Lessons from the experiences of a classroom-based writing mentor

In the fall semester of 2005, I became one of the first consultants from the **Undergraduate Writing Center** (UWC) at the University of Texas at Austin to be hired for a pilot program of the **Writing Across the Curriculum** (WAC) Initiative: the **Writing Mentors Program**. Rhetoric professor Joan Mullin directs the program with assistance from Susan "George" Schorn, UT's WAC coordinator. The program seeks to improve students' writing as well as student-instructor communication through the role of the writing mentor. The writing mentor is highly trained in writing; typically, writing mentors are recruited from the UWC and have experience tutoring students in a one-on-one setting. The mentor is assigned to a writing-intensive class; he or she attends all class sessions, tutors the students in writing, and meets with the professor to discuss goals and challenges relative to the students' writing.

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While I had a background in tutoring from my experience as a consultant at the UWC, I discovered that mentoring not only presented different challenges, but also enabled me to get a better idea of students' specific needs. Additionally, I found that mentoring offers continuity in tutoring, which is difficult to achieve with consulting. That is, the writing mentor tutors the same students all semester long, which enables her to establish rapport with the students. The mentor is familiar to the students, which creates a more comfortable environment for the student during tutoring sessions. While dedicated students have the opportunity to, and frequently do, visit the UWC on a regular basis, an upper limit of three visits per assignment, a 45-minute duration of consulting sessions, and the consultant's lack of familiarity with the class may limit the progress of such tutoring sessions. Mentoring offers a more comprehensive understanding of both student and assignment, as meeting with students regularly throughout the semester enables the tutor to cover much more ground than would otherwise be possible. Mentoring provides a familiarity with

course content and instructor expectations that consulting sometimes lacks.

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While the mentor attends class, there certainly is a difference between mentor and peer; the mentor does not complete assignments or do the reading for the course (unless the mentor prefers to). Also, the mentor is not a teaching assistant and does not assign grades or otherwise evaluate the students. This new classroom role for the mentor establishes boundaries with both student and professor that make for a more productive environment. The mentor brings writing expertise to the classroom, but she is not necessarily a scholar in the discipline of the class. Her position is unique in that she offers a wealth of advice in terms of writing, but she is not equipped to tutor students in terms of content. The professor is aware that the mentor will help students to convey their arguments in writing. Unlike a teaching assistant, the mentor does not evaluate the students' progress. Instead, the mentor discusses with the professor the progress of the students' writing and their ability to grasp and execute assignments. The mentor mediates between student and professor to improve classroom communication and student performance.

The mentor should make an effort to be accessible to students. In both classes that I mentored, I met with students at least once per assignment and then scheduled additional meetings as necessary. While I did not have set office hours, I created a sign-up sheet for appointments so that students could plan to see me in advance. If a student could not make any of the appointment times that I provided, we would negotiate another time to meet. Students also had the option of emailing their papers to me for comments. Because students often met with me during the rough-draft stage of writing their papers, I could track their progress and make suggestions if needed. I encouraged students to discuss with me their ideas in the brainstorming stage and to meet with me once they had completed rough drafts. Working with students at multiple stages of the writing process familiarizes the mentor with the student's writing process and can help the mentor to identify and confront problematic trends in the student's writing. Such trends are often imperceptible to consultants at the UWC who have limited time with which to tutor students. While it is possible to confront a student's difficulties with a particular assignment as a consultant, the mentor is able to ascertain a more overarching view of the student's specific challenges.

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Mentoring doesn't work perfectly in every classroom situation, however. Despite the availability and approachability of the mentor, class dynamics can either work to the benefit or to the detriment of the mentor-student relationship. Because the mentor's role is new to nearly all students, several of the students I mentored misunderstood initially my role in the class. For some, I remained a figure of authority, like a teaching assistant, whom the students were wary of approaching; for others, especially older students, I was simply a member of the class who offered peer tutoring. Unlike consulting, where the students who come in for tutoring sessions are self-selected, all students in classes with

mentors are given the opportunity to work with a tutor. While all students might benefit from working with a mentor, not all students wanted to invest their time in tutoring sessions–especially if these students viewed meeting with a mentor as extra work.

Additionally, the mentor's understanding of the course can be limited if large amounts of content are not reviewed in class. That is, if the assignments diverge too much from the information covered in class lectures, the mentor's attendance in class does not necessarily facilitate tutoring. When this situation arises, the mentor has the option of discussing with the professor how to better understand the content that is not being covered in class. If the professor can address the mentor's concerns by adding material to lectures, this problem is mitigated. If changing the scope of lectures is not possible, then the situation becomes comparable to consulting: the student explains the content of the assignment to the mentor as she understands it.

Despite certain limiting factors, mentoring encourages students to pay more attention to their writing, and they receive more extensive feedback on assignments, which increases the student's awareness of writing as a process. As a mentor, I noticed that the most important factor to effective mentoring was student cooperation. If students are open to suggestions and to working on their writing habits, they benefit from mentoring. First-year students tended to be more receptive than older students, who generally had already become comfortable with their writing styles and practices. Also, the willingness of professors to incorporate more writing activities into the class–such as journals and free-writing–encouraged students to think about and to plan their writing assignments beforehand. These writing assignments were planned by the professor in the class as a way for the mentor to have increased exposure to students' writing; if not for the presence of the writing mentor, these assignments may not have been included in the standard curriculum. The presence of the mentor affects how the professor perceives the role of writing in the classroom, and writing takes on a more central role in the classroom. In-class writing assignments, just like other pre-writing assignments that the mentor may review, familiarizes the mentor with the students' tendencies in writing. The better the mentor knows the students and their writing techniques, the more the mentor can help.

The incorporation of writing mentors into substantial-writing-component classes is a way to expand the effectiveness of consulting to students who might otherwise go without tutoring in writing. A good majority of students are willing to work on their writing actively if given the chance to do so in a way that is more convenient, and perhaps less intimidating for some, than the writing center. Additionally, mentoring benefits the professor, who learns more about how students interpret and complete assignments. Through regular meetings with the professor, the mentor relates her perceptions of students' reaction to assignments, their ability to complete assignments, and any writing concerns that affect multiple students. This enables the professor to understand how students are faring, since time limitations sometimes prevent professors from having more meetings to discuss writing with students. The mentor brings consulting to the classroom, which enables more students to receive help with their writing than would otherwise be possible.

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