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## A Wealth of Opportunity: An Undergraduate Consultant's Look into the Benefits of Working at a Writing Center

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by **Chris Edwards**, *University of Texas at Austin*

### A University of Texas undergraduate's perspective



Chris Edwards

In an academic world that's constantly becoming more specialized, it can be difficult for undergraduate students to find a path to their goals that will allow them not only to make it into their career of choice, but to thrive in it. However, there are some professional opportunities, such as writing center consulting, that cater to a variety of disciplines. Writing centers provide a valuable experience that benefits both the students receiving the service and those doing the consulting. Professional growth can blossom in such a setting where a consultant is regularly experiencing new challenges overcoming each student's issues and concerns. At the [Undergraduate Writing Center \(UWC\)](#) at the [University of Texas at Austin \(UT\)](#), consulting is just one of the many incredibly beneficial opportunities that undergraduate students can partake in during their time at the university. In just two years working at the UWC, I've been able to participate in a number of project groups, perform editing and publishing jobs, and spend valuable time working with graduate students. All of this experience has been useful for both improving my résumé and finding my future career path.

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Before I started working as a writing consultant, I wasn't sure how to go about

finding my way in the academic world. I believed I wanted to teach, but didn't think grade school or high school were the fields I wanted to prepare for, so programs like **UTeach** and **Teach for America** weren't options. Liberal Arts undergraduates like me who are specialized in the writing process have a similar problem: there really aren't many established, persistent career-building jobs and activities that we can sign up for if we haven't already joined a teaching program, or managed to find an editing or publishing job. While there are different kinds of internships available through UT, there are few opportunities for students related directly to the writing process. However, the UWC specifically trains and employs undergraduates, so interested students who meet the requirements and make it into the internship not only receive course credit, but also a potential paying job and plenty of consulting training. For me, working at the UWC has allowed me to hone my skills in editing, improve my organizational abilities, and manage plenty of one-on-one professional consulting experiences.

Also, aside from any of the sentence level editing skills I've developed during my years as a writing consultant, one of the most important things I've taken away from the experience is a sense of perspective. The process of learning to relate to hundreds of different students, each with their own unique situations and concerns, has forced me to view the writing process at a higher level. It has led me to the realization that writing is a process; no paper is going to be complete in a single draft. This perspective has served my coworkers and me well in supporting students with their struggles with their writing endeavors, and has provided me with a useful outlook into my own writing projects.

Consulting isn't the only professional opportunity at the UWC either. First of all, as a Consulting Group leader, I've been able to meet with groups of consultants and serve as an intermediary between both veterans and newcomers. This provides all of our consultants with the unique opportunity to share their individual techniques and find a sense of camaraderie that many jobs don't provide or encourage. Next, as a member of the Research Group, I've had the opportunity to analyze and compile statistical data about our resources and operating abilities, which not only puts me in a position to work in tandem with my higher-ups, but also to directly support the UWC's growth. Finally, as a Presentations Group member, I've been trained to present the consulting material I've learned to larger audiences. Presentations Group members teach hour-long lessons to students, usually concerning the writing process or the revision of their assignments. This kind of experience was perfect for me, as I wanted to see what teaching college students would be like. After teaching fifteen classes (and counting), I am certain that teaching at the college level is the direction I want to take with my career. While not everyone will arrive at the same career conclusion I have, the wealth of opportunities at the UWC allows each of us who works here to gain experience in a number of different specialties.

**Throughout my time at the writing center, I've been learning about how to utilize and improve my leadership and personal communication abilities, as well as how to take advantage of the opportunities to try many different kinds of jobs, all in one place, that I would have had little or no access to outside of this one.**

Aside from working in different project groups, publishing and editing are two more professional opportunities that I was able to take advantage of at the UWC. I've had the opportunity to co-author a number of intra-UWC White

Papers that we publish for our consultants, as well as edit for this journal. There is always something useful to say about the writing process as well as the methods we use to consult other students, and writing center consultants are encouraged to publish their thoughts on the subject in a White Paper. In writing this article and collaborating with my colleagues on others, I'm also receiving publishing experience that would be unlikely for me to encounter otherwise as an undergraduate student. Writing, editing, and publishing are all integral parts of post-graduate work, so of this experience has served to improve my abilities and has allowed me to confirm my interest in working professionally in the academic world.

One final and incredibly important benefit that I've enjoyed at the UWC is constant peer-level interaction with graduate students. While programs like the Intellectual Entrepreneurship[1] allow undergraduates to interact with graduate students on a one-on-one basis, few other organizations have such a casual setting and friendly interaction between graduate students and undergraduates. As consultants of the UWC, undergraduates and graduates work at exactly the same level. Other than the Assistant Director position, every project group and work position is equally available to everyone. The atmosphere allows for open conversation and mutual support among everyone at the center. I've received a great deal of useful information from my graduate colleagues, ranging from tips for improving my résumé and personal statements to their experiences getting funding and teaching college courses. Their personal experiences have elucidated my own situation and have assisted me in my decision to apply for graduate school. During their undergraduate careers, most students only have graduate students as their instructors. While there is benefit to that kind of contact, it pales in comparison to the friendly, helpful community that our writing center facilitates.

Throughout my time at the writing center, I've been learning about how to utilize and improve my leadership and personal communication abilities, as well as how to take advantage of the opportunities to try many different kinds of jobs, all in one place, that I would have had little or no access to outside of this one. Since working here, I've been able to consult, teach, do research, and even lead my fellow consultants in group meetings; the amount of professional experience I've gained has been immense. Moreover, the fact that this is a paid position has allowed me to support myself financially while gaining all of this experience. Ultimately, however, the icing on the cake to this wonderful profession is being able to support other students and being able to watch them grow as writers and improve their own abilities. Had I not taken the UWC internship course and continued on to working here, my life would have taken a completely different, likely less fulfilling path. The experience and relationships I've gained working here have enriched my college career and provided me with the necessary elements to confidently move forward into the professional world.

[1]The Intellectual Entrepreneurship is a program at UT that allows undergraduate students to shadow graduate students and faculty during their academic activities to better prepare the undergraduates for post-graduate academic study.

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Chris Edwards is an undergraduate senior studying Rhetoric and English at the

**University of Texas at Austin.** He is a consultant at the **Undergraduate Writing Center** as well as a member of their Research and Publications, Presentations, and *Praxis* editing groups. This will be his first published work.

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