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Into Their Own Hands: A Decidedly "Consultant" Philosophy

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by Haeli Colina

It is my third cup of coffee for the night, and my fifth consultation. She is a senior, first-timer, dangling her graduate school application essays in front of her and raising an eyebrow at me, her unexpectedly younger "tutor." "Consultant," I say, trying to sound casual but hoping she'll tune into the importance of the difference. It is something we strive to promote in the writing center, a little word with a big ideology. I explain the way things generally run during a consultation: she tells me what should be my focus for workshoping, I read the paper silently or she reads it out loud, and then we work through the paper together, paying special attention to elements that concern her. She is surprised that I ask her to decide the focus of the session and stares at the paper mumbling "Well, *everything*" before her eyes catch on something familiar in the paragraphs, and she begins to remember—something she was wondering about her organization, something about her conclusion, something about citation. Her manner changes, and the pages she had half-tossed at me as she sat down she now gathers back into her own hands, pointing to particular sentences and thumbing ahead to find a problematic section. Her voice is steadier than before, and she leans forward in the chair as she explains what she wants her paper to accomplish. She is beginning to accept control of the work that she had been prepared to drop off at the door, and as we discuss possibilities, she will adopt or improve on some of my suggestions and disregard others without feeling any guilt or fear.

This is why I choose to call myself a consultant. My work with other students is not remedial. I do not have all the right answers or the best ideas and I do not put myself in a position of transmitting privileged knowledge. I have not attended my clients' classes; I have not read their books; I do not know their professors or their professors' expectations, and I do not, cannot, and should not accept responsibility for "fixing" their papers. What I can do is ask questions that will make them think differently about their writing process in general and their papers in particular. What I can do is listen to them talk their way into excellent outlines and take notes for them. What I can do is show them how much they have already done and how much more they still have waiting to spill out onto the page. Hopefully, students who bring their papers to the writing center will leave with renewed confidence in their own capabilities as thinkers and writers. It is only when student writers assume this central role in their consultations that they can truly be proud of the final products and claim them with all honesty as *their* work.

Haeli Colina is a senior writing consultant and religion major at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. She will be presenting at the IWCA-NCPTW Conference this October on a panel called "Trading Spaces: Looking Out and Looking in on the Challenges of the Writing Process."

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