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Learning From the Past

Transformations from the Center Panel

Third Annual Secondary School Writing Centers Conference, October 2013

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Learning from the Past: Editorial Introduction

Amber Jensen, *Brigham Young University (UT)*

Nearly eight years ago, on a Friday morning in October of 2013, I stood off to the side of a room that was buzzing with the voices of nearly 400 secondary school writing center tutors, writing center directors, and school administrators from 34 middle schools, high schools, and universities in Virginia and Maryland. This impressive group was gathered at George Mason University to learn about and share their respective experiences tutoring in, learning from, and leading middle and high school writing centers.

As the founding director of the Edison Writing Center myself, I had witnessed the power of youth voices to direct their own learning and to collaborate with their peers in meaningful ways through the writing center. But it was chairing this event—the Annual Secondary School Writing Centers Conference—for the third year in a row that solidified for me that the 400 people in that room were united in a purpose that went beyond building programs, teaching writing, or training tutors. We were there because, as the conference’s name suggested, we recognized the power that we had as tutors, directors, and administrators to truly transform learning in schools and transform ourselves as agents in that process—*from the center*.

The idea behind assembling the Transformations from the Center Panel in 2013 was for conference attendees to hear from a cross-section of student tutors, teacher directors, and school administrators about the ways they had transformed and been transformed by the writing centers they were a part of. We hoped that giving voice to a range of experiences would speak to each of our conference’s attendees—whether they be students, directors, and administrators—to help them consider the possibilities inherent within their own writing center experiences.

Opening the panel, student tutors Susana Zelaya, André Sanabia, and Justine Burke spoke powerfully about the confidence they gained as tutors and the ways tutoring shaped their relationships and learning throughout high school and into college. Next, high school principal John Banbury shared what he valued about the teacher and student leadership that led to the peer tutoring program at his high school and some concrete ways he could administratively support its continued success. Finally, directors Janice Jewell and Matthew Kasper reflected on the ways that they fostered community, overcame setbacks, and set goals for the writing centers they founded at their respective public and private high schools. Each of the panelists’ remarks pointed toward common themes of leadership, vision, community, confidence, and of course, transformation.

For each of these panelists, much has changed since 2013: as their author biographies attest, all six have since moved on from secondary school writing centers, the students into careers and graduate school, the directors and administrator into new teaching assignments, new schools, and retirement. Yet the transformations within them personally and in their writing centers persist. It is the lasting transformations of writing and peer tutoring centers within people, institutions, and our wider secondary school writing center community that these panelists’ messages have continued relevance in 2021. As we publish our inaugural issue of *The Journal of Peer Tutoring in Secondary Schools*, we do so with the hope that it will, like the 2013 Transformations from the Center Panel, continue to engage the voices of tutors, directors, and administrators to both document and explore the lasting impact of writing centers in secondary schools.

The JPTSS Editorial Board decided to include a column called *Learning from the Past* in every issue of our journal to document voices that have been part of our community's history because we understand that our foundations are an important part of future as an organization of secondary school writing centers. Before there was SSWCA (Secondary School Writing Centers Association), there was CAPTA (Capital Area Peer Tutoring Association). And before there was CAPTA, there were 400 tutors, directors, and administrators gathered in an event space at George Mason University, eager to hear and learn from each other as they developed into writing center practitioners and advocates. The six panelists whose words are printed below set the stage for peer tutors and teacher directors and writing centers to come. I hope in reading their messages, you will find perspective and guidance from the past that illuminates your own future in the writing center and in our community.

Dr. Amber Jensen *was the founding director of the Edison High School Writing Center in Northern Virginia and the founding president of the Capital Area Peer Tutoring Association (CAPTA). Now an assistant professor of English Education at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, she remains invested in the development and sustainability of secondary school writing centers; she is the founding editor of The Journal of Peer Tutoring in Secondary Schools.*



How Learning Has Transformed Me as a Learner and a Leader

Susana Zelaya, *Edison High School (VA) Writing Center Tutor*

As a freshman student, I was always that girl who came to the writing center to work on every single writing assignment, from my World History 2 project to my biology lab report. Then I got nominated to be a tutor at the Edison Writing Center (EWC), and suddenly I entered the tutoring world. I was nominated by Ms. Jensen, who was my English teacher, and then I answered questions about what I could contribute. A few weeks later, I got my interview date, and I was asked about 5–7 questions about tutoring and what I would do in a scenario. I really felt as though all my hard work of coming to the EWC had paid off and all those sessions with my tutor really helped. I was happy, nervous, and definitely looking forward to tutoring all year.

Then it hit me sophomore year. I felt that my writing was not as potent as a writing center tutor, but then that was transformed because I started noticing that I actually had great tutoring sessions on writing; my tutees always walked away with a better grip on the assignment.

Transformation as a Learner

When junior year came, I gained many tutoring responsibilities: for example, becoming a managing tutor. As a managing tutor, I sort of have the EWC resting on my shoulders, which is teaching me how to delegate with others.

A managing tutor has to make sure that everything in the writing center runs smoothly and be aware of all the other writing center activities that are going on, just in case another tutor is needed. That is where I come in

because I have to volunteer myself and be willing to do work for that activity, such as logging all the attendees in and putting up posters to advertise the activities.

Another example is being willing to delegate in any class when my teachers say, “Okay here’s your writing assignment.” I’m raising my hand and stating that the writing center is always open and that we are always willing to help in the assignment.

As a learner, tutoring has also taught me to be committed to all the assignments I have to do. My math teacher wanted to collaborate with the writing center. He gave us an article about “math doing versus math thinking.” He wanted the tutors to help him create an assignment and a rubric in order for his students to understand the difference between doing math and thinking and analyzing each component of a math question. I took this assignment and started working on it all up until the first day of school. I worked on it all summer and made sure that I handed him a hard copy of all my work. A week after, I heard from students that they had to do the assignment and it showed me that all my work had paid off.

Transformation as a Leader

Junior year I also gained tutoring leadership roles such as being a mentor and a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Liaison. Mentoring was a new leadership role that I knew was almost like tutoring in the aspects where I tutor the first-year tutors in my group. Last year I was tutoring my peers throughout the school, and now I’m sort of in the frontier, leading my mentees and supporting them on their inquiries of being a first-year tutor—going in their Google Docs and giving them feedback that will help them in their *Writing in the Discipline* assignment. I give my mentees moral support and advice on how to tackle their sessions or put a tutee at ease. I remember tutoring a tutee that was in AVID, a career-and-college-readiness program at my school, and we had a lot to say. Then a few weeks later she came back and signed up for me again. With my mentees, I want them to see that it is phenomenal to create a relationship with someone by helping them and to know that you did a good job when they come back again for you.

Aside from being a mentor, I am also a WAC Liaison; I work with other departments in my school and coordinate workshops or new projects for their students. At the beginning, I struggled with being WAC liaison because I did not necessarily believe in myself. I have more confidence now, due to the fact that I have meetings with teachers, and they are all really less intimidating and are willing to collaborate with me. It shows itself because these teachers approach me sometimes in the hall and ask me, “So when’s the next time you’re coming?” or simply tell Ms. Jensen what a great job I’m doing. In the WAC program, I work with students with intellectual disabilities—and I’ve learned to reach out to kids who are otherwise sometimes left out from the school and other students—tutoring is a way to connect with them that really means a lot. I also work with the College Partnership Program, which is designated for students who are willing to go to college and want to be informed about college opportunities. I’m a first-generation college-bound child in my family and a tutor; this highlights the power and potential of writing centers to empower dedicated students like you to realize their dreams.

Conclusion

So you may be asking yourself how tutoring has transformed me as a learner and a leader. As a learner, tutoring has taught me to dedicate myself to all the projects I am assigned and to carry out from the start to the final product. As a leader, tutoring has taught me to believe in myself when I lead others and to be a key example in order to motivate my peers. If I would not have joined the writing center and became a tutor, I would have never learned about the power to make a difference by tutoring my peers or leadership roles with the Edison community.

Susana Zelaya *gave these remarks as part of the Transformations from the Center panel at the Secondary School Writing Centers Conference in October 2013. She has since graduated from Ursinus College with majors in Health*

Policy and Spanish and a minor in Latin American Studies. She currently works at the International Institute of Ammonia Refrigeration (IIAR) in marketing and writing. While she still doesn't consider herself a strong writer, Susana loves editing and giving people feedback. She believes being a writing center tutor gave her the voice and knowledge that, as a first-generation immigrant Latina, she needed in order to navigate a predominantly white post-secondary institution. She hopes to mentor and empower women of color and to develop her skills and experience in communication strategies, marketing, and financial operations work.



How Tutoring Has Influenced My Transition to College

André Sanabia, University of Virginia (VA) Student

My name is André Sanabia, and I am a first-year Echols Scholar at the University of Virginia, but before that I was a tutor at the Edison Writing Center for three years. I like to think of my tutoring as influencing my transition to college in three areas: academically, socially, and as a support system.

When students apply to be tutors, a lot of times they think that tutoring is going to help them with their writing, that they are going to become excellent English writers. And yes, to some extent it does help with that. I had my first college paper just last week, and I am fortunate to say that I did not stress about it at all. I was able to use strategies that are really enforced in the Writing Center of thinking of writing as a process to write my paper, and I was able to go through brainstorming, drafting, and revising in a course that is filled with third-year students. And I was extremely happy with myself for being able to write at a level that these students have been writing at for three years now.

It's also really influenced the way I think about an academic setting. I was fortunate enough to have the option of choosing between scholarships at UVA and the College of William & Mary. So when thinking about these two colleges, with cost out of the way, I was able to focus on what I really wanted in college. One of the things that I was able to think about is where would my future as a writing center tutor go? The University of Virginia, while it does have a writing center, only has graduate students as tutors, whereas at William & Mary it is staffed by undergraduates. So when I talked to my director, we discussed, "What does that say about these colleges as institutions? How is power allocated in that institutional hierarchy?" And that is a thought process that I would never have been able to have, had I not been a tutor. I would have focused on "where am I going to party more?" and "which campus is more beautiful?" The writing center has really taught me to think at a higher level, to really step back and ignore lower-order concerns for those that are a bigger priority—in this case, my academic future.

And a lot of the students here at the conference are being given that opportunity to think at a higher level. One of my favorite professors in college told us a story in order for us to understand the word *discourse*: You are entering a house and there are people talking. You go up to these people and while at first you don't understand them, you start to pick up on their vocabulary and learn about what they are talking about. And then you start expressing your own ideas and opinions, and before you know it, you are contributing to many of the

conversations in the house. That is what many of these tutors are doing *right* now. They are contributing to the discourse about writing center theory. And they may not realize that they are doing something that is typically done at the college level, but this higher-level thinking is something that they absorb naturally through the writing center.

While what the academic area of tutoring helps with is important, the social aspect also deserves recognition. Because of tutoring, I am not having the sort of culture shock that many of my classmates are having right now. UVA is a predominantly white school, and many students are in classrooms that, for the first time, have strongly opinionated minorities that may be contributing a different point of view. That's something that I was used to. Edison High School is very diverse, but as a tutor you have a lot of tutees that are from different walks of life: you have ESL tutees, you have students who don't have computers at home, and you have students from different areas of the globe. And tutoring teaches you about the intrinsic value of diversity. Tutors learn and understand how to be empathetic, as Andrew Jeter was mentioning earlier.

Another thing that tutoring really taught me is that there is a support system among tutors. I have been able to communicate with some of the tutors that have gone on to the University of Virginia. I emailed them once and they sent back great advice. I was also recently stopped on grounds by an Edison alumna who was in the writing center with me my sophomore year of high school, and she was super helpful, asking me how I was doing and if there was anything that she could do for me. Having this sort of alumni system has been really important because it lessened my fear about going off to college; I knew that there were tutors who were there to provide a support net. I myself am a part of that web now! Recently, I had a high school student email me, asking me about the IB program and how he can do better on the SATs. So one of the things that are really influential on my transition to college is that I know that a support system exists.

And tutoring stays with you for life, to be honest. I was studying with a friend for Calculus late one night and all of a sudden, she said, "Hey do you mind looking at my philosophy paper real quick?" and I, at first, was like, "Oh my God, what is Philosophy even about?" but I just quickly put on my imaginary tutoring hat and reminded myself of the pyramid of concerns in a paper. So I asked her to read her paper out loud, and we focused on clarity of thought, that her evidence was actually backing up her thesis, and that she was meeting the purpose of the paper. A few days later she comes up to me thanking me and telling me that her Graduate Assistant thought it was one of the best papers and that her confidence in her writing was really boosted by me.

You are a tutor for life. It's not just about the grammar and mechanics that you learn your first two years of high school in order to help all tutees. Tutoring really helps you prepare academically and socially and at a professional level through interactions with other people and the leadership roles you gain at your center.

André Sanabia gave these remarks as part of the Transformations from the Center panel at the Secondary School Writing Centers Conference in October 2013. Currently, he is a qualitative researcher at PSB Insights in Washington, D.C., where he works as a research manager, developing and executing qualitative research from proposal writing to analysis and reporting. He has expertise with Hispanics, the LGBTQ community, and Gen Z. Outside of work, André is a "plant dad" and has a passion for indoor cycling. He holds a BA in Economics and Women, Gender, & Sexuality from the University of Virginia and is currently working on his MBA at the George Washington University.



How Tutoring Has Influenced My Transition to College

Justine Burke, *George Mason University (VA) Student*

I am currently a part of the Honors College at George Mason University, but before I was here, I was a tutor at West Springfield High School for two years under the direction of Ms. Goransson. When I was a tutor, a lot of my friends thought of me as the grammar freak, the person who writes your paper for you, or the red pen maniac. But after being a tutor for two years, I realized that [tutors] have a completely different role. We're supposed to be someone who is supportive; we lead someone to the answer without giving it [to] them; we allow for self-sufficiency so when they run into the same problem again, they'll know what to do. We give insight into what the tutee can do so that when they actually have a second, they realize, "Oh, I can actually write a paper." And we also are there to be a friend. Once graduation came, I thought, "Okay, this is it. I'm finally done. I don't think I'll be able to be a tutor anymore."

But just because I left high school doesn't mean I have to stop being a tutor. I didn't realize this until the second week of school, when I had to write my first essay. As soon as I got the prompt, I automatically thought of the seven priorities sheet that I learned when I was going through the training of being a tutor. On it, it explained that there are certain things in a paper that come first. Grammar was actually at the bottom of the list because there are other things that are more important. I knew that organization was one of the most important ones, so instead of focusing on the grammar of my paper, I immediately thought, "Okay, how am I going to organize this paper?" Unfortunately, when I got my paper back, it wasn't the grade I wanted, because I was always used to having As in English class. But what shocked me the most was that I wasn't as disappointed as I thought I would be. I think it was mainly because when I was a tutor, I knew there was always room for improvement in writing. I took my professors' comments as critiques rather than [thinking] something they were saying was just because I can't write. I know I can write. But I know I'm not the best writer, so I know I need to be able to practice more.

College writing is much different from high school writing, but there's still elements that are the same. And the ones that are the same I'm able to pick up much more easily, especially since these are elements that I've taught my tutees for two years. For example, I always would tell my tutees when they're writing a paper, "You have to think about your audience. You're going to be turning this paper in to a teacher, so it's probably better that you don't write like a text message or slang; you should probably write more academically." Now that I'm in a class where I have to write a twelve-page paper by the end of the year, I know that this is going to be extremely academic. My professor is going to see it, and possibly other professionals at the school are going to see it. Along with this assignment—because it's a part of a research methods class, so it's actually a research paper—and within the class, we help each other try and figure out how to narrow our question down. We learn to listen to each other. So by being a tutor, I've actually learned that it's more easy for me to talk about, for example, "I think maybe you should go in this direction; your question may be a little too vague, and maybe you should go into another direction, especially if the question is so vague that you can't find research on it."

In college, there are a lot more group projects as well. In one of the group projects that I'm in, I play the role of editor because, for some reason, I can't get away from the role of being a tutor. By being a team member, you

have to learn to have patience; you need to learn how to work with people—even if they annoy you—and you need to learn how to listen as well. Definitely all of these qualities that I have now, I’ve learned—they emerged from being a tutor. I knew years ago, if I thought of being a tutor, I would not think of being one because I was extremely shy. I was one of those people who take a paper and correct it for another person, but by being a tutor, I realized that’s not the role that you’re supposed to be. So even though I was taken out of the writing center, you can take the girl out of the writing center, but you can’t take the writing center out of the girl.

Justine Burke gave these remarks as part of the Transformations from the Center panel at the Secondary School Writing Centers Conference in October 2013. Writing has continued to be a part of her life as she completed a thesis in her undergraduate studies as part of the Psychology Honors Program, won the “2016 Outstanding Honors Thesis Award” for this project, and became a graduate teaching assistant during her graduate studies where she taught and assisted students in the art of writing research papers for their final capstone projects. She received her BA with Honors in Psychology in 2016 and her MA in Criminology, Law, and Society with a concentration in policy and practice in 2019 from George Mason University. She currently works as a Security Specialist at Industrial Security Integrators, LLC.



The Power of Peer Tutoring to Transform Learning in a School

John Banbury, Oakton High School (VA) Principal

I’m going to tell you this upfront: I’ve given countless presentations in my life, and it’s usually about something I know about. So with that said, thank you, Beth, for elevating us here. I’d prefer I was with you as opposed to looking like I know what I’m doing here. With that said, I can take a look at the writing center from the point of view of the principal. How does it affect the school? How have we been transformed over the past few years? What changes do I see coming? I’ll try to get through that in the next three to five minutes.

I think first, and most importantly, what I needed to do was change the mindset of the students right off the bat. After we started our writing center in the first year, Beth and Elizabeth Dean (my other director), set up a very professional conference with all of the students to meet with the administration to hear our vision of what the writing center was to look like. They spent a lot of time preparing. They had questions, they had presentations, they had statistics. I was really blown away with what they’d done. I think they were slightly unnerved when they were done and I looked down and said, “You define the vision.” And I think that’s the single most important thing you can do for your school: let the students define the vision. It’s very easy for me to say, “This is what it should look like at Oakton.” And instead, they took it, they ran with it, and in a follow-up conversation with Beth afterward, she said to me that the kids were a little upset that that was my only response. She turned to them and stated, “He’s giving us a blank slate.”

I gave them a small budget—but a budget nonetheless—and said to them, “Go figure it out.” That’s very powerful for the students. I think that was our first step in transforming our school.

A couple of years later, which is where we are now, I have run through a list of things I've seen that have changed our school. I think first and foremost of the title that I have written here. We are not a writing center anymore. We are The Center of Writing and Learning at Oakton High School. That says a lot, it's a mouthful. But it tells you what direction we are starting to go. So it's no longer just focusing on English, but we have our Math Honor Societies and our Science Honor Societies participating. This is new for us, so I'm not exactly sure what direction it will ultimately go, but we are underway, and we are looking at this as just across the entire school.

I think the next piece that jumped out to me is—at least in the public schools, something that is always of a primary concern in the principals' office—how we are doing on SOL (Standards of Learning end-of-course) exams. One of the things that we have transformed into is a place for SOL prep. Not necessarily just for remediation; we have students who have transferred in who haven't had the opportunity to take the SOL yet, but this gives us essentially an opportunity to prepare them before they have to take down and take a multitude of tests. We can use it as remediation as well.

I think our next—and this is more of a philosophical viewpoint—but a major change that we made: we moved our writing center into the library. I'll say upfront, the librarian was not so pleased. But in our school it is, in fact, the center of the building. Our writing center is open during our Cougar Time (the flex time built into our daily school schedule) and our lunch periods and so on, so instead of having our writing center in a classroom, it's right up there in the library where we have a number of kids who can come in. And then of course, the powerful piece to having it at the center of the school is that it's important. You see it, you know it's there, it's easy to get to, and we can accommodate a large number of students at a time. So that was a major change for this coming year.

We are really on the verge of institutionalizing this. I think if you look at the research, most things don't become institutionalized until really after five years of continuous support. And as we begin our fourth year, we are just about there. And that's been very impressive to me, and I'll go back to my original statement: I believe that comes back to the power of the tutors as opposed to anything that we as adults do in the building.

And this was very exciting to me when we did it last year: we put together a college essay workshop. We had as many teachers as we could get down to the cafeteria and just sit down and have them work with seniors working on their essays. Think about that time period in the high school; that's one of the most stressful things seniors go through. I think as was mentioned earlier, it's a great opportunity to demonstrate empathy. We've all been through it. Even if it was forty years ago, we've all been through it. To sit down one-on-one with a seventeen-year-old kid and, if nothing else, in your own mind, reminisce about what the process was like for you as well—it takes you down a notch and puts you right in the student's shoes.

The most important transformation piece is the trust in the tutors that has developed. Education in America has always been this hierarchy approach: teacher knows all, students get the information. With this approach, with the tutors, what these students experience along the way is that they have value; they bring something to the table. They can work with a peer. They can learn from each other, work on a collaborative effort. Isn't that something that we are all trying to strive for with our students anyway? So I think that's probably the greatest transformation that we've seen up to this time.

Now for some challenges. Beth, this is what I see coming at you in the coming years. First and foremost, we need an appropriate workspace. Our school is about to be renovated, and the plans have to be completed by the end of this year. I have already challenged the students, and to a certain extent, challenged my directors, into designing the space for the writing center. I want it built into the school in a central location.

In our school, interdisciplinary activities have become really the mainstay, and I think we need to go further than just Math, Science, and English, and ultimately incorporate all of the curriculums in the school and have students understand the interplay between them and how they can impact literally every student in every subject across the building.

We need to continue to develop the skills of the tutors. I think initially, when you start the program, you have tutors who are naturally gifted and that's why they want to do it. But as your program develops, you're going to need more tutors. And your second and third wave of tutors aren't necessarily going to be the ones that are actually gifted with working with other people and their editorial skills and, in all honesty, their interpersonal relationships. So I see that as a professional development area for us: essentially, how to develop students as teachers.

I think the central office needs to get involved in the funding. I don't have any problem with staffing my center with a couple teachers, but if this is going to really become part of the culture of Oakton High School and Fairfax County Public Schools—and as we've seen earlier this morning, this is a growing phenomenon across the region—the central office is going to have to get involved and provide some money.

My last piece is we need to learn to draw in our neediest students. If this is there to help everybody, to have x number of students in your building who are not going to participate but who need to come to your learning center or writing center or whatever you've established, that is our next challenge. I want to thank everyone for your time, and I want to thank Elizabeth and Beth for everything you've done here at Oakton to develop this wonderful phenomenon.

Audience Question:

As a teacher-director, how can we convey the importance to the administration of the need of a writing center?

The most important thing on my end, and I really hesitate to speak for all principals—we all have our own styles and needs of importance when it comes to our schools—but for me, your school is never really going to grow (and this is a more philosophical answer than anything) until your students have some say in the direction of it. What better way to give your students some say in the direction than having them involved in tutoring academically. Whether it's just strictly for the English papers that are coming out of the English department—and I think most of us would agree that that's too narrow of a focus for what we're trying to accomplish here—but even if that was just your starting place, and that is a starting place.

So what I try to stress to people is that I need to see it, so telling me that this is going to happen probably isn't going to get very far. One of the things, when we were in the early stages of this, that Beth would do is she would literally bring me statistics: “Okay, we've done this and this happened.” Very well thought out. Again, probably the most powerful piece was [that] it wasn't something that she designed; the students designed it and brought it to me. And so, over time, as I see what the students are able to do, it just gives me a sense of trust that, yes, I can turn this part of the school over to literally a group of fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds and let them run with it. So I guess if I could advise any of you, I would find—as my colleague here from Herndon said—you know, those five kids. You start with a handful and you demonstrate what they can do to your administration, and you push them and let them run with it.

Dr. John Banbury gave these remarks as part of the Transformations from the Center panel at the Secondary School Writing Centers Conference in October 2013. Dr. Banbury is a retired teacher, principal, and central office administrator. He spent 13 years as the principal at Oakton High School, which was his role when he offered these remarks at the 2013 conference. Currently, Dr. Banbury teaches in the Educational Leadership Department of the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University.



From the Director's Chair: Possibilities for Transformation at the Writing Center

Janice Jewell, *Herndon High School (VA) Writing Center Director*

Sydney, Patrick, Emily, Faiza, Annie: those five students were the inaugural class of Advanced Composition at Herndon High School, and those five were the most responsible for the transformation and the possibilities that are now being realized at our center. I heard Amber Jensen speak about the Edison Writing Center in October 2009, and in April 2010, the Herndon Writing Center opened its doors with eighteen National English Honor Society tutors.

It was quiet. A lot. We had a small profile; we competed for after-school time with other clubs, teams, and organizations. We tended to be overlooked, even by the English department. A year later, still open, limping along, with the administrative support of my administrator, Ellen Reilly, we added Advanced Composition to our catalog, and we recruited twelve students to enroll in Advanced Comp for the fall of 2011. By late August, those numbers had dropped to five, and a critical moment had to be navigated. Certainly, as you mentioned, staffing—a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:5. Well, Ellen fought. I fought. My principal, William Bates, took a deep breath and said, “Okay.” Emily, Annie, Sydney, Patrick, Faiza: these five students made the writing center their own. They advertised, they made videos, they spoke out, they wrote, they tutored, they skipped lunch to tutor, they brought their friends. When we solicited candidates for the next year, they interviewed.

The next year, we enrolled twenty-five students and were able to offer two sections of Advanced Composition, allowing us to be open all lunches, four days a week. The English 11 team that year sent every student writing a persuasive essay [to the writing center] as part of their SOL [Standards of Learning] prep. The Thursday afternoon sessions continued with National English Honor Society students but with a much higher profile than the noise of the five. One memorable afternoon just last May, we tutored seventy students writing Dante’s *Inferno* essays with English Honor Society and Advanced Composition students working together to make sure everyone had a tutoring session.

We added a second teacher and director in the writing center, which also transformed us. Kate Gillen is our second dynamo. With her on board, we have added programs such as outreach to English and ESL [English as a Second Language] classes. We have a blog, we’re on Twitter, we have automated our student evaluation process for gathering statistics. She runs our blackboard site. She helped us team up with our ESL 3 students when they were working on global awareness projects. Our visibility is higher than ever. We are now open during our flex period, and we’ll be doing a project in support of National Writing Day with the whole school. None of this would have been possible without steadfast administrative support, and our growth and potential do rely heavily on the vision that our administrators had and continue to have about peer-tutored centers. Thanks to them, we have a dedicated computer cart. Our tutors use these computers to help students with their writing, to show them online writing resources, and also for the automated evaluation. Our vision as we continue to transform is to have a budget. We want our logo everywhere: bumper stickers, pencils, the tutors want thumb drives with the Herndon Writing Center logo, they want the ninth-grade guidance package for students to have Herndon Writing Center temporary tattoos.

Our current staff numbers thirty-two, and we have eight students presenting here today. Patrick and Sydney have graduated; Emily and Faiza still tutor with the National English Honor Society, and hopefully they are

going to help with our tutor training; Annie is in Advanced Comp 3. For me personally, the transformation is in the enormous pride I feel in the contributions of all the student tutors who have worked to make our center a welcoming and a safe place. In December or January, when I watch them arrive, set up the desks, lay out the paperwork, get their tutor logs ready, [and] staff the entrance desk, all without me saying or doing a single thing, I just well up. I have the privilege of working with the best young people around. And these students are in all of your schools. They make me hopeful, and they make me enormously gratified.

In May, our class wrote six-word memoirs. They really liked the assignment, so we put the six-word memoirs in a really big font, and we laminated them and we put them in the hallway. The students wrote things like, "Put on sunscreen; still got burned." and "Dear Kabul, please send Dad home." Those are still hanging in the hallway; they survived the summer. Last week I saw an ESL teacher standing there with his students, reading our six-word memoirs. They did a mini lesson in the hall, they went back to their classroom, and the ESL students wrote six-word memoirs. We are going to laminate *their* six-word memoirs and hang them with *our* six-word memoirs as part of a very tangible and celebrated connection between what the writing center can prompt and then promote in the school. So this is our transformation. From begging to bust and beyond; changing the culture of our school, one memoir, one student, one Hornet at a time.

Janice Jewell gave these remarks as part of the Transformations from the Center panel at the Secondary School Writing Centers Conference in October 2013. She has been an English teacher at Herndon High School for 21 years. After co-founding the Herndon Writing Center, she taught Advanced Composition for five years. She has served as department chair and is currently the AP Coordinator. Janice also teaches English 9 Honors and AP Literature at Herndon.



From the Director's Chair: Building a Writing Center from the Ground Up

Matthew Kasper, St. Paul's School (MD) Writing Center Director

Good morning. I'm tasked with talking a little bit about my school and the founding of our writing center. I want to give you a little background, first, then tell you where we are today before addressing future challenges. I'm happy to take questions at the end if anything isn't covered.

Our school, St. Paul's, is probably unique at this conference because it is a private school. We're a K–12 school; we're located in Northern Baltimore County in Brooklandville, Maryland. I've been teaching at St. Paul's for five years; I'm an English teacher. I started a master's program at the Bread Loaf School of English in Middlebury, Vermont. At Bread Loaf, I would run into a lot of teachers; I would talk to a lot of teachers, and I was excited about the concept of a writing center. I really didn't know that much about it at all, but the idea seemed to be a really good one. After my first year of teaching at St. Paul's, I noticed that there was a lot of work that needed to be done with student essays. I was a graduate of the school, so it was hard for me to reconcile what I thought of myself as a student a long time ago with the students I was teaching at the time. I really thought I spent more time on my papers; I really remember putting a lot of effort into my writing. Well,

as it turns out, talking to my old teachers, some of that was true—some of it was not so true. So, I really saw the writing center as a great opportunity to improve the writing culture at St. Paul's. And basically, at an all-boys school, [it was] getting the guys to really spend more time and pay attention [to] writing as a process, something that would take place over a period of time and not something you would do the night before and turn in to your teachers.

When I started to talk about this idea of a writing center with my principal and colleagues going into my second year, there was some interest, but it was a muted interest. I think, you know, when administrators are presented with ideas—even good ideas—it always comes down to “Okay, how much is this going to cost? When will this happen? We have our schedule already established. What do you have in mind? I need specifics. I need a plan that's laid out.” Admittedly, I didn't have the planning side ready. A lot of things were kind of up in the air. We didn't have the opportunity to get started until I proposed the writing center committee. The principal decided that was okay. I would have five to six months to actually have a committee to talk about what it would mean to have a writing center at St. Paul's. It seemed relatively safe; it was during [the] meeting time of other committees; it wasn't going to cost money, so it was approved.

When this committee started, we would meet about twice a month. It wasn't a whole lot of time, but it was an efficient time at the beginning of the day. There was someone from almost every discipline; so there was a history teacher, a math teacher, a German teacher, an English teacher—which was good, because it gave us the chance to really think outside the box, and also make it something that wasn't just what the English department would do and the history department would do. Our committee, I thought, was really good in that we had a lot of ideas and a lot of proposals.

Long story short, at the end of those five months, we basically came to the idea, after reading Jenn Wells' book and [after] other considerations, [that] having a writing center really comes down to: (1) do you have the space? and (2) when will this happen? We ended up taking all our ideas and presenting a proposal to our principal. In terms of space, we focused on the new library. We noticed one of the rooms of the library wasn't completely thought out—there was a printer in the room, and students were hanging out in there. So all we had to do was move the printer to claim it as our space. So that was good. In terms of the hours and the structure of the writing center, I talked to my principal and I talked to somebody else who was in charge of scheduling, and we figured out that if we could have the students sign up for the writing center, if I could get enough students who would be interested in working at the writing center, then I could have them work at the writing center during their free period.

Our juniors and seniors all have at least one free period most of the time. In terms of faculty staffing, we wanted to have a presence at the writing center, particularly our first year, not only as a guide for the students who would be working there but also to make sure that the faculty would buy in. I know that's always a question that comes up—how do you establish faculty buy-in? The idea was that if we had faculty members that actually worked in the writing center, they would automatically buy in over time because they would have a chance to work with students, and they would also start sending their own students to the writing center. That worked out well with our scheduling because we had teachers that were assigned to study halls, and it wasn't a big deal to have them transferred to the writing center. So we had the location and we had the staff.

Here's where we are today after two years: we have ten students who work at the writing center. Last year we had eight: four juniors and four seniors. Our idea was we wanted upperclassmen to be working in the writing center particularly the first year; that way we would have four guys who could continue on and work as seniors. The four seniors who were there, obviously a little experimental, would allow for a replacement. This year, one of the challenges is we weren't able to get as many juniors as we would have liked. We have three juniors working there, so we're a little senior-heavy. One of the challenges is that as students take more and more advanced classes, they don't have as many free periods. This year, we're working a lot at lunch; we're working at the beginning of the day; we have some periods covered but we don't have the whole day covered. However, we do have faculty covering every period, so that's nice.

In terms of the future, we would like to see our writing center continue to grow. We were really excited about last year, our inaugural year; we had about 150 visits, which is pretty good for our school of a little under 400 kids. We did a series of promotions. We offered pizza, barbecue sauce—we tried to go out of the box—a lot of different things to try to get guys to come in. It was fun. I guess this year what we're trying to do is build on that. We had a birthday cake to celebrate our first birthday. A lot of the boys showed up right away to eat the cake. But at least they know where the writing center is. Hopefully they'll come back.

What I would say about starting a writing center at a smaller school, a private school, [is that] the biggest challenges are the same as at a lot of schools: finding a location and finding the hours in which to do it. We can get funding—but that only happened once the writing center was established. We do struggle with faculty buy-in. There are a lot of teachers who are as busy as the students. Also, it doesn't naturally occur to them to send kids to the writing center when they ask for help with writing. So they might just help them themselves. We don't have a writing center class; that's proved to be a little difficult, so I'm hoping that is something maybe we can work toward in the future. My suggestion to anyone who is starting a writing center at a school like mine is to work hard and be consistent with the people you are working with. If your principal or administrators are initially resistant to the writing center or starting a committee, do the legwork, go through the process of visiting other writing centers, gather data, and fine-tune your proposal specifically to your school so that everyone feels comfortable that this abstract idea can work for your student body. We've had some success, and we look forward to the future, but it's never easy. Thank you.

Matthew Kasper *gave these remarks as part of the Transformations from the Center panel at the Secondary School Writing Centers Conference in October 2013. He is a freelance writer, English teacher, and former journalist currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Pacific University. An American, he has lived in Shanghai and Singapore for the past seven years with his wife, Crickett, and their two children.*