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Meet the Tutors: Student Expectations, Tutor Perspectives, and Some Recommendations for Sharing Information about Tutors Online

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Meet the Tutors: Student Expectations, Tutor Perspectives, and Some Recommendations for Sharing Information about Tutors Online

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Abstract This article presents findings from an IRB-approved study about tutors' online information on writing center websites, scheduling systems, and social media. The study used surveys to investigate students' responses to tutors' online information and focus groups to investigate tutors' rationale for the information they shared. While many researchers have studied how writing centers are presented online, little research considers how tutors are represented. The authors argue that such representation merits attention, as tutor profiles can affect students' comfort with the writing center staff and their microdecisions about who to see and how to interact with them (Salem, 2016). The authors share advice for making decisions about how tutors are presented online and for using the process of creating meet the staff and similar pages to study and improve their centers.

Keywords tutor identity, self-presentation, writing center websites

Introduction

We begin with reflections from Jessica, whose experiences as a writing center user and tutor sparked our interest in researching how we share information about tutors online:

Before I became a writing tutor, I was a user of the center myself. I had transferred to the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) from a rural community college and felt out of place and overwhelmed on the large, bustling urban campus. I wanted to give myself the best chance possible to succeed, even if it meant sometimes

putting myself in uncomfortable situations, such as asking for writing help from strangers. Because I already felt out of place, I experienced a great deal of anxiety when seeking help. To deal with my anxiety, I always consulted the meet the staff page on the center's website before booking a session. Finding a tutor with whom I could connect was especially important to me as a first-generation and transfer student. I looked for tutors who not only mentioned the type of writing that I needed help with in their bio, but also tutors who seemed approachable, as I needed not only appropriate writing advice but also assurance

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from someone who made me feel comfortable and included. I tended to choose tutors who were older graduate students, because I got along well with several nontraditional students at my community college. I knew from my experience interacting with them that older students often also felt out of place, so I assumed that they might be compassionate when helping me.

In my first semester of tutoring in the writing center, a student disclosed to me that she had not only looked at my meet the staff bio, but also that she had gone further and searched for information about me within another institutional database before booking an appointment with me. I was surprised the student would admit this to me, but not necessarily shocked that she did this research. She was not only a first-time client of the center, but she had also brought in a piece of writing that contained very personal information. As I began working with this student, I think we both felt that we already had a connection because of the research she had done on me before choosing to work with me. Sharing personal writing with a stranger in an unfamiliar space is never easy for anyone, and as I reflect on my experience of researching tutors as a client and on this student's disclosure of researching me as a tutor, I realize that the ability to learn about tutors before meeting them might be a crucial step in convincing some students to use the center at all. This may be particularly true when the student comes to the center seeking help with assignments that are especially personal or when the student feels anxious navigating the institution, as I did as a first-generation and transfer student. When I shared my experiences as a student and tutor with Jaclyn, the center director, she replied that she had always wondered how much—and how—students use online information about tutors in spaces like the meet the staff page.

In this article, we share research that investigates this question. Specifically, our IRB-approved study examines what students think about tutors based on information available on

writing center websites, scheduling systems, and social media pages. While this question appears straightforward, student perception of tutors based on online information raises complex questions about how we share tutors' identities. When we ask how students react to tutors' online information, we raise questions about students' microdecisions, not only the microdecision of whether to use the writing center, but also the *micro* microdecisions of what tutor to see and how to interact with them (Salem, 2016). Further, considering student response to tutors' online information raises uncomfortable but important questions for ourselves about staff makeup. Are students able to make the decisions they may want, such as choosing to work with a tutor from a similar background or who has a similar identity in terms of race, gender, age, sexuality, nationality, or ability? In our own writing center, perhaps not, as our tutoring staff does not reflect the diversity of our larger institution, particularly regarding race and nationality.¹ The study also investigates tutors' rationale for their online profiles, because we were interested in how their expectations aligned with how students actually used the information available.

We offer findings for readers who are interested, like us, in being more intentional with how tutors present themselves to students in writing center websites, scheduling systems, and social media. Such intentionality may include using the center's online presence to share honestly where the center possesses and lacks diversity. Our own center's staff is highly diverse in some areas, like age and socioeconomic background, and far less diverse in others, like race and nationality. We believe students deserve access to both kinds of information as they make decisions about who they will see. This research was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope readers will benefit from our findings about writing center websites, schedulers, and social media, but also consider how our methods may be applied to other online spaces that have become commonplace, such as Zoom meeting rooms. Before we share our methods, results, and suggestions, we review the relevant literature.

Literature Review

This study adds to existing conversations about how writing centers present their intended ethos online and how clients respond. While the presentation of the writing center itself is critical, we also assert that the online presentation of *tutor* identities can meaningfully impact students' experiences with our services. Our study of online tutor profiles raises questions about how writing centers function online, how tutors present their identities, and how students react.

The fields of writing center studies, technical and professional writing, and computers and composition offer a rich history of research about the design, user-friendliness, and usability of writing center websites and online writing labs (OWLs). Examples include Blythe (1998); Colpo et al. (2000); Miraglia and Norris (2000); Karper (2003); Mason (2003); Leiben-sperger (2006); Salvo, Brizee et al., "Purdue OWL Usability Report" (2007); Driscoll et al. (2008); Salvo, Ren et al., "Usability Research in the Writing Lab" (2009); Grutsch McKinney (2010); Brizee et al. (2012); Lee (2014); Bacha (2018); Worm (2020); and Camarillo (2022). This work concerns how writing center users, often but not always students at that institution, interact with the center's online spaces and resources. Access forms a major thread throughout this body of design and usability work, as researchers generally seek to ensure that everyone can successfully use writing center websites and OWLs. In perhaps the clearest example, Allen Brizee, Morgan Sousa, and Dana Driscoll (2012) study usability and accessibility of writing center online spaces for students with disabilities. Further, usability research has become increasingly concerned with the affective dimension of user-computer interaction. Studies like Jeffrey Bacha's (2018) are not all about mouse clicks but also consider how users *feel* when they navigate a writing center website or OWL. Eric Camarillo's (2022) reflections about how race and class are coded into online writing center spaces ask readers to consider how marginalized users may be impacted by supposedly "objective" aspects of the site. Similarly, our study is concerned with user experience on both practical and

emotional levels. For example, in presenting information about its tutors, a writing center may want clients to learn easily who can best help with a particular assignment *and* feel comfortable with writing center staff. In this way, we see research about the design of writing center websites and OWLs as relevant to our study. We extend this work by considering not just how a writing center is presented online but also how its tutors are.

Also relevant are studies about the online tools and environments used for tutor-student interaction, including online tutoring but also communication outside the tutoring session. Again, this work generally attends to both practical concerns (can clients easily use the tutoring platform?) and affective dimensions that are perhaps less easily quantifiable but no less important (how does the client *feel* when using it?). Recent research about online tutoring includes Anna Worm (2020), who illustrates how writing center staff have various experiences and beliefs about the benefits of offering online tutoring services; Kathryn Denton (2017), who argues for more research about asynchronous online tutoring; Cristyn Elder (2017), who analyzes the types of questions students ask when using an email tutoring service; and Joanna Wolfe and Jo Ann Griffin (2012), who explore how various online tools affect client and consultant interactions. Wisniewski et al. (2020) build on Wolfe and Griffin's (2012) study with their own findings that student and tutor perceptions of the online tutoring environment can affect factors such as session goals and content discussed. This work often focuses on how tutors present themselves during tutoring, but researchers have also explored how we ask students to share their identities. In one example, an anonymous author (2018) writes in *The Peer Review* about asking for student pronouns in online scheduling systems. Also addressing online student profiles, Kristen Nichols-Besel, Katie Levin, and Kirsten Jamsen (2019) show how students react to requests for information when scheduling. They find that many of the questions asked in our scheduling systems reveal what we privilege about student identity, and, while helpful for us, may not always serve students' best interests. Session reports

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are an additional way writing centers interact with students, often online, and have been the subject of much research; see Rita Malenczyk (2013); Melissa Bugdal, Kristina Reardon, and Thomas Deans (2016); and Chapter 4 of R. Mark Hall's *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work* (2017). While much work about session reports focuses on pedagogy—how do we sum up sessions for students so they benefit most?—recent work has considered how we treat students' identity, including those they may share in online profiles, within the notes. In one example, Justin Hopkins (2018) considers our use of student pronouns in session notes. Research about the tools and environments used for tutor-client interaction, including online tutoring platforms, student profiles in online schedulers, and session reports, is relevant to our study for several reasons. First, to borrow from R. Mark Hall, we are concerned with the "everyday texts" of writing center work. Like research about session notes and student profiles, online tutor profiles can shape students' interaction with the center and tutors and influence decisions like which tutor to choose, how to interact during a session, and whether to return. Second, we are concerned with online tutor-client interactions that may be overlooked. Research about online tutoring platforms and everyday documents is often concerned, as we are, with the details of how students perceive us based on our online platforms, communication documents like session notes, and publicity materials. To these discussions, we add online profiles of tutors.

While little has been written about online tutor profiles, writing center studies has a long, rich history of work on tutor identity in general. Scholars going back to John Trimbur (1987), Andrea Lunsford (1991), and Peter Carino (2003) have discussed the collaborative and authoritative natures of tutoring and asked the degree to which these natures conflict. Implicit in these conversations is a question of what a tutor should be: a peer collaborator or an authority figure, for example? Implicit also is the question of what students want from their tutors: When a student schedules a writing center session, do they hope to meet with a peer or an authority, a collaborator or an editor, a student or a teacher, or something

else? Scholars like Carino have suggested that tutors should be both/and, so that their challenge is often to figure out how to move flexibly between authority and peer roles. The question for us becomes how we reflect this flexible both/and tutor identity in online spaces like scheduling systems, meet the staff pages, and social media, where students might form an impression of tutors before they even use the center. Further, just as in the tutoring session itself, there may be conflict between what the tutor believes they are presenting and what the student perceives. Chris Leary's (2017) analysis of client tweets about writing centers illustrates this conflict. Despite efforts to destigmatize use of the center, Leary finds many tweets characterized it as a place where "struggling writers" go. Leary's study reminds us that we may make every effort to present a particular image of the center, but we cannot fully control students' impressions. The same is true of tutor identities.

Our study seeks to at least understand, if not control, students' impressions by studying how center users are learning about our tutors online, what they think of tutors based on this information, and how tutors make choices in presenting themselves.

Methods

Surveys

Survey participants were writing center users at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), a public R1 university in the southeastern United States. To recruit survey participants, Jaclyn emailed everyone who had used the writing center during the previous six months and asked them to complete a voluntary online survey. These clients were identified using WOnline, the scheduling system used by the center. In total, 1,610 writing center users were invited to participate in the survey, and that pool generally reflected our center's average user demographics in class year, major, and status as native or non-native speaker of English.

We collected 80 complete survey responses. As this number represents only 5%

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of potential participants, we recognize that survey findings are limited. Additionally, survey participants skewed a bit toward graduate students and non-native English speakers. Specifically, participants included 22 graduate students (27.5% of participants), and only 15% of users during the six months we identified were graduate students. The remaining participants included 40 freshmen, 7 sophomores, 4 juniors, and 7 seniors. Freshmen consistently make up about half of our traffic—and did during the six months we identified potential participants—so the number of freshmen surveyed reflects average user demographics. This was important to us, as we were interested in students' first impressions and interactions with the center, and we assumed first-year students would be among those having those first impression thoughts. Participants included 63 native speakers of English (79% of participants) and 17 non-native speakers (21%). This is a significant skew, as only 13% of students in the participant pool were non-native speakers of English. Though unplanned, this was a skew we somewhat welcomed, as we were interested in how representations of staff come across to non-native speakers, particularly those who are international students. We wondered if the writing was clear to non-native speakers, but we also wondered if parts of the tutor bios we saw as personal and inviting, like references to popular movies and TV shows, were overly tied up in American culture and off-putting to someone from outside the United States. Finally, a wide variety of majors were reported but generally reflected our university's health care and STEM orientation.

Survey participants were asked about their experience with using the writing center website, as well as if they had explored tutors' online profiles or other information at any point. See Appendix A for the survey.

Focus Groups

Focus group participants were writing center staff at UAB. Jessica emailed everyone on payroll during the 2018–2019 academic year inviting them to participate in focus groups. Of the 25 people who worked in the writing center that year (excluding the authors),

9 participated, representing 36% of staff. Participants were broadly representative of staff demographics in terms of gender, race, nationality, age, and ability. Participants included four adjunct tutors, three graduate tutors, one undergraduate tutor, and the full-time office associate who has also worked as an undergraduate and graduate tutor. This skews a bit toward adjunct and graduate tutors, as we had five undergraduate tutors on staff at the time, and only one current undergraduate tutor participated. At the time of data collection, all participants had worked in the writing center for at least one semester, and some had for as long as three years.

The nine participants were divided into focus groups of three participants each; groups were determined based on participant availability, not demographics. Jessica led each one-hour focus group. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with representing themselves online as writing center tutors. They were also asked questions about whether clients had discussed their online profiles with them during tutoring sessions or in other encounters like when scheduling appointments or checking in with the front desk. Finally, participants were asked their opinions on the writing center's online representation of its staff members. Focus group sessions were audio recorded. See Appendix B for focus group questions.

Results

Surveys

The purpose of the surveys was to investigate whether and how students were looking at and responding to tutors' online information. To contextualize our findings about students' decision-making, we also asked questions about their motivation for using the writing center and their perceptions of the center and its online presence.

After demographic questions, the survey collected information about how and why participants had used the center. Sixty-three participants had had an in-person tutoring session, and 17 an online session. (The data were

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collected before the pandemic.) When asked for what course or assignment they visited, 13 answered developmental writing, 20 first-year composition, and 5 simply “English” (which could mean developmental or first-year writing, or a literature class). After English courses, the most common responses were personal statements (7) and nursing courses (7), with the rest of participants spread across courses from various disciplines.

Next, we wanted to know what motivated participants to use the writing center and how participants had learned about it. Nearly half of survey participants, 39 out of 80, claimed self-referral when asked what motivated them to use the writing center. Required for a class and professor referral were the second and third most popular at 19 and 12 participants. Only a handful of students each chose peer referral or extra credit. When asked how they learned about the writing center, 28 participants selected classroom presentation, 20 word of mouth, and 19 orientation or other event. Eight participants selected writing center website, 1 other website, and a handful other.

Next, participants were asked questions about how they chose a tutor and what online materials they had looked at regarding the writing center. First, we asked what factor most influenced the students’ choice of tutor when scheduling. Fifty-three participants responded the day/time the tutor was available. Thirteen chose personal or professional relationship with the tutor, 3 selected recommendations from other students, and none selected recommendations from professors. Regarding online information, 8 reported they chose a tutor based on information they learned from the meet the staff bio, and 1 selected info from other online profiles like social media.

Next, we asked participants if they had looked at online information about tutors *before* using the center. Forty-three responded no and were asked why not. The most common reasons were that they were unaware that the center had online information about tutors (21 participants), it had not occurred to them (17), and they were not interested (11). A handful responded that they already knew about tutors via word of mouth. Thirty-seven participants responded that they had looked at tutor

info before using the center: 13 before they chose someone to see, 6 after they had already chosen someone, and 12 both before and after. We asked when clients looked at tutor profiles because we wanted to know how students were using the information: were they using it to select a tutor, to learn about the tutor they selected before their session, or both? (Six participants responded no to both, even though they had claimed to look at tutor info before using the center. They may have been confused by the question, but it is also possible they looked at some other point we failed to ask about, like when deciding whether to use the writing center at all.) We also asked which pages they viewed to learn about tutors. The most common responses were the writing center website (any page) at 25, the meet the staff page at 24, and the online scheduling system at 15. Only 1 participant chose the center’s social media pages, and only 3 chose the tutors’ personal social media pages.

We then asked participants how important they found it to have online information about their tutor available via meet the staff or other pages. Participants were split about how much this mattered, though few felt it was unimportant. Specifically, 35 participants selected neutral and 36 selected very important (12) or important (24). Six selected unimportant, and only 3 selected totally unimportant.

In our final questions, we wanted to learn about the participants’ perception of the center and its tutors. First, we asked participants to rate their perception of the center and their tutor, based on the center’s online presence. Thirty-one participants rated their perception of the center as very positive, 25 positive, 17 neutral, and 1 negative. About tutor perception, 26 responded very positive, 21 positive, and 27 neutral. (Six participants skipped both of these questions.)

Next, we included two write-in questions where participants could describe their impressions of the center and tutors based on the center’s online presence. About the center, participants most frequently commented on its ease of use (9). Other words that came up frequently were professional (6) and organized (5). Negative comments were few but important. One participant wrote: “They are very

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organized, but there is no diversity within the UWC (ethnicities).” About tutors, several participants explained that they had not looked at tutors’ profiles. The ones who had mostly commented that the tutors looked competent and/or helpful. Four participants commented on their comfort level with the tutor and said that they looked at the meet the staff page to find a tutor who seemed approachable and/or with whom they shared common interests. One wrote: “I looked at their profile and found I shared interests with them. This made me feel more comfortable about going.”

Finally, we asked if participants had anything else to add. Few added anything new, but some responses do stand out. One participant commented about helping students with disabilities: “I’d like to remind your tutors that if they learn to implement at least one different strategy for tutoring someone with a learning disability or another kind of disability . . . not only will they feel more comfortable in the session, the student will know the tutor cared, he/she is more knowledgeable, and the student will more than likely return, as well as refer others.” A different participant commented on their experience as a nontraditional student in online courses: “[S]ome of my online experiences before [university] were sketchy and even some professors at other schools didn’t get that there is an array of experiences and ages that attend online. I am a working professional (an older person), so prejudgement or bias is important not to allow. . . . UWC doesn’t seem to assume why I am there or what reasons I am in need of help. . . . Thankful for them!”

Focus Groups

The purpose of focus groups was to discover staff ideas about how students are using tutors’ online information to make judgments and formulate expectations for their experiences in the center. We also sought to learn how tutors want to be represented and how the writing center’s online presence affects their choices.

Our writing center’s website includes a meet the staff page with staff members’ pictures, brief bios, and fun facts. Participants in each focus group were asked how they decided

what information to include in these profiles. Most agreed that their decisions were primarily based on existing staff members’ bios. Participants in one group said that they wanted their bio to make them appear credible, and one tutor even said that they wished to appear boring. Still, other participants expressed the desire to be relatable to students and to “paint a picture” of who they are so that students feel comfortable meeting them.

We then asked participants if they believed that students look at the meet the staff page. Participants in the first group agreed that students probably do not look at the page but admitted that it might depend on the type of student and how much time they have to choose a tutor. One participant noted that students have mentioned the page during sessions, but all members of group two generally agreed that students’ choice of tutor probably depends more on times the tutor is available. The third focus group unanimously agreed that students do visit the page because students had mentioned it to them.

Participants were then asked what perceptions they hoped students would have of them based on the information they chose for their meet the staff profile. Participants unanimously agreed that they wanted to appear friendly, approachable, and relatable to students, and some expressed that this is why they discussed their pets in their bio. All participants in the first focus group agreed that they wanted to appear smart and credible to students who looked at the information, and one participant in this group said that they included their teaching experience because they want students to trust their insight. One participant said that they want students to know that they have diverse experiences and therefore can relate to many different people regardless of background. The third group speculated the page could eliminate the anxieties of students who may be scared to ask for help or feel unsure of what to expect.

We also asked about participants’ personal social media pages, beginning with whether they believed students looked at these pages. Most participants guessed usually no, but several claimed students had admitted to looking at their profiles prior to the session. One tutor

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even had a student Facebook message them. The second and third focus groups agreed that whether students try to learn about their tutors before a session probably depends on the type of student. Generally, they believed that more anxious students may be more likely to research their tutor. To follow up, we asked participants whether they considered their tutor identity when building their personal online presence. Most participants said that they did try to construct a “professional” online identity, but not necessarily because they are a tutor. Many admitted to keeping their profiles private to limit how many people could access their information, and others said that they did not have much of a social media presence. One participant said that they had not considered that students would look at that information before booking, so it had never occurred to them to tailor their profiles for that purpose.

Next, we asked the participants if any students had explicitly commented on information they had found about the tutor online. Two participants described students coming in to work on a specific assignment with them due to information they had read on the meet the staff page. Most participants did not find such comments surprising, but others admitted that they would feel strange to know students had researched them.

We then inquired about whether participants had ever recommended that students look at the meet the staff page when suggesting tutors or encouraging students to return. All participants said they had suggested particular tutors or recommended that students visit the writing center’s website in general, but most had not directed students to the meet the staff page. Only one participant had specifically mentioned the page to students to help them decide who could best assist with certain types of assignments.

Finally, participants were asked whether they had any recommendations for how the writing center might change the way we present staff online. The most direct suggestion was to make the meet the staff page more prominent on the website so that students can access it more easily.

Additionally, participants agreed that including more information about the tutors’

expertise and academic interests would be the most beneficial change. One participant who holds an administrative position commented that students often call the front desk to ask which tutor could best help with particular kinds of writing. This made the participant think that students primarily sought information on tutor “specialties” when they researched tutors. Many participants recommended including such info on the website but agreed that we should not be too specific, since most tutors (at the time the research was conducted) have an English background and that may discourage students who need help with other disciplines. Finally, one comment came up only once but is quite significant. A participant pointed out that the center’s staff is primarily composed of white women, which may discourage students of color from visiting. The participant suggested, only half-jokingly, that we remove pictures of tutors from the meet the staff page to minimize our staff’s lack of diversity.

Discussion

When we began this research, we wanted to learn how students used tutors’ online identities to make decisions about scheduling. We viewed this as an even smaller, but still important, decision than the kind of micro-decisions Lori Salem (2016) explores. We also wanted to know tutors’ rationale for how they presented themselves online. We knew going into the research that tutors would likely describe the kinds of peer-authority, collaborator-expert tensions that scholars going back to John Trimbur (1987), Andrea Lunsford (1991), and Peter Carino (2003) discuss, but we wondered how the tutors might reconcile such tensions when introducing themselves online. By studying these questions, we hoped to learn better strategies for presenting information about tutors in online spaces like meet the staff pages. We conclude with recommendations for sharing online information about tutors that is both robust enough for the significant online sphere in which we find ourselves and respectful of tutors’ identities and privacy.

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Choosing Info for the Meet the Staff Page

Before this study, we felt on a gut level that offering online information about tutors is only fair given how much information we ask students about themselves when they schedule an appointment (see Nichols-Besel et al., 2019). Survey findings validate this instinct, as we learned that having information online about tutors is important to many students. Further, we learned that participants who do research tutors rely mostly on the center's website, particularly the meet the staff page. These findings underscore the importance of having a detailed, usable section of the website with information about tutors. Participants noted that they liked visiting these pages to see who their tutors were, but several commented that they wanted more information about the tutors' expertise. They wanted to make sure they chose a tutor who could meet their specific need, whether that need was writing a lab report, fine-tuning an APA reference page, or being supportive about writing anxiety. We recommend that writing centers include meet the staff pages on their websites and update the pages regularly. Further, meet the staff pages should attend to user experience, including not just how easily users navigate the page but also how they feel as they do. As the research regarding user experience and writing center websites illustrates, these practical and affective dimensions are both important (see Bacha, 2018; Camarillo, 2022; and others cited in the literature review). Finally, we recommend that meet the staff pages include information about tutor specialties, which may be particularly useful with the shift to online tutoring, as day-to-day "hey, who is good at X?" conversations in the center may be less common.

This final recommendation may be most challenging, as we know from our own experience that making decisions about whether to include tutor specialties raises further questions about whether our tutors are generalists or specialists, a longstanding writing center debate explored by scholars including Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz (1993) and Kristin Walker (1998). While we do not have an easy

recommendation for this quandary, we suggest listing several specialties per tutor to keep any one tutor from being pegged as The Expert about a particular topic. We also suggest framing specialties in positive terms that show the tutors' interests, not just what they feel they are good at ("Travis loves working with personal statements!"). Finally, we suggest including specialties beyond those that are easily categorized, like specific genres or citation styles. A tutor may be listed as an APA maven, but they may also be listed as someone who "loves helping students work through writer's block." These final two suggestions may help writing centers show the specialties in terms of interest and enthusiasm and in descriptions that are general enough that students do not categorize tutors too strictly.

Of course, disciplinary specialty is only part of what tutors may share online. Recurring use of words like "relatable" and "approachable" in surveys and focus groups also made us reflect on how much tutors should share personal identities. Students and tutors alike seemed to know what they meant by these words but rarely offered specific explanations or examples for what approachability or relatability might look like. Such qualities are difficult to describe, even when we have a gut-level sense of them, but a survey finding *and* a focus group finding seem important. In the survey's write-in section, one participant noted the center's lack of diversity, and a second commented that the center did not seem to make assumptions about nontraditional students. In focus groups, participants talked about including pets in their bios, since furry companions are almost universally beloved. Taking these findings together, we see a potential disconnect between what students may view as relatable or approachable and what tutors assume they will. While tutors may assume students want pet pics or favorite movies, students may actually want a tutor who shares or will at least respect the identities that most shape their experiences as students. In our third section, we discuss in more depth representing diversity online and handling a center's lack of diversity, particularly racial diversity. Here, we simply want to note that tutors should be encouraged to share, within their comfort levels, identities

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that students may connect with. This may be particularly important for those identities that are not apparent from scanning staff pictures or that may put students somehow outside the norm. For example, tutors could share if they are first-generation, nontraditional, or transfer students. Our survey findings are quite limited, but comments do suggest that these kinds of identities influence whether the student views tutors as approachable, perhaps even more than personal interests (though we certainly do not want to suggest writing centers should eliminate their tutors' furry friends or favorite movies from meet the staff pages).

Balancing Relatability and Credibility

Relatable and approachable were not the only recurring but difficult-to-define words that came up during focus groups. Nearly all tutors also said they wanted to appear "credible" online, particularly on the meet the staff page. Survey findings suggest that the goal of relatability is reasonable, as several survey participants mentioned looking at the meet the staff page to find a tutor with whom they felt comfortable. The findings also suggest the tutors' goals for appearing credible are being met, as many survey participants commented tutors seemed professional based on the info available online. While there is certainly justification for wanting to present both these identities in online representation and student interactions alike, we are also reminded of how difficult it can be to balance these competing narratives, as being too relatable may be off-putting to students who want instruction from an expert, just as being too authoritative may be unsettling to students who need assurance from a peer. Jessica is reminded of a breakroom discussion from her time as a graduate tutor, when another tutor was describing a recent tutoring session. In the session, the tutor was helping a student identify and correct comma errors and reassured the student that even she, a writing tutor, makes comma mistakes from time to time. She noted that the student seemed surprised and perhaps even put off by this comment, and she wondered if it had been the wrong thing to say. Conversations

like these remind us that, despite our best efforts to appear relatable and/or credible to students, how we *think* we are presenting ourselves to students may be very different from how students interpret and use the information we present. Chris Leary's (2017) Twitter "eavesdropping" suggests the same, albeit about the writing center overall instead of individual tutors.

The breakroom anecdote also reminds us of the broader balance in roles that tutors experience: Tutors are pressed on the one hand to relate to clients as nonauthoritative peers *and* to show they have the knowledge required to provide helpful advice on the other. Much has been said of this balance in the past few decades of writing center scholarship, going back to John Trimbur (1987), Andrea Lunsford (1991), and Peter Carino (2003). Less has been said about how we present that balance through online information, even though survey findings suggest that tutors are right to try to present themselves online as both credible and approachable, whatever those terms may mean. More research should investigate this question, interrogate what we mean by such words, and study what *students* mean when they wish for credible, approachable, and/or professional tutors. This research could focus on the types of print and online communication we use daily with students, as such communication is an important part of where students form such impressions. Melissa Bugdal, Kristina Reardon, and Thomas Deans (2016) illustrate how session notes provide a possible example of the communication to study, and we hope that the present study illustrates how meet the staff pages provide another. Based on our findings, we offer some basic advice for how centers may balance relatability and credibility in tutor profiles.

Most importantly, we suggest writing centers create standard guidelines for tutor profiles on meet the staff pages. In focus groups, we learned how disoriented staff members felt about our own failure to provide such guidelines. Looking back, Jaclyn also recalls how this failure led to some awkwardness in our meet the staff page that reflected partly our mix of professional and student tutors. One tutor, an instructor with 20 years of teaching

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experience, submitted a professional headshot and a three-paragraph bio that listed her extensive professional experience. This contrasted greatly with the short, casual bios and candid pics that other tutors, most of them students, had submitted. The contrast between this tutor's bio and pic and those of the other tutors was the most extreme, but we noted wide variations in others' bios and pics that could lead to students categorizing tutors as "the friendly one," "the professional one," and so on, and could also present a false hierarchy among tutors. In survey findings, students did not specifically speak to this. However, reflecting on the focus group participants' discomfort with the lack of guidelines and our center's historically varied meet the staff page, we wondered if survey participants who threw around words like relatable, professional, and credible were implicitly noting these types of differences and making assumptions about tutors. We do not suggest all bios should be identical, nor do we suggest writing center websites should hide that tutors have different levels of experience and education. However, providing a general template for bios, making the pics consistent, and agreeing on how much personal vs. professional info to include will help tutors feel more comfortable figuring out what to share, help emphasize what we most want students to notice, and minimize the sense that some tutors are more or less approachable or professional. Finally, making bios and pics consistent makes the pages cleaner and easier for users to navigate.

Writing centers should decide for themselves what they want to emphasize as they develop guidelines for their tutors' bios and pics. As an example, we began providing more guidance after this research and asked all tutors to include a 3–4 sentence bio that focuses mostly on professional and academic information and a 1–2 sentence "fun facts" section that focuses more on personal information. We also decided collaboratively that all pics should be candid to bring more personality to the page. At the same time, we provided guidelines from our university's web team on taking good candid photos to ensure quality and create a more consistent look across pics. We keep tutor specialties general in the ways described

in the previous section, which works for our writing center because students can call or email our full-time office associate if they want more specific information about tutors. This is just one example of how bios may differ across centers, as we imagine centers with less front desk presence may prioritize including tutor specialties to minimize these types of emails and calls.

Representing Staff (Non)Diversity

Writing center scholars argue that our online spaces reflect our centers but are themselves important actors rather than neutral technologies that simply support or promote our in-person work. Eric Camarillo (2022) calls writing centers to consider the supposedly neutral aspects of technology and to consider how their websites may oppress, even if unintentionally: "It's true that the outcomes of technology may not have been intended, but one does not need intention to be racist. One only needs to be disinterested and inattentive." Camarillo references Jackie Grutsch McKinney's observation that the physical writing center presented as cozy home may privilege white and middle- or upper-class sensibilities and asks: "What if writing centers are coding their websites, which are arguably extensions of their physical spaces, in similar ways, privileging certain perspectives and uses over others?" Our research illustrates that tutor profiles are important parts of our websites and thus should get the kind of attention Camarillo calls us to identify when we are privileging certain perspectives. However, our research also illustrates the limits of tutor profiles when our staff lacks diversity.

Survey and focus group comments regarding identity and diversity were few but forceful. As discussed earlier in this section, one survey respondent noted our writing center's lack of diversity, and two survey comments addressed tutor age and ability. One commented that tutors should have strategies for working with students with learning or other disabilities, and another claimed to have had good experiences with writing center tutors as a nontraditional student. Even though these comments regard *student* diversity, the fact that the participants

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raised them in response to questions about *tutors'* online presence suggests that they were connecting the information they had about tutors with student identities like ability and age. Finally, a focus group participant wondered if we should eliminate pictures from the meet the staff page to try to minimize that our tutors are mostly white women.

In reality, our tutoring staff simply does not reflect the diversity of our larger institution, particularly regarding race and nationality.² The issue of staff diversity becomes heavier when we consider that roughly one third of our center's usage comes from students in developmental writing, as the course requires regular writing center use. Students of color make up a large percentage of this course population, so our client population generally includes an even greater percentage of students of color than the broader student population of our highly diverse university. This makes the already troubling lack of diversity in our staff even more so. Two members from the first focus group reflected on the unequal balance of white to nonwhite tutors, which one participant noted felt "odd," especially given how many students of color we see from developmental writing. This comment prompted another focus group member to observe that one of the tutors, a Black woman, seemed to have many students from these courses schedule regular sessions with her. She also commented that this tutor seemed to stay booked more frequently than other tutors who worked similar hours, which was consistent with the observations of others in the focus group and usage data from WOnline. We cannot make any claims about why this tutor stayed busier than other tutors, but the focus group members speculated, and we agree, that it may be because this tutor looked like many of the students who were required to use the center. Surveys reveal the completely unsurprising finding that many students primarily choose a tutor based on when they are available. But, if a Black tutor is staying booked more regularly than her white colleagues who work at the same time, tutor availability cannot be the whole story. Aside from availability, survey findings suggest that students look for someone who is "approachable" and "relatable," and

focus group discussion and one survey comment suggest identities including race could be part of that story. Finding a tutor who shares one or more of the student's identities could even be what students mean when they use slippery terms like *relatable*, *approachable*, and even *professional* and *credible*.

What do we do when something about our writing center, particularly something as crucial as having a diverse staff, is lacking? Or to put it differently, what do we do when we believe students will choose a tutor based partly on identities like race, but we know that our staff lacks diversity enough that all tutors during certain blocks of time may look fairly similar? To reflect on our website a staff diversity we do not have would clearly be unethical, as would minimizing our lack of diversity by eliminating staff pictures or through some other means. The problem raised in this section offers a great reminder that a writing center website is only as good as the writing center it represents. The website cannot mask or change problems in the writing center, at least not ethically. The best we can do is use our website in two ways: (1) show students what our center is so that they can make the best decisions about how to use it, and (2) show the writing center staff what our center is so we can make decisions about how to improve.

To the first point, we suggest that centers include robust online information about their tutoring staff. We believe it is important that this information be available to students. Even if the staff lacks diversity, having a representation of staff members, including images, matters for two reasons. First, students simply deserve to have the information, to know what kind of environment they are walking into, even if—or perhaps especially if—it is one they may find less welcoming, particularly in cases where they are required or incentivized to use the center. Second, this representation can highlight what staff diversity we do have so that students have some chance of finding a tutor with whom they have something in common. While our own staff lacks diversity in race and nationality, our tutors are diverse in age, ability, and interests. We have tutors who are nontraditional, transfer, and first-generation students; tutors who are military veterans

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and those who are parents; tutors who come from low-income backgrounds; tutors who grew up in rural areas and others who grew up in the middle of Birmingham. We imagine other centers, like our own, lack diversity in some areas but are highly diverse in others. Perhaps the best we can do is honestly share information about our staff, highlight the diversity we do have, and work on developing teams that reflect the diverse makeup of our institutions.

The process and product of a center's online presence can help with this final point. For us, developing our center's websites and then studying the products, both through this study and less formally day-to-day, has helped us see our center's positives and negatives in a new light.

Specifically, developing our meet the staff page, including working with tutors on what information to include, helped us get to know our staff better as a collective and to think about that staff through students' eyes. As we look at the page now, we see more clearly than ever where we need to focus our energy in terms of tutor recruitment. While we could have gotten this sense from simply reflecting on a list of staff members, seeing the carefully written and designed page helps us better imagine our staff from the students' view. Day to day, developing social media content serves a similar purpose, as our Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn posts often include content about tutors, like their accomplishments and activities. Again, the process of developing this content and the experience of analyzing it through the students' perspective helps us to think more clearly about our staff as a group, including what improvements we need to make. Additionally, social media allows us to get instant feedback from student users who like, follow, and comment (or don't) on our posts. We conclude our article with a final suggestion that writing centers take advantage of their rhetorical training to learn about their staff, particularly its diversity and how students may view it, through the processes of developing, gathering feedback, and revising online representations of tutors. This work will help writing centers make more informed decisions about where to go next in

developing and representing staff that fully reflect the diversity and values of their broader institutions.

Notes

1. At the time of writing, our staff includes 29 tutors and 3 student administrators: 17 white women, 6 white men, 7 nonwhite women, and 2 nonwhite men. The university student population is only 58% white, but our staff is 72% white. Further, all staff members but one are U.S. citizens and native speakers of English, whereas 5% of UAB students are from other countries and 15% of our center's users are non-native English speakers. Finally, our director and office manager are both white women and U.S. citizens. Our staff is diverse in terms of age and parenting status; current tutors range from 18 to 53 years old, and the director, office manager, and several tutors have children. Additionally, several tutors are first-generation college students who are or have been nontraditional or transfer students. While this is positive, particularly for assisting students from developmental writing courses that are made up of many first-generation and low-income students, these kinds of identities are not necessarily noticeable to clients scanning our website. We may ask whether they should be. For example, should tutors who are first-generation college students, transfer or nontraditional students, or student-parents be encouraged to share such information online, knowing that it may make some clients feel more comfortable coming to them? Future research could explore this question.

2. See note 1 for a breakdown of staff demographics.

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Appendix A: Survey

Demographic Questions

1. Class standing
 - a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior
 - e. Graduate student
2. Major (write in):
3. Is English your first language?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. For what course and/or assignment did you visit the UWC? (write in):
5. What motivated you to visit the UWC?
 - a. Required for a class
 - b. Extra credit for a class
 - c. Professor referral
 - d. Peer referral
 - e. Self-referral

Survey Questions—Quantitative

6. Was your tutoring appointment online or in person?
 - a. Online
 - b. In-person
7. How did you first hear about the writing center?
 - a. Website
 - b. Other online page or tool (examples: social media, UAB Greenmail)
 - c. Classroom presentation
 - d. Word of mouth
 - e. Orientation or other on-campus event
 - f. Other (write in):
8. When scheduling an appointment, what factor most influenced your choice of tutor? Please select one.
 - a. The day/time they were available
 - b. Information you learned from their meet the staff page bio
 - c. Information you learned from other online profiles (example: social media)
 - d. Recommendations from other students
 - e. Recommendations from professors
 - f. Personal/professional relationship with the tutor
 - g. Other (write in):
9. At any time before using the UWC, did you look at any information online about the tutors? (Examples: UWC website, WOnline, social media pages, other web pages)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
10. [If they answered no to question 9], Why not? Select all that apply.
 - a. I was not interested in viewing information about the tutors before using the UWC.
 - b. I was not aware the UWC had a meet the staff page and/or other websites with information about tutors.
 - c. It did not occur to me.

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- d. I already knew about the tutors via word of mouth.
e. The appointment was scheduled for me by a UWC staff member.
11. [If they answered yes to question 9], Did you try to learn about tutors before choosing a tutor to work with?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 12. [If they answered yes to question 9], Did you try to learn about your tutor after scheduling an appointment with them?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 13. [If they answered yes to question 9], Which of the following did you view to try and learn about tutors? Select all that apply:
 - a. UWC website (any page)
 - b. The meet the staff page on the UWC website
 - c. UWC online scheduling system
 - d. UWC social media pages (Facebook, Twitter)
 - e. Tutors' personal social media pages
 - f. Other (write in):
 14. How important is it to you to have access to online information about your tutor via meet the staff or other pages?
1 (totally unimportant) 2 (unimportant) 3 (neutral) 4 (important) 5 (very important)
 15. Rate your perception of the UWC, based on its online presence (website, online scheduling system, social media, etc.).
1 (very negative) 2 (negative) 3 (neutral) 4 (positive) 5 (very positive)
 16. Rate your perception of your UWC tutor, based on their online presence (website, online scheduling system, social media, etc.).
1 (very negative) 2 (negative) 3 (neutral) 4 (positive) 5 (very positive)

Survey Questions—Short Answer

1. What impression do you have of the UWC based on its online presence (website, social media pages, online scheduling system)?
2. What impression do you have of your UWC tutor based on their online presence (UWC website, UWC social media pages, personal social media or professional pages)?
3. Do you have anything else to add about the UWC's or UWC tutors' online presence?

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

Please note that there is an expectation of confidentiality for our discussion today. The data from today's discussion will not be shared outside of a research context (like when the researchers are analyzing and writing about the data); when shared, the data will be made anonymous. To help protect everyone's confidentiality, please do not share other participants' comments outside of today's conversation.

1. How did you decide what to put on your meet the staff page?
2. Do you think that students look at your meet the staff bio? Why or why not?
3. Do you think that students look at your other online profiles (such as social media or other professional pages)?
 - a. If yes, does this change the way that you present yourself in those online spaces?
4. Based on your meet the staff bio, what perception do you hope students will have of you?
5. Have any students commented on your meet the staff bio (or other online bios—WOnline, social media, etc.)?
 - a. If yes, was it a response you expected? Hoped for? Did not expect?
 - b. If yes, does this information influence how you present yourself online?
6. Have you ever recommended that students look at the meet the staff page?
7. Is there anything you would change or add about how our writing center does staff presence online (in WOnline, the website, etc.)?

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