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"Tell me exactly what it was that I was doing that was so bad": Understanding the Needs and Expectations of Working-Class Students in Writing Centers

Abstract

This study presents insights from hour-long interviews with eighteen working-class students from three different higher education institutions. It finds that working-class students' perceptions of the writing center are at odds with how writing centers perceive themselves. The working-class students in our study generally wanted support that was more direct, more "expert," and more generous than what they found in the writing center. The participants' experiences pose important questions for writing center directors who want to provide services more closely matched to students' needs.

Brandon finds his way to Temple University, an urban, public, doctoral institution, from a small farming community in central Pennsylvania.[1] He's a football player who did well enough in high-school classes to be admitted to Temple, but he wasn't a good enough athlete to earn a spot on its Division 1 team. Brandon struggles with courses and culture on campus, not because he lacks the talent or promise but because he finds mystifying expectations on nearly every front. Brandon figures his "hick-town" upbringing is at least partly responsible for why he is so confused by the university and its requirements. His girlfriend (also from a farm town) teases him for sounding like a "hick," and he teases his own father for being uncomfortable in Temple's urban neighborhood. The place he feels most at home is at his on-campus job. It is loosely related to his planned career path, and he's already managed to work his way into a position with more responsibility and more interesting duties. Brandon's boss has become an informal mentor.

Like Brandon, Talisha, a student at St. John's University, an urban, Catholic, research institution, is the first in her family to attend college. The child of an immigrant, she imagines going to graduate school and becoming a foreign-service officer, but right now, most of her energy goes into figuring out how to make ends meet. She works a lot of hours at her part-time jobs, and she loads up her course schedule to maximize the credits for the tuition she's paying. In a previous generation, and in another country, Talisha's family was quite privileged. Her grandfather ran a business and travelled the world as an informal ambassador for his country. He didn't have a formal education, but in his world, self-educated was just as good as college educated. Maybe better. The family retains a memory (and many stories) about their privileged past, but life is definitely different now. Talisha plans to earn the formal educational credentials she believes will secure her future.

At Eastern University, a suburban, comprehensive, Christian school, Juanita is a multilingual learner. Like Brandon and Talisha, she is the first in her family to attend college. She lives with her parents and commutes to campus each day. Juanita is often confounded by what faculty want from assignments, and she does not believe her high school prepared her well for college. One of her biggest struggles is getting past her fear that she is too far behind to succeed. Whenever she writes papers, she is convinced her grammar is extraordinarily bad, and she regularly visits the writing center. Her tutoring sessions help—somewhat—because the tutors are reassuring. But what really lights her up is the help she gets from her friends who edit her papers for her.

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1   We have used pseudonyms for all participants in this study.

Each of these students was a participant in our study of working-class students who use the writing center. They are typical of our interviewees, and they are also typical, in many ways, of the students who visit writing centers across the country. As Beth Boquet (1999) notes, writing centers are arenas in which wider institutional currents become material. In particular, writing centers are places where inequality—unequal access to educational resources—is made manifest. Students like Brandon, Talisha, and Juanita grew up in families and communities where getting a college degree was not the norm and where a college education did not seem entirely necessary. Or at least that was the case in the past, when our students' parents were coming of age. The students we interviewed felt that, anymore, college degrees have become a necessity for anyone who wants to make a decent living, and they were each trying to work toward that goal. But in many ways, working-class students' lives before college have not prepared them for what they encounter on college campuses. And—other side of the same coin—the colleges they attend are not fully prepared for them either. All colleges make implicit assumptions about students—what they need, what they want—but students like our interviewees come with a host of expectations and needs colleges have not fully anticipated.

Writing centers *should* be a godsend for students like our interviewees. The very purpose of a writing center, at least from the perspective of university administrators, is to help students who have gaps in their preparation for academic writing. Moreover, from the perspective of writing center administrators, writing centers are designed to offer "student-centered" support. We pride ourselves on meeting students where they are, without preconceived notions of where they "should" be. But our research reveals that writing centers do not function the way we imagine they do. Our interviewees had mildly positive things to say about their experiences in the writing center—the tutors they saw were generally "nice"—but, as we listened to the stories they told, the writing center came to seem like the five-dollar bill your grandmother presses into your hands at Thanksgiving. It's a caring gesture and it helps a little bit, but it isn't a game changer. So why is that? What is it that working-class students find when they use the writing center, and why doesn't the center play a larger role in their educational pathways?

Research on Working-Class Students in U.S. Higher Education

Research in sociology, education, and other fields has demonstrated clearly that working-class students face particular challenges in higher education, challenges that call out for thoughtful and tailored responses (Hurst,

2010; Lareau, 2011, 2015; Mullen, 2010; Stuber, 2011; Walpole, 2003). For one thing, research reveals that high schools—funded by local taxes—are highly stratified in terms of their resources and curricula (Kozol, 1992). Children from middle- and upper-income families are more likely to attend high schools that offer prestigious, college-preparatory curricula, as well as full access to college counselors and to the kinds of extracurricular activities (from drama clubs to SAT tutoring) that help burnish college applications. Students from lower income families are more likely to attend high schools with more basic curricula and to have only limited access to college counselors and extracurricular activities (Lareau, 2011, 2015). The resources gap continues in college, where middle- and upper-income students can draw on resources from their families that allow them to live on campus, take nonpaying internships, study abroad, and so forth. For many working-class students, meanwhile, living in student housing is out of reach financially, and holding down a paying job is the top priority (Stuber, 2011).

All these economic disparities impede working-class students' academic progress, but they are really just the tip of the iceberg. When working-class students come to universities, they also find themselves immersed in a cultural environment markedly different from what they experienced growing up, one whose unstated rules are difficult to discern and follow. In the language of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1991), they come to college with a "cultural capital" that is mismatched to the middle-class, professional world of higher education. Cultural capital is a loose collection of knowledge, experiences, and preferences that shape our interactions with people and that signal where we are positioned in social class hierarchies. Sometimes it is easy to spot cultural capital at work: describing one's posh vacation in the Maldives is easy to recognize as a class signal. But most of the time, cultural capital functions more stealthily because it is embedded in neutral-seeming ideas about what is "appropriate" and "normal." It registers in such things as how we speak with professors and other authority figures, how we express grievances and complaints, what we assume we are entitled to or not entitled to, what we think is funny, and so forth.

Being with people who share our cultural capital is comfortable because we instinctively get what is going on, and broadly speaking, this is what middle-class students are likely to experience in college. Middle-class students have grown up interacting with educated middle-class professionals at home, and they can draw on this experience and a bank of shared expectations when they interact with professors and administrators on college campuses. For working-class students, by contrast, going to college means entering an environment distinctly at odds with their prior

experiences and in which their instincts about what is a "good move" to make in a particular situation, about what to expect of their relationships and what others expect of them, are often "wrong."

Working-class students, of course, can and do adapt to the new cultural environment of college; over time, they acquire middle-class cultural capital. But as Allison Hurst (2010) has argued, even when they adapt, working-class students then face another challenge. Having acquired this cultural capital changes their own views of the world and others' views of them. As a result, working-class students risk being effectively dislocated from their families and communities. Donna LeCourt and Anna Rita Napoleone (2006, 2011) argue that working-class students are pressured to surrender their identities in exchange for material success and security, and Irvin Peckham (2010) connects this specifically to writing, noting that working-class students are pushed to assimilate to middle-class discourse in the name of achieving academic tone. To get a sense of the tension this pressure creates, consider that for middle-class students, getting college degrees and professional jobs just makes them more like their parents and most of the other adults they've been in contact with their whole lives. For working-class students, the opposite is true. The more "success" they achieve, the greater the symbolic and material separation between them and their families and home communities.

Cultural capital is a thick and useful concept in the research literature on educational inequality, and it became an important theoretical framework for our research. We sensed the specter of mismatched cultural capital in every interview we conducted. It helps explain many of the stories our interviewees told us, from Brandon's description of himself as a "hick" to Juanita's grammar fears. It also shaped how our interviewees experienced the writing center. For working-class students, writing centers evoke the feelings of dislocation and discomfort that come from mismatched implicit assumptions: we are not what they expect us to be, and we do not do what they expect us to do.

Everywhere and Nowhere

As we worked to contextualize our project in the history of writing center scholarship, we encountered something of a paradox: working-class students are everywhere and nowhere. On the one hand, our review of *The Writing Center Journal* archives uncovered not a single article devoted to working-class students (or to socioeconomic status in general) since the journal began in 1980. Looking beyond *The Writing Center Journal*, we found that social class registers in scholarship about writing centers, but

just barely.[2] Yet a review of writing center histories suggests working-class students were the very reason the current writing center movement was launched in the first place. Histories by Beth Boquet (1999), Peter Carino (1996), and Neal Lerner (2003) connect the growth of writing centers in the 1980s to the increase in working-class students enrolling in higher education in the decade immediately prior. In this sense, the writing center movement—our writing centers, *The Writing Center Journal*, IWCA, WCenter, all of it—owes its existence to working-class students' decisions to attend college.

This paradox is not an accident. Acknowledging a connection between working-class students and writing centers was troubling for the nascent writing center movement because it seemed to connect writing centers to remediation. Thus, the writing center scholarship from those years didn't just avoid talking about working-class students. It actively denied any special connection between writing centers and "poor" (in both senses) students. That scholarship was intent on creating arguments for writing centers (and writing center pedagogies) not connected to remedial students. These arguments are largely premised on a claim of neutrality: writing centers aren't (or shouldn't be) *for* any particular group of students. Instead, they are (or should be) addressed to "universal" writerly concerns. It's no surprise, then, that the two most powerful ideas that emerged from this literature are both connected with the word *all*: writing centers are open to *all* students, and we make the students do *all* the work. The former signals that the writing center has addressed itself to majority/mainstream students; the latter signals that the pedagogies used in the writing center will call on knowledge students are supposed to already have (and will not bend if they don't have it.) Taken together, these *all* statements were meant to define the writing center as an academically respectable space, one that isn't "marginal" to the university's mission.

The goal of these efforts was probably largely—maybe entirely?—self-interested. Rejecting the remedial label and rejecting associations

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2   For example, a working-class student is profiled in Nancy Grimm's (1999) *Good Intentions*, although the book is not principally about working-class students. Note, however, that writing center scholarship—especially where it intersects with critical race theory and new literacy studies—does develop ideas that are useful in theorizing the role of socioeconomic status in the writing center. In particular, the ideas of multiple literacies, literacy codes and code switching, discourse communities, and communities of practice broadly informed our thinking about class in/and the writing center. Finally, note that class is an explicit topic of analysis in the broader field of composition studies, where we found journal articles and book-length studies addressing working-class students' experiences with classroom-based writing instruction (e.g., Durst, 1999; Peckham, 2010).

with low-prestige students was about trying to build the status of writing centers and their directors. But all along, that self-interested agenda has been entangled with and masked by language about serving students. Indeed, the principal justification for nonremedial writing centers and for allegedly nonremedial writing center pedagogies is that they are *better for students*. A nonremedial writing center is better for students because it protects them from stigma; common writing center pedagogies (non-directiveness, preference for higher order concerns, etc.) are better for students because they focus on the student as a writer rather than just on a particular paper. This "better-for-students" argument is self-reinforcing. It's a moral argument—who would want to do something that would harm students?—so it has served as a powerful bulwark against change.

We have a long history of teaching ourselves to speak the language of universality and neutrality and of evading associations with nonmajority students. This means we are well trained to *not* hear what students like Brandon, Talisha, and Juanita are saying to us and to avoid changing our practices in response to their needs. If a student comes to the writing center saying they want us to "proofread" their paper, we are thoroughly versed in the methods of not hearing that request. We think to ourselves, "That's not really what you want" or "It's better if I don't give you that." Insisting on a neutral stance effectively reenacts the marginalization of the very students to whom we owe our existence.

Methods

The data for our research are drawn from a set of 16 interviews we conducted with students from our three institutions: St. John's University, Temple University, and Eastern University.[3] Each interview lasted around 60 minutes, and the questions followed a common script. Using open-ended questions, we asked students to tell us about their families and where they grew up; about their decision to attend the university; about their experiences with college writing assignments; and about their experiences in the writing center (see Appendix A for the full interview protocol). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and we later coded the transcripts as described below.

A good deal of diversity is built into our dataset. To begin with, the three institutions from which we drew participants are diverse. St John's

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3   We applied for and received IRB approval at St. John's University (#0514162) and Temple University (#22484). At Eastern University, approval was granted on the basis of the St. John's University IRB review. Harry was the writing center director at St. John's University during the IRB approval process and interview process.

is a large, urban, Catholic institution; Temple is a very large urban public research university; and Eastern is a small, private Christian university. Moreover, the writing centers at these institutions are also different in size and organization. Finally, the students we interviewed were themselves diverse. All were working class, and all were writing center users. But beyond that, they included men and women of varied ages and racial/ethnic/linguistic backgrounds, they were at different educational levels, and they were pursuing a diverse array of academic programs (see Appendix B for a summary of the characteristics of the participants involved in this research).

The term *working class* is at the heart of our project, so defining that term was an important methodological concern. In the published research, there is no single consistent definition of the term. Instead, class is usually defined by the following variables, either singularly or in combination: income, type of profession, level of education, and assets. So, for example, an individual with an income below a certain level, who works in a nonmanagerial job, who does not complete college, and who does not own a home, would usually be considered working class. But there is considerable complexity in this equation, and the line between working class and middle class is blurry and dynamic. If someone grew up in a household that met the definition of working class, but then that person went on to earn a college degree and get a high-paying professional job, does that person still "count" as working class? If not, when did the change occur? Does it matter what they consider their class identity to be? The students who participated in our research project were all in this liminal space in terms of their class identities. All were the first in their families to attend college, and all were forging paths toward the middle class; but as young adults, all were deeply identified with the class identities of the families and communities of their childhood.

In the end, we defined class according to three variables: parental income, parental education, and parental occupation. This operational definition complements wider use of class in composition studies, in which class represents not just material conditions (e.g., income, property) but a whole set of lived experiences, discursive practices, and performativity that often intersects with race in the United States (LeCourt, 2004; Lindquist, 2002; Peckham, 2010; Rodriguez, 2003; Rose, 2005; Shor, 1992; Young, 2007). Our interviewees were all students whose parents did not earn college degrees, whose parents worked in non-professional jobs, and whose annual family income was below the median for their region. We chose this definition for several reasons. First, it matched the definition used in most of the educational research we reviewed, and this gave us more confidence that we could apply the insights from that research to

our work. Second, including parents' income in our definition also allowed us to capture the educational effects of family financial resources. Parental earnings shape the neighborhoods students grow up in, as well as the neighborhood schools they attend. It also shapes the resources students have access to once they are in college, especially whether and how much they need to work while going to school. And finally, including parental education as a variable allowed us to explore the effect of cultural capital.[4]

Per our IRB proposals, we offered participants a small gift for participating in the interviews. (At St. John's University and Eastern University, they received $10 gift cards to Starbucks; at Temple University, they received $10 in Diamond Dollars, its on-campus currency.)[5] Students were offered the gift before the interview began, and as part of the informed consent process, they were told the gift was theirs to keep, even if they decided to withdraw from the interview or cut it short. Ultimately, no students withdrew from the interviews at any point, and none refused to answer questions.

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4   Recruiting participants who met this definition was its own challenge, and the process worked somewhat differently at each of our institutions. We each began by generating lists of students who had used our writing centers in the previous three years, but from there, the process diverged. At Temple University, Lori was able to draw on institutional data for parents' income and educational attainment, so it was relatively easy to generate a list of all of the writing center users who matched two of our three criteria. In the interviews, she asked students about their parents' occupations, and based on that she was able to determine whether they met our full definition of working class. At St. John's University and Eastern University, Harry and John did not have direct access to institutional data about any of our variables, but they did have access to data about students' parents' home zip codes. Armed with that information, they turned to the U.S. Census Bureau's database of zip codes and filtered out a list of students from zip codes where the average household incomes were at or below our target. That process yielded a list of students who were *likely* to match our criteria, and Harry and John used the list to invite students for interviews. At the beginning of each interview, they asked follow-up questions about the parents' jobs, income, and educational attainment, and based on that information, they were able to determine which interviewees met our criteria. As it happened, some of the students who came for interviews did not meet our definition of working class. In those cases, Harry and John completed the interview as planned, but we did not include data from those interviews in this analysis.

5   The amount of the gift is meant to be enough that it might entice a potential interviewee to consider participating but not so much that it coerces them into sharing information they wouldn't otherwise want to share. The cost of the gifts (as well as some of the transcriptions) was covered by an IWCA research grant. We are grateful for that support.

Coding Processes

The coding process was extensive and time consuming, and we did most of it in online meetings using Skype and Webex. We began by using "open coding," which is a way of identifying, naming, and categorizing the information collected in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014, pp. 194–204). Here's what that looked like for our project: Starting with one transcript, we discussed each conversational turn, reflecting on what the interviewee was saying (and not saying) and trying to articulate the underlying logic of the communication. We then repeated that process with the second transcript, but this time, we also took note of phrases, ideas, images, and "logics" that seemed similar across the two interviews. We treated those points of similarity as preliminary codes, and we began keeping a list of them. We continued on in this way until we had reviewed approximately half the interviews. By that point, we had generated a list of around 40 codes that seemed significant and that were found in multiple interviews. We created a chart that grouped those codes together under several thematic headings.

At that point, we began reading and coding the transcripts separately, with each of us individually adding codes to each transcript. We then met to compare our codes and to discuss any places our codes differed. We revised the provisional code list and clarified the larger thematic headings several times to reflect the new understandings that were emerging. In the end, we had identified several overarching themes that appeared in all the interviews, as well as three critical tensions that speak to uneasy spots where the common practices of writing centers—however sensible and progressive they seem to us—are poorly aligned with working-class students' needs and expectations.

Findings

Critical Tension #1: "I'm not used to writing his way"

When we listened to our interviewees talk about writing, we were struck by a major mismatched idea about writing that came up in every interview. Initially, we noticed our interviewees spent a lot of time trying to parse "what the professor wants" in terms of writing. But eventually we realized it was not any one of their professors they were concerned about. Instead, it was what "college" wants in terms of writing. Our students believed there was a clear set of expectations for college writing in the form of an essay "structure" that should be used for all college writing assignments.

Of course, this is not true. The expectations for college writing are not unified, and there is no single, correct structure for college writing. But our interviewees' belief in the structure was unshakable, and they described their determined efforts to learn it. They met with professors and tutors, and they scrutinized the comments they got on their essays, but none of this work yielded the clarity they were looking for. What made this especially frustrating was that they believed the professors and tutors knew what the structure was but simply wouldn't or couldn't explain it to them, perhaps because the expected structure was supposed to have been learned in high school. To our interviewees, this withholding felt unfair, like a game that was rigged against them. This is Latisha reflecting on her experiences:

> Some professors, they're willing to cater to students who don't really know what they expect them to know . . . but others feel like, oh, you should just know this from high school. But my high school was different, so what can I do about that?

Of course, many college students, including many privileged students, struggle with understanding the expectations of college writing, which after all are complex and context dependent. But that struggle meant something different for our interviewees because of how it intersected with their experiences before college. Most of the students we interviewed were the most educationally successful members of their families and their high schools. They were recognized by parents and teachers as "the smart one," or, as Sherrod put it, "the family helpdesk." They were the people everyone expected to succeed and everyone turned to for answers. Yet when they came to the university, being the "the smart one" was suddenly no longer an identity they could lay claim to.

Most were not entirely surprised by this turn of events. Indeed, our students were fully aware of the stratification of the education system (although they wouldn't have used that word), and they were well aware their high schools offered a "poor" education. George described his high school as "chaos," saying, "They never really prepared us for college. . . They just followed a curriculum and they taught, taught, taught, but they didn't mold us or sculpt us to be students." In Latisha's vocational high school, the curriculum was "just preparing you to get a job" in a trade like cosmetology or culinary arts. When Latisha announced she wanted to apply to four-year colleges, the school counselors told her, "You're not going to get in."

In a sense, our interviewees came to the university with a powerful orientation toward "imposter syndrome." They had earned As in their high-school classes, but since they didn't believe those classes were as rigorous or academic as the classes in more privileged "college-prep"

high schools, their achievements felt fake. They suspected their academic preparation was deficient, and they were anticipating and bracing for the moment when those deficiencies would be revealed. For Latisha that happened in a journalism class:

> At my high school, I was like a straight A student. And I was like, I don't know how that's going to go in college. And like in my journalism course we got our first paper back and I had like a C, and it was the worst feeling ever. You know, I was like oh, no. This is going to be horrible.

Here is Sandra:

> [In high school] I felt like a minimum of work would really get me through and then—I mean I was like getting As. I was really high in my class. And when I got here I was like "Wait, maybe I'm not as smart as I seem." I obviously felt like . . . in a way I guess I felt like my high school let me down because they didn't prepare me for this.

We heard these stories about trying to learn the "structure" of college writing as stories about mismatched cultural capital. What our students really wanted was to "get" college writing in a fundamental sense—to learn its unstated assumptions and understand what college writers are supposed to be striving for—in order to erase what they perceived as a deficit in their high-school curricula. They assumed this structure would be something tangible—Sherrod compared it to an online car-repair manual—so that is what they looked for. Small wonder then that they didn't find satisfactory answers in the professor's written feedback on their papers nor in their meetings with professors to discuss the assignments. This is Juanita, describing her experiences with one professor:

> Because for me [the professor's] comments weren't completely . . . "This is what's wrong." It was more like comments. It wasn't like "This is why it's wrong." It wasn't like that. And for me, I need to know why it's wrong and how to fix it. So I think that was, for me, difficult. And I did go to his office many times, but . . . the answers I got weren't—like in the moment they were like "Okay, I understand, thank you." But afterward I'm like "I don't understand it. Why is it wrong? How can I make it better?" That's what I didn't know how to make it better. I'm not used to writing in his way. So like another structure that's new . . . it was a little bit difficult for me.

We would like to be able to report that our interviewees had better success in writing centers, but for the most part, this was not the case. Several of our interviewees described how they came to the writing center because they couldn't get clarity from their professors. Sandra told of her frustration with a particular course in which her peers were getting better grades, and she could not see why their work was better. She came to the

writing center because she "wanted [the tutor] to tell [her] exactly what it was that [she] was doing that was so bad." The tutor was not able to resolve the confusion.[6] Other interviewees hoped tutors would be able to give them a clear idea about what kind of text they were supposed to produce—a target to shoot for or some guidance about what they should cover or not cover in their essays. But instead they had encounters that were confusingly unhelpful and in which their direct questions were met with muddled responses. This is Darlene:

> I basically asked [the tutor] for structure . . . like how should I structure my paper so I have enough to write about to fill out 20 pages. And it was a little bit of "Oh, well, what can you think of?" And they were really pushing me to think about what I should write about and I'm like "Well, that's why I came here! So maybe you can like guide me further. And give me a little hints or clues about what I can write."

We imagine Darlene's tutor was hesitant about offering direct guidance because she was not familiar with the course or the content Darlene was writing about. We are used to seeing this as a normal scenario. Tutors don't necessarily have knowledge of the content, readings, disciplines, or genres the student is working with nor of the idiosyncratic preferences of an instructor because we assume the student writer will bring that knowledge to the session. But what seems "normal" and logical to us seemed risky and problematic to our interviewees. Conventional pedagogy insists they bring their own knowledge to the table at a point at which they consider their own knowledge to be "fake." For students like Darlene, that approach is tantamount to insisting her ignorance must be exposed before she can get any help.

Our interviewees consider generalist tutors to be a distinct weakness of the writing center. They had no doubt the center would be more effective if the tutors "knew what the professor wanted," or at least knew particular subject areas. Our reliance on generalist tutors also led our interviewees to interpret the writing center as a space for grammar correction. Here is how Juanita explained it:

> For example, the psychology paper . . . most of the [writing tutors] I had weren't psychology majors, so . . . they didn't know the professor. Like they didn't take the classes, per se. So it wasn't like they knew how to help me in some way. But they knew how to fix the

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6 This might or might not have something to do with our tutors' class identities and consciousness. Our research design did not allow us to explore the effect of influence of tutors' class backgrounds on writing center sessions, but we think that would be a fruitful topic for future research.

grammar and things like that.

As we will explain in the next section, seeing the writing center as a grammar-correction space was not a bad thing for our interviewees. In fact, quite the opposite. But what is important to note here is that our mismatched ideas about writing and expertise led students to interpret our role in ways that directly contrast with our intentions.

Our interviewees described some highly satisfying experiences with writing instruction, but these mostly occurred separate from either their instructors or the writing center. For example, here is Sandra talking about an in-class peer-review exercise:

> It was helpful. The person wasn't like just being nice. He was like, "Seriously, this is a problem. You have to fix this." So key! And he said that if I needed to come back to him that he gave me his information if I needed to have him read another edition of it.

And here is Latisha talking about the process of getting writing help from a friend:

> It was very fun! She just took [my paper]. And she's like, "Don't talk to me. Let me just edit everything." So she edit, edit, edit. And I was like, "Great, thank you."

Whatever one might think of these interactions from a pedagogical perspective, what we heard in them was our interviewees' delight and relief at encountering someone who would lean in and help them. Our interviewees longed for a person who would fully engage with them and who would work with them all the way through their writing processes. They wanted help that was both generous and tangible, and they wanted to learn from an expert who could guide them confidently.

Critical Tension #2: "Relax. You're fine. It's not even that bad."

Most of our interviewees believed their own grammar was bad—in fact, not just bad but truly awful—and getting help with grammar was an important concern for them. Our interviewees used the term *grammar* in a nontechnical sense to mean anything that can happen at the sentence level, from subject-verb agreement to wordiness to word choice. We follow their sense of the term here. In the interviews, they described their efforts to fix their grammar problems. It seemed clear to us that their concerns about grammar were driven in part by their intersectional identities. Most of our interviewees were people of color, and many grew up in homes where languages other than English predominated. Isabella connected her "bad grammar" with the fact that she bounced between Spanish-language instruction in Puerto Rico and English-language instruction in the United States throughout her primary and secondary schooling. Tuyen voiced fears of being "looked down on" for her grammar. She imagined peers in

a peer-review session who would look at her writing and think, "How do you come up with this grammar?" These stories were tinged with awareness that grammar speaks about identity and educational background.

It also seemed clear to us that our interviewees' fears about grammar were connected with the imposter syndrome. They believed writing sentences that "sounded right" was an essential requirement for being accepted at the university, so their own poor sentences loomed as a fatal flaw—definitive evidence they really didn't belong at the university. Not surprisingly, they were intensely anxious about revealing just how poor their grammar was, particularly when they first arrived at the university. George said,

> When I was a freshman, I was embarrassed of my work, I was so embarrassed, you know. Oh, is this person going to think that I'm stupid? That's the first thing that went through my mind.

Talking about his plans for the future, George articulated the bigger consequences he feared would be attached to poor grammar:

> My big dream is to be a sports agent . . . but my problem is I'm not strong at writing so I wouldn't be able to . . . write any deals. So there was like a barrier almost where if I don't learn how to write, I have no point of even trying. . . . So, I would like to have this one key thing that I really need.

As we noted earlier, our interviewees believed writing center tutors had the expertise to help them with grammar, so many of them went to the writing center for help with grammar. For the most part, these grammar sessions seemed to have helped. Isabella described how the tutors helped her "put everything in a way that was understandable." George talked about how the tutors helped him "catch everything" that was wrong. But it was Latisha's lengthy descriptions of her struggles with grammar that really helped us understand the dynamic at work in these tutoring sessions. We asked her to tell us about a "satisfying" experience she had with writing, and this is the story she told:

> I don't remember the assignment but I was like really freaking out over it, and I just felt like my grammar was like really bad. And the Writing Assistant, it took us like ten minutes to read my paper, and it was like three pages long. And he was like "Nothing's wrong. Like your grammar is fine. Great organization. Relax. You're fine. It's not even that bad."

If we take this description at face value, then Latisha's three-page paper did not actually change very much in this tutoring session. So what made this such a satisfying experience? We believe it was because Latisha's tutor drew on his own knowledge and expertise to make a clear evaluative statement about her paper. In so doing, he directly answered the real, but

implicit, question she was asking, namely, "Do I belong here?" Note the pronoun in his answer, as she reported it: "Relax. You're fine."

Several of our interviewees described how they gradually over-came their grammar fear. Both George and Latisha explained that their confidence grew as they became more adept at finding and fixing their own errors. They both still asked tutors to review their work, but the tutoring sessions felt different when they were more sure of themselves. George described that difference using the language of control. When he proofread his paper before the tutoring session, he felt he "had the upper hand" in the tutoring session. Latisha described, with obvious pride, how a tutor said, "You're doing my job for me." As they became less anxious, our interviewees also became more open to discussing other (nongram-matical) aspects of writing with their tutors. Here is Maria describing this development:

> I struggle a lot with grammatical errors, actually. I struggle very much with grammar. Not so much with punctuation or spelling but just the grammar itself and how to form a perfect sentence. It's really difficult for me. So having someone who was at least very skilled in grammar. When I was [in the Writing Center], I already knew that I had trouble with grammar, so I told them, "I need you to look at everything grammatically. I don't care about the content right now. Just fix my grammar errors." Then after a while I would say, "okay, this is what the scholarship is about. This is the question they're asking me. Do you think I actually answered the question as best as I could? Is there anything I could strengthen a little more?"

As George noted, this process took time: "It wasn't the one day I went there and they showed me all that. It was over time going there, and going there, and I learned okay, they're not just here to edit my work. They're here to teach me, and you know help me grow as a writer."

Critically, even as their confidence and writerly experience grew, our interviewees did not change their overall view of the importance of grammar. To them, "sounding right" was still an essential requirement for belonging at the university; they just became more confident about their ability to achieve it. This observation led us to interpret their grammar stories as a version of Abraham Maslow's (1943) "hierarchy of needs." When they first arrived at the university, our students were filled with overwhelming fears about being disqualified from the university because of grammar. As Maslow's theory suggests, they needed to address those fears before they could address any other aspect of their papers. In other words, Latisha needed to hear "Nothing's wrong . . . it's not even that bad" before she could really think about anything else. Seen in this way, these stories could be read as an argument for reversing the orthodox

understanding of higher order and lower/later order concerns. When they first arrived at the university, grammar was our interviewees' highest order concern precisely because they were so worried about it. Only later did it become a lower order issue. Did those grammar-focused tutoring sessions substantially improve their papers? Not necessarily, as we saw in Latisha's case. But is our concern for the student or the paper?

Critical Tension #3: "That's on you"

Our interview protocol did not include questions about mentors or mentoring. Nevertheless, all the interviewees told us stories about people who had mentored them. We heard stories about people who helped our students decide to go to college; who helped them choose a major; who helped them get an internship; and who helped them see a future career path they hadn't seen before.

Brandon—our "hick-town" student—got an on-campus job to make some extra money. His boss at that job noticed his enthusiasm and helped him move from a relatively low-level student-worker job to a higher level job with more responsibility. More substantial and interesting to him, that new position seemed likely to open doors after graduation. It was a stepping stone to his first professional job. Similarly, Amanda explained how her college-educated aunt reached out to her when she was in high school to persuade her to apply for college:

> She would talk to me about the value of education, where I could go and what I could do. She would compare a salary of somebody who doesn't have a college education to what I can have. She never really, I don't want to say, put my family down, but she would kind of compare. "Me and Uncle T are here, and your mom and dad . . . you're fine, but . . . they could be in this class[7] if they both went to college." She kind of made it all about money in a sense, but . . . she didn't make it like "You guys are below everybody." She said "You can do so much and I see your potential." She kind of knew that my mom and dad weren't there to pull that out in me.

Not all the mentors we heard about were individuals, and not all were intimately connected to our interviewees. In some cases, the mentoring came through on-campus programs designed to introduce students to new opportunities. For example, Marcus, who was majoring in biology, told us how he got involved in a program that allowed him to earn a teaching credential alongside his biology degree. He had not previously considered teaching as a career, but once in the program he found a love

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7   We interpreted the phrase "they could be in this class," which Amanda attributes to her aunt, to mean "they could be *middle* class."

of teaching and great satisfaction in the idea of "giving back" to younger students.

Part of what made these stories so significant to us was their gravitas. Our students considered these to be important moments in their educational pathways, and they told the stories in vivid detail and with commentary that indicated to us how much they had reflected on them. This detail contrasted sharply with the hazy and indistinct ways they described the writing center. Apart from some highly satisfying grammar sessions, their interactions with the tutors did not register as particularly important to them or worthy of reflection. In fact, we weren't even sure they entirely remembered what happened in their sessions. Moreover, the glowing pleasure of their stories about mentors helped us recognize a fundamental ambivalence in their discussions of the writing center.

For our interviewees, going to the writing center roughly equated to being "good" or "diligent." Getting help from the writing center is what students are *supposed* to do, just like they are supposed to complete all their homework and study for their exams. Toward the end of our interviews, we asked each student what the university could do to better serve students like them, and we were struck by how many of our interviewees rejected the premise of that question. They did not believe it was the university's responsibility to help students—or at least not more than it was already. They agreed the university should make academic support opportunities available, but they felt doing more than that would actually be a disservice to students. As Marcus put it,

> I'd say that [the university] is doing a fine enough job, it's just that students need to take the initiative or take that first step to want to get help. Because [the university] does offer a lot of opportunities for students who are struggling in any subject. But it's all up to the student.

This meant many of our interviewees were quite ready to judge their peers who were less proactive about visiting the writing center. As Anthony said,

> I feel like if you seek help, don't you feel like there is help? Like, if I need tutoring, can't I go to the tutoring center? If I need some help with writing, can't I go to the Writing Center? If I need to speak to someone, isn't there always someone that I can speak to? So, I feel like there are resources there and you just have to lend yourself to them, don't you?. . . It's—it's kind of on you.

Versions of that phrase *it's on you* came up repeatedly and helped us see that our interviewees generally accepted the premise that individual students (not schools, not "society") are responsible for creating their own success. This implicit narrative of individual responsibility—up by the

bootstraps!—is what drove our interviewees to be such good students and what led them to visit the writing center.

But this narrative also led our interviewees to question, and in some cases to explicitly judge, their own family members who had not gone to college. We heard about brothers who never did much homework or who refused to leave their hometowns; we heard about sisters who never gave school any thought, and sisters who thought they could get by without college (until not having a degree became a "predicament.") Thus, even as they took justifiable credit for their own hard work, our interviewees become less able to see the barriers to education that face other working-class students. The narrative of individual responsibility morphed into what Hurst (2010) identifies as the "burden" of academic success—a wedge between our students and the families that nurtured them.

Of course, the gospel of personal responsibility is contradicted by the stories our interviewees told us about mentorship. They all had help in achieving their success, and they both registered and valued that help. But the help they got from their mentors seemed free of the ambivalence and the potential for judgement attached to tutoring. None of our interviewees judged their siblings for not finding a boss who gave them an opportunity, or for not meeting a professor who showed them new career possibilities. Instead, the stories about mentors were narratives of good luck and happy accidents, of welcome help that arrived unbidden. Reading between the lines, we could see the intentionality in what these mentors did—it wasn't entirely an accident that Brandon's boss gave him that chance. Brandon's academic department has developed relationships with people who hire student workers and has a semiformalized system for building on-campus jobs and internships into career development. The boss was on the lookout for students like Brandon, and he was primed to think of the jobs he offered as career stepping stones.

These mentoring relationships helped our interviewees acquire cultural capital. The mentors shared their knowledge of the entry points into academia, of moves that grease the academic wheels once one has become an insider, and of the credentials that open doors in the professions. They also mobilized their networks to make sure our students had access to opportunities. Through all of this, they helped our interviewees find a sense of agency and belonging. In other words, they offered our first-generation, working-class students the kinds of experience and help their more privileged peers have by virtue of growing up in middle-class homes.

Conclusions and Implications: Writing Center Practices Seen through the Eyes of Working-Class Students

Our interviewees helped us see the support they want and need when they come to college. They want writerly support that is direct and authoritative, and they want teachers/tutors who are engaged and willing to go the distance with them. Our students, especially when they are new to the university, want tutors who understand and validate their concerns about grammar and who are willing to help them "sound right." And our interviewees want mentors who can provide generous and proactive support and who don't wait for students to ask for help or expect students to be able to articulate their needs. Along with all this, our interviewees want relief from the stress of feeling like imposters. They want to feel they belong and to feel the university welcomes them and recognizes how hard they are working.

The interviews also showed us the gaps between what our students want and what they found in the writing center. Our students did have some positive experiences in the writing center, particularly in their grammar sessions, but for the most part the help they got was altogether less (less direct, less clear, less authoritative, less engaged) than what they needed. Moreover, their stories revealed the ambivalent nature of writing center help. For our support services to make sense, working-class students must implicitly accept the idea that managing the mismatch between themselves and the university is "on them."

Based on all this, we can imagine some productive changes writing centers could make to better serve students like our interviewees. In the bulleted list below, we outline some practices and programs that would be possible (though not easy) to enact within the common structural frameworks of writing centers. These specific proposals are tentative; we offer them as a way of visualizing the implications of this research, not as fully fleshed-out blueprints for action. In many cases, our proposals echo the findings of previous researchers—inside and outside writing centers—and we have indicated the connections in footnotes.

- To address students' need for more expert tutors, we could consider changing how we talk about tutors' expertise. This change might involve borrowing or adapting some of the features of "course-based" tutoring centers, in which tutors are identified with the subject areas they major in; or it might involve naming the expertise tutors have in ways students

can recognize.[8] (For example, most tutors are experts at getting papers done and at figuring out the expectations of assignments.) But some writing centers might also be able to consider more substantive changes, like adding graduate students, professional tutors, or faculty to our tutoring staffs. (Obviously, these additions would not be possible at many institutions.)

- Our students' biggest concerns about expertise had to do with knowing "what the professor wants," especially in situations in which they didn't understand the form their final paper should take. We could develop pedagogies especially for this situation. Currently, writing center tutors are likely to treat this as a discovery learning (Bruner, 1961) scenario, in which the goal is to lead students to articulate their own ideas. But our interviews, and research in educational psychology (e.g., Mayer, 2004), suggest that this situation calls for a directive approach that allows student writers to see what the final text is supposed to look like.[9]

- Our research also suggests that a single interaction with a tutor is unlikely to be enough when a student needs help generating ideas and making a plan for a paper. (Students may leave their tutoring session with an outline in hand feeling confident, only to find themselves unable to act on the outline later.) Students would be better served by a pedagogy that prioritizes multiple back-and-forth interactions with tutors throughout the drafting process. Offering support in the form of day-long or multiday writing retreats might work. Another possibility might be to offer some students access to a "follow-up channel" through which they could share questions or subsequent drafts with their tutor. Finally, if we suspect students may have trouble enacting the plan they developed in a tutoring session, we could simply reach out to students directly to ask how their paper is progressing.

- We could consider fully owning the role of "grammar expert" students already believe we play. Embracing that role would require us to let go the fear that the status of the writing center

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8   Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz (1993) and Dinitz and Ann Harrington (2014) have advocated reconsidering the generalist tutoring program.

9   This idea finds support in the concept of "worked examples," a term used by cognitive load theorists (Kyun, Kalyuga, & Sweller, 2013; Mayer 2004; Tuovinen & Sweller, 1999).

will take a hit if we are seen as a "fix-it shop."[10] We believe, to the contrary, that owning a role in grammar instruction will help writing centers grow by making us more genuinely student centered. As part of this approach, we would need to explore the full range of grammar-related needs students bring to the writing center, as well as the varied pedagogies required to meet those needs.[11] Grammar anxiety (which commonly manifests as students coming to the writing center to ask for proofreading) is one such need, and we can and should teach ourselves to recognize it and respond productively to it. We could also consider new models (beyond tutoring) for working with students on grammar and proofreading. For example, taking a cue from the kinds of support students organize for themselves, we could sponsor proofreading "co-ops," where students get their papers proofread in exchange for proofreading others' work ("Don't talk to me. Let me just edit everything").

- We could also learn to recognize when impostor syndrome is at work and consider developing programs to address it directly. Recent research has explored "social-psychological interventions" that have shown promising results in helping first-generation college students overcome the feeling of being an impostor.[12] We could adapt such workshops to address writing-specific concerns and either offer them in our centers or sponsor them for the university at large (e.g. as part of first-year orientation programs).

- Finally, as all the previous proposals imply, we could diversify our models of instruction beyond one-on-one tutoring.[13] One-on-one tutoring is a powerful method for working with student writers, but as our interviewees revealed, it comes

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10 We could also rethink our collective contempt for this term. Some of our interviewees, especially Sherrod, used similar language in a very positive sense.

11 Writing centers that serve significant numbers of English-language learners have already begun exploring a variety of grammar pedagogies. TESOL research has much to offer in terms of grammar pedagogy, including pedagogies for managing anxiety.

12 For a summary of the theories behind this approach, see David S. Yeager and Gregory M. Walton (2011); for an accessible summary of the issues in implementing interventions, see Yeager, Walton and Geoffrey L. Cohen (2013); and for a specific intervention that was created with students like our interviewees in mind, see Walton and Cohen (2007).

13 Here we are directly echoing and adding to Jackie Grutsch McKinney's (2013) powerful, nuanced analysis of the role of tutoring in what she calls the "writing center grand narrative" (see pp. 65–80 for the heart of the discussion).

with distinct limitations. Through the scaffolding process of a tutoring session, students reach insights and "aha!" moments, but the model assumes students will be able to remember and recreate those insights on their own, often many hours later. The time-limited nature of tutoring sessions also continually forces us (and our students) to prioritize some aspects of writing over others, which works against developing a balanced understanding of how writers really work. Tutoring also requires students to dedicate energy, organization, attention, and motivation to getting help each time they want it and requires them to know and name the help they need. To serve students like our interviewees, we must develop more varied approaches to providing writerly support, including at least some forms that involve us, rather than students, initiating contact.

All these proposals beg for additional, deeper research into and more extended conversation about what writing center practices and pedagogies could become. At the heart of all these proposals is the goal of recognizing and challenging orthodox writing center practices and beliefs—a continuing legacy from the founding days of writing centers—that remain a strong presence in writing centers. This change begins with the idea of neutral/universal pedagogical practices that serve "all" students. Above all, we want to argue here that the support we provide to students must be differentiated and must reflect and respond to their needs.

We expect some readers will reach this point and say, "We've done that already." The arguments against writing center orthodoxies have been accumulating for a while now, and many writing center directors feel they have "moved past" them. In fact, before we heard what our interviewees had to say, we thought that too. It has been many years since any of us taught nondirective questioning to our tutors, or asked them to read Jeff Brooks or Steve North, or exhorted them to put the pencil down, or used the terms *higher order/lower order concerns* in any way except to poke fun at them. Yet, all the stories we report here happened in our own writing centers. It's as if we swept those pedagogies out the door and they boomeranged right back in again.

Our point is that meaningfully changing how students experience our writing centers will require much more than changing our own beliefs about writing centers. As these interviews show us, students and tutors derive an understanding of what the writing center is supposed to be and do from the implicit logic of our daily practices as much as, or more than, from what we explicitly say to them. The writing center orthodoxies endure because they are linked to the structural "givens" of our writing

centers: our generalist tutors, our timed tutoring sessions, our requirement that students ask for help, and so forth. For writing centers to genuinely serve students like our interviewees, then, we will have to figure out how to change at least some of those "givens."

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Appendix A: Interview Script

Part 1:

- How did you find out about this study? How many credits have you currently completed?

- Tell us about your family. (Query: parents' level of education; parents' profession.) What role does education/higher education play in family's lives? Family from US?)

- What drove your decision to go to college/university? Why did you choose SJU/Urban-Public-Doctoral University/Suburban-Comprehensive-Christian University? What role does college/university play in your future plans? How satisfying has that been?

- Tell us about your typical day or week during a semester. What's your routine like (digging at what they do—studying, class, work)? What process, structures, systems are in place?

Part 2:

- Tell us about a time when you struggled with writing in a class. What happened? What did you do? What do you think it was about? Did you do something new/different in that moment? How usual is that way of responding? Did the writing center play into that moment? How so? What was that like? How did that work out for you?

- Tell us about an especially satisfying writing experience. Why/how? Did the writing center play a role in that?

- What would you say to a friend or a peer about working with the writing center based on either of those experiences?

- So we've been talking about writing that you've experienced and the role the writing center has played in that work. Looking forward, beyond college, what place do you see writing having in your professional/personal life?

Part 3:

- To what extent do you think this university is set up to address the needs of students like you, students who share your

background? What does it do well? What does it need to do better? Differently?

- Let's think about the writing center along those lines too. To what extent is this writing center set up to address your needs, students like you?

- Anything else you want us to know? Think about? (In some interviews, Lori included additional questions in part 2, asking students to reflect explicitly on their experiences in the writing center (separate from their stories about times that were satisfying or a struggle.)

Appendix B

Participant	Institution	Class
Latisha	Suburban–Comprehensive–Christian University	Junior
Juanita	Suburban–Comprehensive–Christian University	Sophomore
Maria	Suburban–Comprehensive–Christian University	Sophomore
George	Suburban–Comprehensive–Christian University	Junior
Oren	Urban–Catholic–Research University	Senior
Quinton	Urban–Catholic–Research University	Senior
Paula	Urban–Catholic–Research University	Senior
Madeline	Urban–Catholic–Research University	Junior
Talisha	Urban–Catholic–Research University	Sophomore
Troy	Urban–Catholic–Research University	Junior
Anthony	Urban–Catholic–Research University	Senior
Darlene	Urban–Catholic–Research University	Junior
Amanda	Urban–Public–Doctoral University	Senior
Sandra	Urban–Public–Doctoral University	Junior
Tuyen	Urban–Public–Doctoral University	Graduate student
Sherrod	Urban–Public–Doctoral University	Junior
Brandon	Urban–Public–Doctoral University	Sophomore
Marcus	Urban–Public–Doctoral University	Sophomore

Sex	Race/Ethnicity	Multilingual	Major
Female	African American	No	Communications
Female	Latino	Yes	Communications
Female	Latino	Yes	Pre-med
Male	Latino	Was not asked/ did not disclose	Political Science
Male	White	No	English
Male	White	Yes	English
Female	White	Yes	Journalism
Female	White	No	Chemistry & Biology
Female	Black	Yes	Government & Politics
Male	South Asian	Was not asked/ Did not disclose	Business
Male	Latino	Yes	Government & Politics
Female	African American	Yes	Accounting
Female	White	No	Speech Pathology
Female	Latino	No	Political Science
Female	Vietnamese	Yes	Pharmacy
Male	African American	No	Computer Science
Male	White	No	Sports & Recreation
Male	African American	No	Biology

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