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Review: Advocating, Building, and Collaborating: A Resource Toolkit to Sustain Secondary School Writing Centers edited by Renee Brown and Stacey Waldrup

Twelve years ago, as a new founder-director of a high school writing center, I was lucky. Geographically lucky. The year I started my center, three other high schools in my district did the same. Those of us directing those centers became a coalition of newbies who were only an email or phone call away when we wondered, “What training activities work best, and in what order?” or “How do I respond to skeptical colleagues?” We shared assignment ideas, troubleshoot problems, and offered congratulatory support when our centers hit milestones or when a school administrator visited the writing center to be tutored on his graduate school paper. This informal network sustained us and inspired us as our fledgling programs grew into more mature, effective versions of themselves. The success of our centers was largely due to these relationships and our sharing of practical and theoretical learning.

Most directors of high school or middle school writing centers (secondary school writing centers, or SSWCs) are not so lucky. Many are lone wolves in a district or region with few if any other knowledgeable colleagues.

Fortunately, *Advocating, Building, and Collaborating: A Resource Toolkit to Sustain Secondary School Writing Centers*, edited by Renee Brown & Stacey Waldrup, current president and vice-president of the International Writing Centers Association's newest affiliate, the Secondary School Writing Centers Association (SSWCA), offers new and experienced directors the same things I gained from my fellow high school writing center colleagues twelve years ago: trustworthy guidance, stories of success and struggle, and practical tools to try. While the primary intended audience is writing center practitioners in the *secondary school* (middle or high school) context, the range of topics has relevance for the larger field—for those in post-secondary institutions as well as those not tied to any academic institution. The toolkit lives up to its name, providing theoretical guidance and practical tools for both starting and sustaining a writing center, and, more than any other I have encountered, this publication welcomes readers in. This inaugural publication of the SSWCA Press is a much-welcomed addition to the limited literature on SSWCs (see, e.g., Farrell, 1989/2012; Kent, 2006, 2017; Fels & Wells, 2011).

The past decade has shown enormous growth in the number of SSWCs and a need for increased scholarship and research from this group. Inspired by the work of previous secondary school writing center director (SSWCD) authors, the content offered in the *Advocating, Building, and Collaborating* toolkit is rooted in directors' real experiences in K–12 schools, rather than in the post-secondary context we find in most writing center scholarship. The toolkit builds on the work of Pamela B. Farrell (1989/2012), Richard Kent (2006; 2017), and Dawn Fels & Jennifer Wells (2011), who were pioneers in writing about SSWCs. While previous work has offered detailed and inspiring descriptions of secondary school writing centers that I certainly valued in my early days as a director, what is unique about this toolkit is that its authors are writing from the SSWCs of *today*, touching on modern topics such as social media, smartphones, memes, Google Forms, and videoconferencing. Also unique is the collaborative way the toolkit was compiled and written. Unlike Kent's book, a single-author work that many of us consider the SSWC "Bible," the toolkit draws from the wisdom and experiences of 22 SSWCDs working in a variety of different contexts. Similarly, Farrell's (1989/2012) and Fels & Wells's (2011) edited collections of SSWC-themed essays were authored by SSWCDs working in different schools and different types of centers, but the essays in those works did not speak to one another to the degree that the *Advocating, Building, and Collaborating* toolkit's chapters do. With the pragmatic through-line of its structure and format, the toolkit combines the strengths of works that came before it—for example, the detailed how-to-start-and-run-a-center guidebook offered by Kent and the theoretical and multiple-author aspects offered by Farrell and Fels & Wells.

Following a preface written by the editors and an introduction written by two former presidents of SSWCA, Kate Hutton & Amber Jensen, the nine chapters of the toolkit and its first appendix cover topics relevant to SSWCs today:

1. the roles of the SSWC director,
2. planning and proposing a center,
3. recruiting and choosing tutors,
4. training tutors,
5. reaching out and promoting the center,
6. collecting data for assessment,
7. planning writing initiatives that involve the whole school,
8. establishing a middle school writing center,
9. partnering with universities
10. establishing peer tutoring centers that encompass all subjects.

Each chapter has a predictable and user-friendly structure that will appeal to busy SSWCDs or school administrators:

1. a title page for the chapter, which includes guiding questions readers should consider in relation to the chapter's topic, a list of included resources, such as sample timelines or mission statements, and the names and institutions of those who contributed the resources;
2. a 3–4 page-long Discussion section, where chapter authors offer overall guidance on the topic based on their own experience running a K–12 center and their knowledge of other centers' approaches; and
3. numerous useful, flexible resources and sample documents to, as stated in Brown & Waldrup's preface, "contextualize, highlight, and share best practices" (p. 6).

Each chapter works as a standalone piece but also includes reference notes to other chapters when relevant. For example, Hutton's chapter, "Tutor Recruitment and Selection," discusses the importance of reaching out to staff and students to generate interest in the program, then directs readers, in a parenthetical note, to the chapter on outreach. These parenthetical notes will be especially helpful to novice SSWCDs who may not yet understand the ways topics such as tutor recruitment and faculty outreach are interrelated.

Writing center work has never been one-size-fits-all. A theme throughout Brown & Waldrup's toolkit is the importance of getting to know one's local context (an adage for writing center practitioners at all levels). The toolkit's chapter authors discuss the ways their own local contexts shaped the missions they established for their centers and what tools they used to facilitate those missions. By offering resources, the toolkit helps to demystify the daily work of running a SSWC and give directors ideas for where to start. Like any good toolkit, it provides a range of different tools, leaving it up to the reader to determine which tool best fits a given context. Tools are introduced with brief explanatory paragraphs, so readers do not just see the "what" but also the "why" behind each resource. In all chapters, the guiding questions and Discussion sections push directors to be intentional about each choice made for a center, from writing a mission statement and recruiting tutors to managing data collection.

Throughout the toolkit, the audience is welcomed into the conversation as a valued member of the tight-knit community of SSWCDs. Because each chapter offers the unique voice of one or two directors and, in some cases, their sense of humor, the experience of reading this text feels like the pleasant lunch discussions at a writing center conference. There is a passionate, unpretentious, empathic tone throughout the work (even when discussing difficult colleagues in the "Outreach and Promotion" chapter!). Community-building is central to the ethos of the toolkit, and perhaps this is both a cause and effect of this toolkit being offered at a discounted price to any SSWCA member. The organization plans to republish the toolkit at regular intervals, and in their Introduction chapter, Hutton & Jensen invite readers to consider submitting resources to the toolkit's next iteration "as a way of contributing to the living, breathing nature of the field of SSWCs and the exciting prospects of its future" (p. 13).

Even as an experienced director, I came away with new insights about SSWC work. Amber Jensen's chapter, "Defining the Work of the Secondary School Writing Center Director," seemed an appropriate opening, offering a compelling and research-based exploration of the various roles a SSWCD must play. Jensen argues for institutional recognition of (and compensation for) the labor involved in these roles. Jensen writes, "If we downplay our roles as directors when negotiating for our centers, we may inadvertently allow our work to remain invisible and, thus, unvalued by school administration, and ultimately unsustainable" (p. 16). This statement is relevant not just for writing center administrators but also for school administrators interested in starting a writing center at their school but unsure where to start. Jensen's piece answers: Start by considering what you are asking the director (who is also probably a full-time teacher at your school) to do, and budget and plan accordingly.

Jeffrey Austin & Christine Modey's chapter, "University Partnerships," will also inspire experienced directors. The authors lay out the mutual benefits for both the secondary and post-secondary institutions involved in such a

partnership, share a variety of models, offer some guiding principles and pitfalls to avoid, and finally describe their own inter-institutional collaboration. These authors argue that collaborations not only improve the work of each writing center but also offer new possibilities for the broader writing center community. This chapter, which even includes a descriptive agenda for a half-day professional development workshop, will be the most relevant to *Writing Center Journal* readers situated in a post-secondary institution. This is also just one of many times throughout the toolkit that it stakes out a scholarly space for SSWC work; the authors recognize the importance of SSWCs being a part of writing center research and scholarship through conference presentations, original research, or partnering with those working in university centers who may have more research experience. Building on the momentum of the toolkit, the SSWCA has launched an open-source, peer-reviewed journal, the *Journal for Peer Tutoring in Secondary Schools*, as a space devoted to these scholarly conversations (see <http://sswca.org/journal>).

I nodded knowingly while reading of pitfalls I learned “the hard way,” and I am excited for the possibilities this toolkit offers for those just starting out in this field. The innovative, low-cost approaches to tutor training, faculty outreach, and middle school-specific contexts made me wish I still directed a center. This text is brimming with ideas I would love to try.

My criticisms of the toolkit are limited to a set of small but notable gaps:

1. Virtual writing centers: The discussion of virtual writing center work was limited to one page with a single resource, probably due to the rarity of SSWCs offering virtual or asynchronous tutoring at the time of the toolkit’s publication. (I know of only a handful of SSWCs that were offering this before the COVID-19 pandemic). However, as evidenced by SSWCA’s summer and fall 2020 digital roundtables focused on moving the writing center online (see <https://sswca.org/events/2020-21-digital-roundtable-series/>) and the many presentations focused on virtual tutoring at the 2021 and 2022 SSWCA Annual Conferences, this topic is now on everyone’s mind; future editions of the toolkit should have no trouble expanding the discussion.
2. Running a center without a tutor training course: Perhaps because the chapters are primarily written by writing center directors whose schools have an associated tutor training course, many of the resources are designed for this context. However, many SSWCs do not have this luxury and instead exist as extracurricular clubs or spin-off projects by chapters of the National English Honor Society; discussion of how a SSWC might train its tutors and keep them accountable and in community with one another, even without a

tutor-training course, would also benefit other small-scale writing centers.

3. All-Subjects peer-tutoring centers (also called learning centers): As noted in the toolkit's Appendix A, in recent years, a growing number of secondary schools associated with SSWCA are "opening or expanding their writing centers into 'peer tutoring centers'" or learning centers (p. 171; see also Goransson, 2022). Sometimes, this decision is determined by school leadership (as was the case for my own center), but, more frequently, anecdotes suggest it is a decision made by the tutors and their director. This is a trend that is also occurring, to some degree, in the post-secondary context, according to Malkiel Choseed (2017). However, the toolkit includes only the brief Appendix A on the topic without resources included, only some guiding questions and Barton's discussion of her own writing center's expansion. Barton shares the reasons she and her tutors shifted the mission and scope of their center and the rebranding and restructuring to make this possible. The editors promise an expanded discussion and resources section for all-subjects centers in future editions, and I hope they will explore potential challenges directors and tutors face when converting a writing center into a learning center, not just the rosy narrative painted in the current edition.
4. Procedures, tutor expertise, and space: There was limited discussion of the sign-up procedures for tutees, namely how different schools approach this by using paper sign-up sheets, online sign-ups, or by accepting only walk-ins, and of how to (or whether to) match tutees with tutors who have relevant expertise for that tutee's assignment or course. This matching process becomes especially complicated for learning centers, where tutors may be expected to have advanced content knowledge to successfully tutor certain subjects. New or prospective directors would also benefit from discussions of the physical location of the center, the layout within the center, and how the tutees are welcomed to the space when they arrive.

These critiques aside, this publication certainly deserves a place in every writing center's collection of resources. More so than any previous work focused on SSWCs, this text offers theoretical and practical knowledge along with concise yet thorough discussions of the decisions a writing center director faces each day, while still trusting readers to design the center that will best serve their own students and their specific institutions. Like an effective writ-

ing tutor, the toolkit offers guidance and options but leaves the pen in readers' hands.

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