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Doing More with Barely Enough: Narratives of an Undergraduate Tutor Researcher and Mentor

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Cover Page Footnote

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Doing More with Barely Enough: Narratives of an Undergraduate Tutor Researcher and Mentor

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ABSTRACT We expand the field's focus on contingent labor to include part-time student employees' experiences in addition to the experiences of part-time and contingent faculty. This article uses autoethnography and diary studies as frameworks for understanding the experiences of undergraduate tutor labor, particularly as it involves undergraduate research. Further, we show how a faculty mentor and writing center director's view of a student tutor's contingency can lead to revised approaches in writing center administration.

Keywords undergraduate research, contingency, part-time labor, student employment

Conferences have a bigger impact than some of the other work [in college]; they bring more prestige to my name.

—Santiago to Andrea, on presenting at writing center conferences

My problem with the job is the never-ending opportunity cost problem of whether or not I should invest more hours tutoring or more hours studying, serving coffee, or resting. It is a real-life problem. What can I do? It is a battle against time, and I only have a little left to accomplish everything my ambitious self wants.

—Santiago to Andrea, on the demands of writing center tutoring

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Santiago's reflections above demonstrate the contradictory nature of writing center work, the tension between the value peer tutoring affords undergraduate tutors and the cost of that labor alongside the life choices undergraduate tutors have to make when deciding how, when, and why to do the work of peer tutoring. The field of writing center studies follows writing studies and composition more broadly in examining contingent labor in terms of adjunct, non-tenure-track faculty. This article expands the field's understanding

of contingency by adding to the visibility of peer tutor labor, a category of work within educational institutions that is often buried beneath narratives of student success.

Higher education understands writing tutoring as a crucial part of institutional retention efforts (Doman, 2014; Harris, 1995; Okoye et al., 2021). Writing center tutoring has also been recognized as a contribution to the pre-professional lives of undergraduate students who work as tutors (Bergmann, 2010; Ervin, 2016; Hughes et al., 2010) and an avenue for

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undergraduate students to contribute to the larger field of writing center studies (Ilanetta & Fitzgerald, 2012). Yet, like much of the good work writing centers perform in the name of student and tutor support, these benefits come at a cost. Tutor labor, while often the center of student support and retention efforts, is nearly exclusively part-time (WCRP, 2021–2022), pairing high-stakes initiatives with diversification efforts and recruitment of students—often those who are underrepresented or marginalized—into low- and moderate-paying jobs.

Research in writing studies most often explores questions of labor as they relate to the contingent status of faculty and administrators. In their recent study of writing center professionals' vexed relationship with contingent labor status, Dawn Fels et al. (2021) present a comprehensive view of the working lives of people employed in writing centers in a range of salaried and hourly configurations. Of their 48 participants, only one identified as a peer tutor. Our article offers a view of one peer tutor's lived experience of contingency and the choices that tutor, co-author Santiago, made throughout one semester of writing center work that involved peer tutoring, undergraduate research, and conference travel. We thereby build upon the work of Fels et al. (2021) and Seth Kahn et al. (2017) by including student labor in our larger field's conversation on contingency in writing programs. While attention to equity and exploitation of adjunct and lecture-line faculty is central to the labor of teachers in higher education, such scholarship overlooks the reality that writing center tutors are the institution's most novice cohort of *teachers*. We use the word *teachers* here to highlight writing tutors' role in supporting—often silently—the mission of composition and rhetoric programs across the country, not to invoke the image of the sage-on-the-stage educator or the banking model of teaching. Writing tutors support the delivery of writing instruction in higher education, and while undergraduates who step into the role of writing center tutor gain work experience, develop relationships with writing faculty and staff, and gain agency through their literacy practices in the writing center

(Williams, 2018), student employment provides institutions with an opportunity to hire the cheapest labor on campus. Santiago's narrative illuminates the reality that his low-wage labor is also being used in the service of teaching writing.

As we push our field's understanding of the politics of writing tutor labor, we must also acknowledge how this labor sits alongside what writing center research *values*. Engaging students in community that also opens doors to conference and research opportunities that may serve to forward students' own academic and preprofessional interests is work that writing center scholars and practitioners stand by, and indeed, in her own research, faculty co-author Andrea has encouraged expanding our field's notion of peer tutor labor to include undergraduate research (Efthymiou & Fallert, 2022). Yet the longer Andrea does this work—and she offers gratitude to Santiago for shedding light on this truth through his narrative here—she understands that this growth comes at a cost. Santiago's narrative, which we frame through the lenses of autoethnography and diary studies, adds to the narratives of contingency in writing studies, offering the lived experience of one undergraduate tutor who works to excel academically while making the most of his undergraduate education. Andrea's reflections, alongside Santiago's, demonstrate how his diary complicates her understanding of the lived experience of one tutor-researcher, and together, we offer our perspectives to illuminate how student labor *is* valuable labor to consider—and hopefully reimagine—in our field.

Methodological Frameworks: Autoethnography and Diary Studies

As co-authoring often goes, we wrote this article separately and together, the act of writing mediated by many hours of conversation on Zoom and in person in the writing center and in the various campus offices that Andrea occupied during a period of transition in her own career. One goal for the writing of this piece was to bring together form and content, to

manifest the ways in which an undergraduate tutor's writing center labor happens, how that labor looks, what is negotiated in its execution, and how it is supported by a faculty mentor. Autoethnography informs Santiago's narrative that follows. His voice complements that of Rebecca Hallman Martini (2021), whose autoethnography reveals how her struggle toward better working conditions as a graduate student writing teacher was intertwined with her mental health and wellness. Like Hallman Martini (2021), Santiago plots a timeline of activity both directly related and ancillary to writing center work, and therefore his memories serve as autoethnographic data points (Jackson & Grutsch McKinney, 2021).

Diary studies offers a complementary methodological framework for representing our data and understanding how we make sense of the parallel experiences of tutor researcher and faculty mentor. In a recent study on undergraduate researchers in writing studies, Kristine Johnson and K. Michael Rigenburg (2002) employ diary studies as a method for understanding how the affective experiences of undergraduate researchers develop rhetorical education and meaningful writing. Their lens is informed by Laura R. Micciche (2017), whose genealogy of composition methodologies pulls together the relevance of places and bodies in our field's conception of collaborative writing. In this way, we are also inspired by Kaidan McNamee and Michelle Miley (2017), whose parallel stories of tutor and administrator represent the way identity, power, and disenfranchisement circulate within and around a writing center.

In what follows, Santiago shares his diary written over the course of the fall 2022 semester. Santiago began collecting his impressions and recounting happenings leading up to his participation at the Naylor Workshop on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies and at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW). Andrea's voice, following Santiago's, is not intended to mediate or control Santiago's narrative in any way; indeed, the diary exists virtually unedited here. Instead, Andrea reads Santiago's diary for the earnestness of his voice, with gratitude for his honesty in offering an uncensored view of the

full experience of working as a part-time student employee who also participates in undergraduate research, labor that exists optionally but distinctly adjacent to writing center work and is work our field often champions as an added value for the tutors we hire.

Narratives of Undergraduate Research and Mentorship in the Writing Center

Santiago's Diary, Part 1: Writing Center Work as One of Many Competing Demands in a Tutor's Life

Tutoring at my writing center has turned out to be more challenging than I anticipated. Since I got the position after taking the required pedagogy class to become a tutor, I've been trying to balance my college classes, my social life, my part-time jobs as a barista and a tutor, and my extracurricular activities within my institution. I regret not being more active at the writing center during the week, but what else can I do? There is only one Santiago to go around. Although I have only been tutoring for one semester, I feel my sessions have been quite successful (or at least the student writers I've helped tell me so). My problem with the job is the never-ending opportunity cost problem of whether I should invest more hours tutoring or more hours studying, serving coffee at my second (or first?) job, or resting. It is a real-life problem. What can I do? It is a battle against time, and I only have a little left to accomplish everything my ambitious self wants.

I've been successful in the writing studies department since I added it as a minor, alongside my economics major, last semester. I was offered a writing tutor position that is quite exclusive and sought-after among all the jobs offered on campus. I was invited to attend the Naylor Workshop and NCPTW to present a research project that started as a mere homework assignment in our tutoring pedagogy course. I've been given opportunities to get my writing out into the world and win prizes, mentions, or scholarships. And most importantly, I was offered the chance to work alongside a

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professor I admire and with whom I am collaborating in making this research article. I am genuinely grateful for the opportunities I've received from the writing studies world. However, my potential as a writing tutor, an active member of the writing studies department, and a research assistant for the director of the writing center has been cut short because of bad timing and destiny's cruel games. I am in the senior year of my undergraduate degree, and the pressure to fulfill the expectations of an overachieving student, a competent barista, a reliable friend, a responsible son, and a fashionable socialite is not helping with my tutoring job and research project in the slightest.

Not only do I have to fit in at least three tutoring sessions per week, find the time to write my autoethnographic fieldwork for *this* article, attend staff meetings and get as involved with the writing studies department as much as I possibly can, but I also have to consider my other subjects, obligations to Honors College, and E-sports club activities, on top of being present for my peers and my community. And I will not lie; it has been getting more and more challenging to maintain a work-life balance when, while at school, I'm also working as an employee. There have been times when I forget that I have a tutoring appointment at the end of a busy day, when all I want to do is go home and take a minute to breathe. It took a lot of work to make the habit of logging on for tutoring sessions on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon after a long, joy-killer shift at my barista job, let alone finding the motivation to do homework and host practice sessions for the E-sports club division I co-manage right after online tutoring. With significant affairs coming up in my senior semesters—midterms, tournaments, events, and student involvement activities—I have plenty of work in my schedule. I also must take into account my work schedule outside the university and prioritize the gig that makes me the breadwinner of my household. As much as I love my job as a tutor at the writing center and all the fantastic conversations I have with other peer tutors, staff members, and student writers, I can only partially rely on this gig to fulfill my monthly expenses. Being a tutor comes with

significant challenges, such as managing the time commitments associated with attending the Naylor Workshop and NCPTW, without getting financially hurt by taking time off from my barista job.

My schedule for the fall 2022 semester is more restrictive than any other schedule from previous years. To make a living from my barista job, go to class, and have enough time for homework and social life, I must begin all the days of the week at 5 a.m. Even though I knew that by becoming a writing center tutor I was overextending myself beyond what I could do in a day given my time restrictions, I wanted to give the position a try and see if I liked it or not. Part of me also wanted to know if I would have the time to do all these things (plus deal with my twenty-first birthday!) and if my young but worn-out body could handle this new, heavier routine. Was I going to make it past Naylor? Or would I give up tutoring to focus my attention on my undergraduate research project with Andrea?

Andrea's Reflection, Part 1: Understanding the Strain of the Extended Work of Writing Center Tutors

When I consider how Santiago enters this conversation, how he invites me into his reflective space of processing his experience of beginning work as a writing center tutor, I feel conflicted about my role in overburdening him. I recognized Santiago's talents—his interest in multilingualism in education, dedication to his own studies, and willingness to engage earnestly with his peers—when he was a student in an honors seminar I taught in fall 2021. I invited him to take the tutoring pedagogy course I would be teaching in spring 2022, thinking, as I do whenever I invite an exceptional student into the course, that tutoring is an excellent opportunity for all undergraduate students, a chance to get paid for doing the good work of supporting student writers, to add an impressive line to their resume that comes with having developed strong interpersonal communication skills, and the possibility of engaging in research and conference experiences. As I often say, the writing center is *my* happy

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place, and I often find myself trying to make it everyone else's, as well.

But Santiago's honesty around the work has complicated my vision. While undergraduate tutors have (I think) been honest with me about the demands on their time, and while (I think) I make a habit of reminding tutors that boundaries around writing center work are necessary and healthy, Santiago's diary has helped me see in greater detail the reality of undergraduate tutor labor. The position of undergraduate writing tutor at our private institution in one of the most expensive regions of our country only recently began earning minimum wage, and while I have spent the better part of my seven years as writing center director at Hofstra advocating for this increase, this progress feels less like a win and more like a consolation prize. Undergraduate students like Santiago, who pay private school tuition while commuting from home and living with family, must work both to compensate financially for a relatively low on-campus wage and to create an on-campus social network that requires extra time taken by commuting and working off-campus. These layers of paid labor and unpaid effort present complicated feelings; I am conflicted about having presented Santiago with *exciting research and conference opportunities* the more I understand all the constraints on his time. I wish I could have better prepared Santiago to face the challenges presented to him, perhaps through structuring writing center shifts to more strategically offer space to prepare for research and conference experiences. While I believe in the value of conference experiences and undergraduate research in writing centers (Efthymiou, 2021), I am beginning to see this labor as simultaneously impactful and exploitative.

Santiago's Diary, Part 2: Writing Center Conferences as Exhaustion

Right before the Naylor workshop, the event that would facilitate my individual and collective research projects with fellow research partners, I encountered problems among my team members. Two of my peer collaborators decided to bail at the last minute and

jeopardize their attendance at the workshop because of their excessive school workload and other personal issues. And although I wanted to sympathize with them, my feelings got the best of me. I was angry and expressed my discomfort to them. Initially, I had no intentions whatsoever of attending the Naylor Workshop because it landed on the milestone weekend of my twenty-first birthday. However, these same peers who wanted to back out from attending had earlier appealed to me and manipulated my sense of pathos cleverly enough to convince me to ditch my family, friends, and work during such a momentous occasion. So, after canceling plans for my birthday ahead of time and letting all my loved ones know that I wasn't available to rejoice with them, these same peer collaborators notified me over text message two days before the Naylor Workshop that they would not attend. After an intervention with Andrea, my teammates decided to stick to the original plan and attend the workshop. Despite not having to go alone to Pennsylvania, I was still furious that going by myself was even remotely possible. It felt as if my peers forgot that I too am a student who also has homework and personal problems. My Naylor Workshop weekend was a stressful race against homework. My professors thought it would be great to assign extensive economics work, a midterm, and a reflective essay on nostalgia—all due the day after we were scheduled to return from the Naylor Workshop.

The weekend of September 30 to October 2, 2022, was an experience I will not forget. I had one chance to make an impact and make a good impression on the night of September 30, during the meet-and-greet event upon arrival. I took advantage of every opportunity to discuss my research project and why I cared so much about multiculturalism in the writing center. After a delightful dinner, some conversations among peers, and opening remarks and the keynote, the floor was open to us students, brave people who wanted the spotlight but were new to the space. Without delay, yet with unavoidable nervousness, my teammates and I pitched our project to our new community of scholars and mentors. After the tutor-mentor meet-and-greet, I left with a

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small notebook (that would become my little tutor diary for the rest of the semester) and an overwhelming feeling of self-confidence and excitement—a strange serenity.

September 30, 2022

I was baffled by the group of young scholars (and other not-so-young scholars) that showed up for the workshop. I was curious as to how the weekend would evolve from tonight's meet-and-greet dinner party to the things Andrea told me about it. She said that we would go to York College of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Engagement and work with tutors and advisors nonstop until we had a solid research project draft. How scary! The workshop facilitators organized groups, and I was paired with a mentor, my research team from my university, and student-scholars from other universities. As I approached my designated table and joined my teammates and our larger group, unfamiliar faces greeted me with curiosity and enthusiasm. My teammates gave the young scholars from universities across the country and the mentor assigned to us sitting at our table a quick introduction to their parts of the project, yet I was kind of left out of their picture and they referred to my part as the "project's introduction." However, I noticed how there was already a sense of interest from people at my table about our project, mainly about me and my mysterious introduction. I took it upon myself to make my part of the project stand out and be more than just an entry point for my teammates' parts; funnily enough, I noticed how the mentor and folks sitting at my table looked at me whenever I spoke about my endeavors and my research project. I sensed interest, curiosity, and eagerness for me to keep talking. It felt nice.

We were given a chance to briefly introduce our projects in front of all workshop attendees. Of course, I took the opportunity to go in front of everybody and show them my conviction in my research and my passion for my identity. I gave an excellent first impression of myself, and everyone at the workshop knew my name by the night's end!

I still had issues with my teammates, our relationship was growing colder, and I was more than ready to disband the group and

work independently. We hung out for a bit, and I was introduced to my roommate. Let's say that I was not too fond of him.

I cut the hangout short and went back to my room to work on the homework I had left to do. I had worked a little on the train on the way to the workshop but couldn't finish it all. I was too tired to think about my nostalgia essay that was due upon return, and I was still weary of working on it for too long after hanging out with my team, so I chose to be happy and went to sleep after writing a paragraph.

The following day was nothing but a blurry haze. It was my twenty-first birthday, but also the most important day on the Naylor schedule. We woke up early and began working on our presentations and research projects with the help of peers and mentors. I was constantly stressed because I not only had to pay attention and participate in the workshops and group sessions that were scheduled throughout the day, but I also had to answer the phone constantly and walk in and out to say thanks to anyone who called me to congratulate me on such a special occasion. There was still some tension between my teammates and me, and we all collectively and silently agreed to part ways and work independently on our parts of the research project (or more like my other two teammates worked together, and I worked by myself).

As the day went by, the word spread among all workshop attendees, and birthday wishes and congratulations flew left and right. I felt unique, recognized, and seen. Ironically, my teammates didn't wish me a happy birthday. These experiences will serve me right in the future.

I saw how one of my teammates broke down in tears because they were overwhelmed with their homework, and even though I tried to feel empathy, I couldn't. However, as I saw their frustration and stress stemming from being at this workshop instead of being home doing their homework peacefully, I couldn't help but wonder: will all this be worth it?

October 1, 2022

So my teammate broke into tears as they struggled to do their homework and balance the activities that the Naylor Workshop had

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planned for us. They probably didn't have any extensions on their deadline for their homework, or perhaps they didn't ask for any, anticipating that these activities wouldn't take all day. Or their professors didn't give them any help or resources to balance the workload for this busy weekend away from home. What do I know? The only thing is that they're trying their best.

How is this worth it for us? I am not struggling with my homework now, but I was last week as I was trying to catch up with my assignments so I could have a more peaceful experience here at the workshop. Was coming here worth it for all of us? Is it worth all the stress?

After the main events and leaving for a museum night, I returned to the hotel room exhausted and burned out from everything I had to do. I couldn't wait to return home and be with my friends and family. I was glad that the Naylor Workshop was almost over.

On our last day at the workshop, we dedicated ourselves to putting together a poster showcasing our work during the weekend. I, of course, made my own poster with my new research project: "Mavericks and the Writing Center," a project I would eventually present at NCPTW 2022 that would identify the lack of multiculturalism in the writing center and how a space that considers itself radical is conservative in many ways. My presentation focused on my concerns about the lack of multicultural, ethnically diverse tutors in the writing center and how this affects the number of non-native English-speaking and culturally diverse students entering the writing center. It was a complete success! I received many good comments on my presentation, referrals to other writing centers and their directors from across the country, and suggestions on how to carry on with my research (if I get to that stage). I was glad that the event was over, though. I wanted to go home and relax after a long weekend full of activities and headaches.

After returning from Pennsylvania on a lonely train ride, I couldn't stop thinking about how heavy that weekend at the workshop was and wondering if I would make it through the week without skipping class (so I could catch up with the work I missed and upcoming

assignments). Surprisingly, I managed to keep up with my busy schedule without skipping anything or missing a shift at my jobs, but I sure was tired. The remainder of October felt like a never-ending to-do list in preparation for NCPTW, which I was scheduled to attend in Omaha, Nebraska, at the end of the month. My classes, jobs, tutoring, and E-sports practice all felt like chores piling up with no mercy; I wasn't overwhelmed per se, but I sure felt numb for the rest of the month until our time to fly to Omaha.

The biggest event on my calendar came like a chilly breeze—unannounced and breathtaking. I was not ready, and the universe was not kind to me either. A few days before the big day, I went on a date with one of my best friends since we had not seen each other much after summer because of how busy our semesters were and how complicated life was. We were catching up and eating some hotpot at a nice place I discovered with some friends of mine during my summer adventures when suddenly I felt dizziness and raspiness in my throat. "Nothing to worry about," I told my delusional self as we drove back to my house; I kept telling my friend how nervous I was about presenting to a bunch of scholars and how I had no idea what to wear during the event instead of thinking about potentially getting sick right before the event. I ignored my discomfort for the rest of the night and blamed my uneasiness on the food I had eaten, yet I woke up completely voiceless the following day. I am so lucky, aren't I?

October 27, 2022

I did everything I could to get my voice back before my presentation on October 28. I chugged tea and honey, bathed in eucalyptus, popped cough drops as if they were candy, and had my mother do the "Sana, Sana, Colita de Rana" with some Vicks VapoRub for two nights straight so I could go and say my silly little smart words at the conference. I was silently panicking as the Thursday before the big day rolled by, and it was time to gather with my professor and teammates at the airport. I wasn't planning on missing such an event. I spent my entire October organizing everything and working hard so I wasn't going to

skip NCPTW just because I had a little cold. I looked rough, and it showed. I was greeted by Andrea with a warm “Hello,” followed by “Oh gosh, are you okay?” Did I look okay? Of course not, but there I was, regardless. That Thursday night was enjoyable and memorable. We all went to a board game bar near the hotel we were staying at and had a meal together. I shared a drink with those of us who could legally drink and laughed about my misfortune. It was a nice bonding night.

We returned to our rooms and rehearsed our presentations for the next day. We were all nervous about presenting and could barely sleep. We practiced our presentation timing, wrote notes, and even reworked our slides. I helped a friend pick her outfit and lent her my pearl necklace, one of the three lucky charms I brought to give me confidence while my voice was still gone and my throat was on fire. We went to sleep at almost 3 a.m.

October 28, 2022

The morning came, and we all headed out to see the day’s first presentation; my friends were amazing and received tons of good feedback on their projects, and I was so happy to see them thrive.

Since we had missed the prior day’s award ceremony because we were on our flight from New York to Omaha, I did not receive my “Emerging Scholar Award” for my proposal in front of a captive audience (as I had hoped). Still, I received my award privately and happily participated in a silly photoshoot of the Hofstra NCPTW gang. The afternoon rolled by, I ugly-choked on bubble tea (almost facing death by tapioca boba), and my voice was still gone. I could barely speak, but I had no other choice. No Ricola or Dayquil could save my throat. I presented my research project that I had worked on for months to a diverse audience, and we concluded our panel with engaging conversation. Despite my feeling sick, pushing my voice to the limits, and finishing the performance sounding like a ghoul, we succeeded!

My friend and I had an invitation to join a professor in her panel held the following day and talk about our concerns regarding diversity and multiculturalism. Unfortunately, we had planned to return home the morning

after our presentations, so we missed that opportunity and more networking with other students and writing center colleagues. I won’t lie. I was bummed that we missed such a great opportunity. However, I was also relieved that NCPTW was finally over. No more stress, no more rushing.

The opportunity-cost war was far from being over. I was done with my conferences, workshops, and all the other things that wore on me for the first three months of my semester. However, my next battle was against the undergraduate research project I was supposed to work on since the very beginning of the semester. I had no idea how to put together all my experience and hazy memories from the last three months. I had my field notes from Naylor, my pictures from NCPTW, and the task of creating a poster plus a short PowerPoint presentation for our Honors College Undergraduate Research Day in mid-December. How can I measure the value of all these opportunities quantitatively? I certainly valued the time I spent preparing for these events. I met amazing people along the way and learned a lot from them. I had my moment to shine, and the limelight was on me throughout the semester to the point that I blinded myself for a bit and lost track of other important life matters. I must admit that some of the reason for my downfall after my graceful ascent in the writing studies and tutoring scene is that I used my involvement at the tutoring center, the writing studies department, and my active participation with clubs and the Hofstra community to neglect my crumbling love life and my unstable social life. Thanksgiving swiftly came by, and for once, I had a moment to breathe from the pressures of both school and work. My aching heart was desperate to find answers to its troubles as my brain constantly drilled thoughts dripping with loneliness and despair. A 24-page handwritten letter to the perpetrator of my heartaches was the best thing I could come up with.

Finals week was right around the corner, and my time was running short. I finally found the inspiration to create the slides and speech for undergraduate research day, and Andrea helped me create a poster for a session before the big presentation in front of the

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provost and deans of Honors College. I put the finishing touches on the slides during “Coffee, Cookies and Cramming,” our late-night writing center event hosted at the end of the semester to help any student with last-minute assignments, tutoring as many student writers as I could. I didn’t have to participate in this event. Still, since it was my last fall semester, I opted to cram as many events and activities as possible to compensate for the fact that I lost an entire college year (and the social experiences and memories that come along with it) because of the pandemic. It was a fun night. I genuinely enjoy tutoring and being surrounded by all these people.

Andrea’s Reflection, Part 2: When the Mentor Questions the Sustainability of the Model She Built

In many ways, the fall 2022 semester looked refreshingly like the semesters before COVID, a time we thought was lost forever. In the writing center I direct, tutors attended two conferences where they shared their ideas and built relationships. This work, while it has always been tiring, struck me differently this time around, though, as I had the pleasure of Santiago’s diary to offer me a more informed understanding of the daily reality this work was for him. Indeed, had each tutor who traveled to a workshop or conference this semester written a diary of their experiences, I have no doubt this picture would be even more robust.

Tutor labor, particularly when layered with the high-impact practice of undergraduate research that writing centers offer, is affective labor (Johnson & Rifenburg, 2022). I was happy to see Santiago write enthusiastically about sharing his research interests and developing a study design, but I was also struck by the understandable emotional energy he spent navigating relationships with his peer collaborators. The energy necessary to do this affective work is an emotional cost that is interrelated with the material costs of Santiago’s work-life. The time he spent preparing and presenting at conferences in the fall was time he could have chosen to work for additional pay—either at the writing center or in

his higher-paying off-campus barista job—do homework, participate in extracurricular activities, spend time with family and friends, or do nothing at all. Yet he made the choice to do the work of undergraduate research in the writing center, a choice that can come at the expense of household income, personal relationships, and health.

Santiago’s voice—both the literal, aural voice that he lost leading up to NCPTW and his written voice here—makes me question the place of undergraduate research in our writing center’s mission, doubting the confidence I once had in this opportunity I have pushed students toward for so long. From Santiago’s diary, I see that his work tutoring students in our writing center is peripheral to his overall experience of the job. While I once viewed the writing center as both a resource for student writers *and* a research space, this past fall semester made me question the sustainability of those efforts when paired. I wonder if I need to shift my focus slightly away from encouraging undergraduate tutors toward research to better support tutors’ work with student writers. More importantly, I’m thinking about how to shift my mentorship model to anticipate the emotional, physical, and economic cost of tutors’ work, while honoring my investment in research mentorship. Working with Santiago has taught me to listen to tutors’ interests and needs more carefully, hearing moments when we can work together to create a healthier workspace, pacing research opportunities to not exceed one conference in a given semester, and rethinking my approach to structuring tutors’ shifts to better balance supporting tutors’ research interests and supporting student writers.

Imagining a Better Model of Tutor–Mentor Labor

Andrea’s Conclusion: Toward a More Sustainable Labor Future

One important condition of Santiago’s labor throughout fall 2022 is compensation. When our institutions of higher education recognize writing centers for their positive contributions

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to retention and student success, they do not simultaneously acknowledge the status of low-wage, part-time student employees. As a new student employee in the fall 2022 semester, Santiago earned three dollars below the state's minimum wage, and his wages increased to minimum wage after one semester on the job. To compensate Santiago for the additional work he writes about here, he and I applied together and earned a stipend for his work as my undergraduate research assistant for fall 2022. Santiago applied independently and earned an award for his attendance at NCPTW in Omaha. Seeking these funds involves multiple processes of drafting proposals and application essays, respectively, and these were not funding opportunities in which the other tutors who traveled in the fall participated. As a mentor, borrowing Santiago's words from the beginning of this piece, there is only one Andrea to go around, and I struggle to envision a way to financially support more than one student in this way in any given semester.

In this work, we call for imagination—and of course further research—around restructuring labor possibilities for peer tutors and their mentors. One way to better square tutor employment with the reality of student life is to shift institutional resources to incentivize and compensate faculty and student labor around collaboration. If my job *required* me to mentor undergraduate students and support the conference attendance in the same way it requires me to teach, I would have more time to work closely with students in the way I worked with Santiago, as we did in this piece. For example, additional release time to mentor undergraduate research could make this work more sustainable. Further, creating a separate operation line in our center's budget or advocating for a stipend for student-faculty collaborations that clearly compensates *both parties* for their time preparing for conferences and conducting research would help administrators and tutors alike separate this work from time tutoring in and directing the writing center.

Likewise, if Santiago had space in his curriculum that compelled him to do undergraduate research, he and his peer collaborators would not have felt as pulled between their traditional

academic responsibilities—like homework and midterms—and their research interests, interests that we know lead to meaningful writing (Eodice et al., 2017). Martha Diede et al. (2022) explore this imbalance between teaching and scholarly labor in their recent article in *Inside Higher Ed*, highlighting our postpandemic revelation that “aligning work expectations with what truly motivates employees is key to helping avoid burnout.” It stands to reason that such a shift in expectations toward motivating students and faculty alike might have further effects on retention of both students *and* faculty, who are increasingly leaving higher education in a postpandemic world where labor is being reimagined on a large scale. So while we still value undergraduate research as part of tutor and mentor labor, we hope our work here can offer one step toward a more sustainable model for this labor.

Santiago's Conclusion: Advocating for Student Workers

I am incredibly proud of my work during the fall semester for the writing center and as an undergraduate research assistant for Andrea. As I've told her in our many meetings and Zoom sessions, the fall 2022 semester was the best semester I experienced in the four years of my undergraduate career. It was the semester when I was nurtured and encouraged to grow the most by faculty and peers alike, and it made me feel that there was more to being a college student than just mindlessly going to class and ensuring I passed with straight A's. However, when I look back at how the institution reimbursed my labor, considering the hardships and sacrifices of producing my two research projects in one semester, I am infuriated that the university could use me and my work as misleading examples of how fruitful and easy being an undergraduate research assistant and tutor can be and how “well” this work is funded. Not everybody can handle pressure as I can; I admit I am a little bit of a statistical outlier in this research project since I enjoy biting off more than I can chew, but I consider it unfair for us undergraduate students to be subjugated to an undergraduate labor situation that barely pays minimum wage and

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coerces students into loading themselves with as many activities and extracurricular opportunities as possible to stand out in the crowd.

While conversing and writing about these issues with Andrea, I have decided to undertake an honors thesis for the Honors College at my institution, seeing this as the perfect chance to further explore labor inequities and think of alternatives moving forward. I believe that undergraduate labor is, in fact, exploitative—as are many minimum wage jobs in the retail and service industry. Still, there is an extra punch to the gut with undergraduate labor: Institutions of higher education get away with offering less than the minimum wage without benefits to employees, like health or paid sick time, while expecting employees to give 110%. This is a harsh reality for any college student who is removed from the security of middle-class living in this late-stage capitalist America.

If we want to improve the current situation that most peer tutors and undergraduate student workers face, we need to understand the needs of these workers and how this labor, aside from enriching a student's experience as a high-impact practice, should offer a source of income that would allow a student to better balance school and work. Back in 2021, Andrea framed tutoring as an opportunity "that would look really good on [my] resume." As a non-native English-speaking student who would tutor native English speakers in their own language, tutoring added further prestige to my abilities and career preparation. Back in 2021, I didn't think about tutoring for the money; I did it because it enhances my resume, and the gig would be just a little money on the side. But now that I am deeply aware of the wage and labor inequities, knowing that some of my peers have this job as their only source of income, I feel the need to advocate for revisions to the system that exploits undergraduate labor in the name of student success.

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