

## Writing Tutor Alumni Takeaways: Pros and Cons of Contingency

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# Writing Tutor Alumni Takeaways: Pros and Cons of Contingency

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**Abstract** This essay aims to build upon the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), designed by Bradley Hughes, Paula Gillespie, and Harvey Kail (2010), which focuses on what tutors learn about themselves as writers and students. However, the PWTARP survey, like much of writing center scholarship, focuses on student workers attending PWIs (Predominately White Institutions). To help fill the diversity gap in the existing literature, the current study uses the PWTARP survey as a frame of reference to investigate what tutors learned about themselves as writers and students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Based on feedback from a team of current and former tutors, we added questions that addressed demographics, multilingualism, and worker conditions. We conducted a mixed methods case study and collected data via surveys and focus group interviews with tutor alumni before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2022). Our findings connect with many results of the original PWTARP and other responses about economic vulnerability and the emotional labor of tutoring. Also, our survey produced many useful findings about issues related to being a contingent worker, including economic pressures, emotional labor, and professional development.

**Keywords** writing tutor, tutor alumni, contingency, emotional labor, writing centers

**M**ore studies are needed about the lived experiences of people who make up the majority of workers in our field: tutors. This essay aims to build upon the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), designed by Bradley Hughes, Paula Gillespie, and Harvey Kail (2010). This important survey discusses the skills that tutors develop through their work and how such skills can positively impact their professional and personal lives after college. However, the PWTARP survey, like much of writing center scholarship, focuses on student workers attending PWIs (Predominately White Institutions). To help fill the diversity

gap in the existing literature, the current study uses the PWTARP survey as a frame of reference to investigate what tutors learned about themselves as writers and students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Based on feedback from a team of current and former tutors, we added questions that addressed demographics, multilingualism, and working conditions. We conducted a mixed methods case study and collected data via surveys and focus group interviews with tutor alumni before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2022). Our findings connect with many results of the original PWTARP and other responses about economic vulnerability and the emotional

Hutchinson

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Jiang

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Avalos

labor of tutoring. Also, our survey produced many useful findings about economic, emotional, and professional issues related to being a contingent worker.

In this essay, we will discuss how our tutors articulated economic pressures, emotional labor, and professional development needs. These results suggest that our field needs to give more attention to tutor concerns about wages and the emotional and professional needs of student and part-time tutors. The current study will extend the previous PWTARP findings by examining tutors' development and growth derived from their tutoring at an HSI.

### Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP)

The PWTARP, initiated by Harvey Kail, Paula Gillespie, and Bradley Hughes (2010), was conducted in three U.S. institutions (University of Maine, Marquette University, and University of Wisconsin–Madison). Data from survey responses of 126 alumni tutors via physical mail helped “explore and document what peer tutors take with them from their training and experience” (p. 13). The first PWTARP also helped “better understand the powerful educational experiences of becoming a peer writing tutor in a college or university” (p. 13). The findings included multifaceted growth that the participating alumni tutors perceived having gained in:

- a new relationship with writing
- analytical power
- a listening presence
- skills, values, and abilities vital in their professions
- skills, values, and abilities vital in families and in relationships
- earned confidence in themselves
- a deeper understanding of and commitment to collaborative learning (p. 14)

The inaugural PWTARP and the original survey have been used as references by more WCs, discussed in chronological order below.

### More Institutions' PWTARP

The University of Vermont borrowed the idea of PWTARP and focused on tutoring writing as career development in their surveys (Dinitz & Kiedaisch, 2009). Founded in 1791 as the fifth oldest university in New England (after Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, and Brown), University of Vermont now has over 10,000 students enrolled: 100% of first-year students in themed residential communities, 11% of undergraduates being students of color, and 6% of undergraduates being international students (University of Vermont, n.d.). They collected data from survey responses of 135 alumni tutors in 2007 for analysis. The findings were categorized into four abilities “central to tutoring: 92 respondents (71%) listed interpersonal skills, 76 (58%) various writing skills, 74 (57%) mentoring or teaching skills, and 40 (31%) general thinking skills” (p. 2).

George Mason University, motivated by PWTARP, sent surveys to 63 alumni tutors from the past 10 years in 2009. George Mason University, founded in 1972, now is the largest and most diverse university in Virginia. It has over 37,000 students enrolled, with demographics of 45% White, 16.7% Asian, 12% Hispanic or Latino, 10.5% Black or African American, over 4% others (Data USA, n.d.; George Mason University, n.d.). The participants in the study were asked how their communication and community skills, which they perceived as part of their takeaways from working as peer tutors and writing fellows, were applied to their lives after college: 88% of the respondents asserted that they used the skills they gained and “the overall experience at the writing center in either the hiring process for employment or the application process for graduate school” (George Mason University, 2009, p. 2).

Another northern college, Carleton College, continued the path of PWTARP in 2011. Carleton College, founded in 1866 in Northfield, Minnesota, has an approximate enrollment of 2,000 students, with 32% being identified as people of color and 12% being identified as international (Helgerud, 2022). The surveys were sent to 54 alumni writing consultants and received 41 responses. The surveys had

Hutchinson

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Jiang

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Avalos

questions about how academic and professional lives of alumni writing consultants had been affected by their training and work in and for the writing center. The college posted answers and testimonies on their writing center website (Evertz, 2020). Their growth included oral communication and listening skills, writerly skills (organization, proofreading, editing, revising, rewriting, clarity, topic sentences, explicit points, specific theses, and written communication), argumentation, critical analysis, documentation, peer review, collaboration, and problem solving.

More recently, in 2014 Natalie Virgintino, a former undergraduate writing tutor at Concordia College–New York and doctoral student at St. John’s University, surveyed alumni tutors who graduated between 1995 through 2013. Concordia College–New York, established in 1881, is probably the most diverse college or university having conducted PWTARP. Its diversity in student demographics includes 33% first-generation college students and ethnic diversity—31.1% being White, 23.3% being Hispanic or Latino, 19.6% being Black or African, and 14.2% being international (College Factual, 2020). The findings revealed that “the experiences in the writing center allowed these alumni to develop significant skills including confidence building, collaboration, listening skills, analytical skills, a different relationship with writing and an overall stronger educational experience” (Colleague Contributions PWTARP). The findings also showed the long-term impact of the takeaways in the light of “career choices, graduate school choices and relationships” (Colleague Contributions PWTARP). The findings echo those from the inaugural research.

As the previous examples indicate, PWTARP studies have been conducted in different institutions over the years. Nevertheless, none of the institutions represent historically underrepresented colleges or universities (i.e., HSI or HBCU); nor do they represent the diversity of the student population among U.S. universities and colleges (i.e., first-generation college students, ethnic minorities, or/and low-income students). Inspired by the call of the *Writing Center Journal* special issue, which defines contingency as the worker

identity of the WC field, we add multilingual peer tutors’ voices and perspectives to the existing homogeneity.

## Contingency in WC Literature and Studies

More scholars are examining writing center working conditions, particularly among directors. In *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*, Nicole Caswell et al. (2016) interview nine new directors of writing centers about their working lives and challenges. In “Moving beyond Alright: And the Emotional Toll of This, My Life Matters Too, in the Writing Center Work,” Neisha-Anne Greene (2018) discusses her experience as a writing center director and reflects upon identity and writing center work: “I have never had a job in writing center administration where I wasn’t the first Black woman” (pp. 20–21). She calls upon change in the writing center community to address the needs of writing center directors from underrepresented groups: “Be my accomplice. Take the risk. Give up some of the privilege you hold so dearly so that I can have some” (2018, p. 29). In addition, Dawn Fels et al. (2021) argue in their essay, “Contingent Writing Center Work: Benefits, Risks, and the Need for Equity and Institutional Change,” that our field needs to better address the working conditions in writing centers. Their interviews and research show how contingent work can have a negative effect on people’s lives; however, policies keep such a system in place: “The privileged few create and sustain contingency because contingency keeps their time, salaries, benefits, and jobs safe, stable, and intact” (2021, p. 356). In their 48 surveys of contingent workers, the majority were professional writing tutors or directors, one was a peer tutor, and one was a graduate writing tutor. Their concerns about living wages connect with our interview findings; however, our study focuses more on the working lives of peer tutors (students) at an HSI and the identities of tutors from underrepresented groups in academia. Therefore, we believe our study addresses a significant gap in writing center scholarship: the experiences of tutors as contingent workers.

Hutchinson

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## The Current Study

### Context

Our institution is one of the largest U.S. Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), with 61% of its undergraduates identifying as Hispanic, 15% White Non-Hispanic, 13% Black, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 7% other groups (Florida International University, 2022). The student population includes 22% first-generation in college, 46% Pell eligible, and 30% immigrants. Florida International University (FIU) ranked in the top six in social mobility among national universities in 2018 (EAB Daily Briefing, 2018). Besides its domestic students from diverse linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds, the institution hosts more than 3,500 international students from over 140 countries (Florida International University, n.d.); it is also a commuting university in the sense that 92% students live off campus. The institution's diversity mirrors its local context of Miami, which is one of the most Spanish-speaking metropolitan regions with one of the largest Latinx populations in the U.S. (Brown & Lopez, 2013). It is a multicultural and multilingual hub that more U.S. cities will resemble in the years to come (Carter, 2018). Thus, FIU represents the future of universities in the United States and the skills of its WC tutors in working with multilingual writers can inform other WCs.

The writing center is located on three campuses of the institution with approximately 80 writing tutors and writing assistants. Undergraduate students take a 3-credit tutor preparation course (ENC 3491 or ENC 3492) to work as peer writing tutors or writing assistants at the Center for Excellence in Writing (CEW). In ENC 3491, students study theoretical and practical aspects of one-to-one writing consultations, learning the skills necessary to improve their writing and peer review skills. ENC 3492 is designed for students who will become writing assistants embedded in classes of various disciplines. Both courses are open to students of all majors who intend to improve their own writing or tutoring skills. Although half of students were certain about becoming tutors, many had questions about the idea of becoming a tutor before taking the class (see Figure 1).

Tutor demographics tended to reflect the university's student population well, and the writing center's programs attempted to celebrate a diversity of languages in their center's tutoring practices and beyond (Cui, 2020; Hutchinson & Gillespie, 2016) via deployment of tutors' linguistic multiplicity and transfer (Cui, 2020; Zhao, 2017). Our alumni tutors (see Figure 2) mirrored the university's student racial and ethnic demographics in the following: 44 (65.67%) Hispanic/Latinx, 6 Black or African (8.96%), 12 White (17.91%), 3 Asian or Pacific Islander (4.48%), one other, and one preferred not to answer.

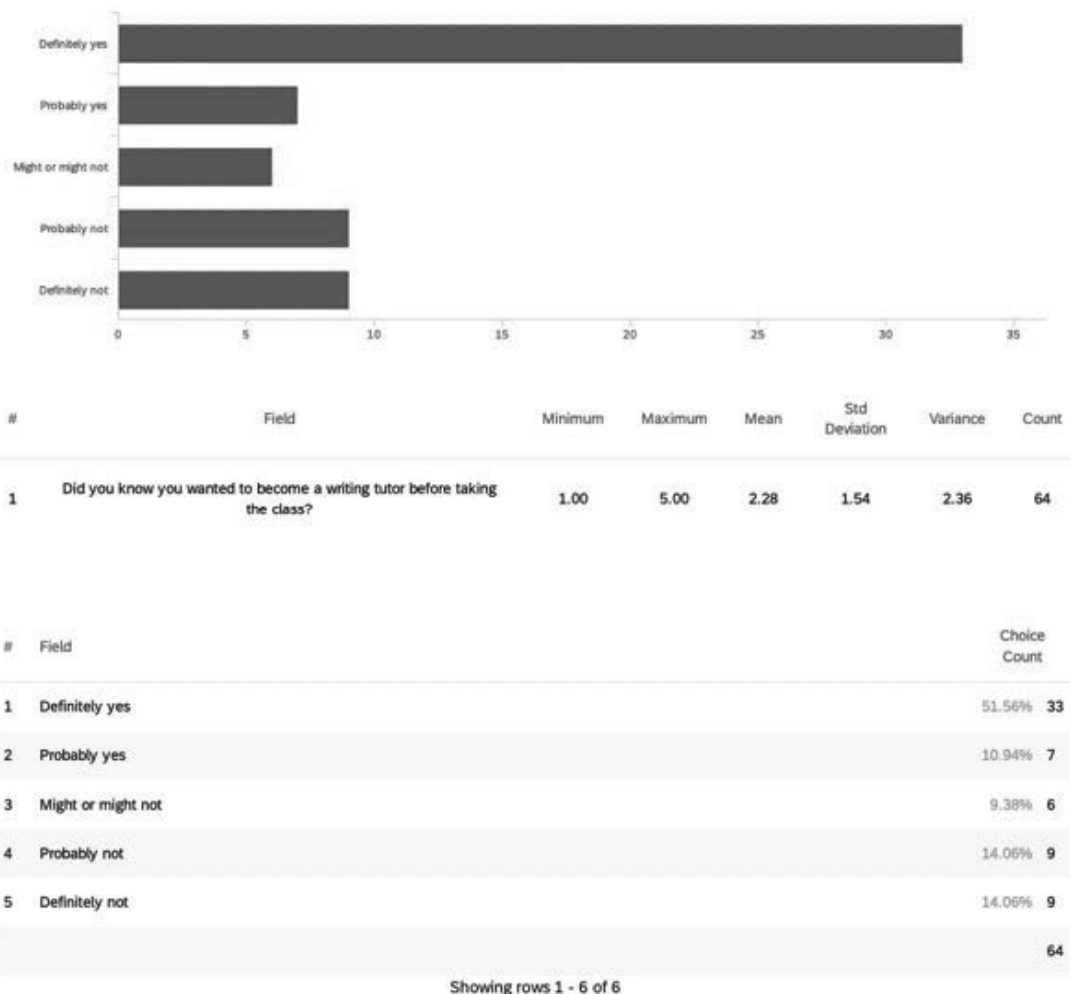
With regard to gender, 18 of the survey respondents identified themselves as he/him, 43 as she/her, and 2 as they/them. In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, the alumni tutors shared diverse linguistic backgrounds (see Figure 3): 63 English, 42 Spanish, 4 French, 2 Portuguese, 1 Urdu, 1 German, 1 American Sign Language, and various levels of Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin. All participants used English for tutoring, half included Spanish, and three individuals also used Arabic, French and Other.

### Temporary Context

The study was conducted after peer tutors graduated and stopped working at the CEW, presumably granting them more freedom to discuss their employment experiences. The data were collected just before and through the COVID-19 pandemic, when in general people experienced financial, health, and social hardships, more pressure, and higher anxiety. That time period was also when living costs increased (i.e., a 40-year high) and so did the unemployment rate. So those keywords around the topic of contingency may be mentioned more often in the collected data of the current study.

### Authors

Glenn is a tenured associate professor, director of the writing center, and a white male. For most of his academic life, he worked in non-tenure-stream positions as an instructor and assistant director of a writing center.



**Figure 1.** Q2: Did you know you wanted to become a writing tutor before taking the class?

Xuan realized the contingency of the WC and herself after taking her role as an assistant director for two years when COVID-19 came and enrollment went down. As a non-native, English-speaking writing instructor and WC administrator, she embraces her positionality of multiplicity and diversity in identities (e.g., multiple languages, an immigrant from Mainland China, low SES upbringing, and femininity) into her teaching and administrative care. Mario was an undergraduate peer tutor and now a graduate tutor. He also works as an adjunct faculty member in the English department. He is a bilingual Miamian of Cuban/Salvadoran descent and his interwoven personal narratives shape how the three of us view and analyze the data and how to redefine the data of this project. In other words, the fluid connections between himself and the collected data as someone between an insider and outsider were vital to this study.

## Methods

### Research Design

We conducted a mixed methods case study with Institutional Review Board (IRB approval #19-0355-AM01). As will be explained in more detail below, we collected data from a survey and focus group interviews. First, we conducted a pilot study by sending the survey to current writing tutors, and based on their feedback, we added questions to the original ones in PWTARP, including the topics of multilingualism and working conditions (see Appendix A). The pilot study, along with input from experienced writing center scholars (including Gillespie as former CEW director) enhanced the validity of our survey and improved its content, layout, and organization. Second, we sent the online survey to alumni tutors working at the CEW (2011–2022) to

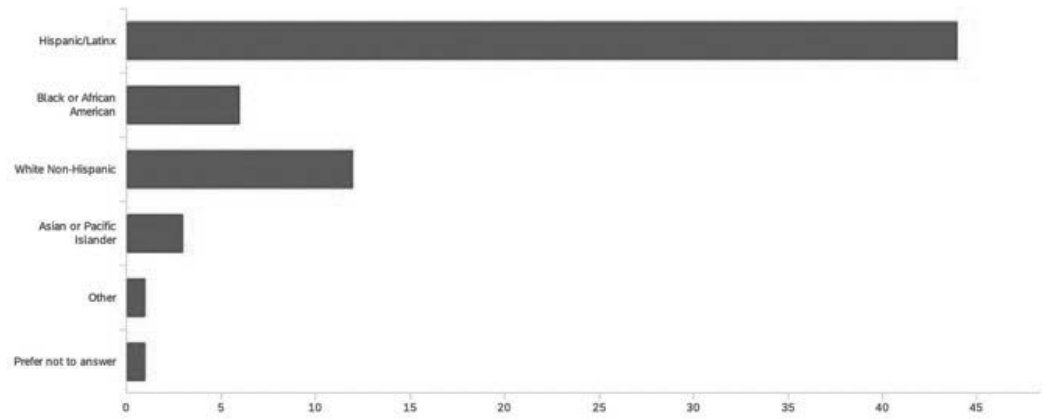
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#	Field	Choice Count
1	Hispanic/Latinx	65.67% 44
2	Black or African American	8.96% 6
3	White Non-Hispanic	17.91% 12
4	Asian or Pacific Islander	4.48% 3
5	Other	1.49% 1
6	Prefer not to answer	1.49% 1

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Figure 2. Q15: Ethnicity.

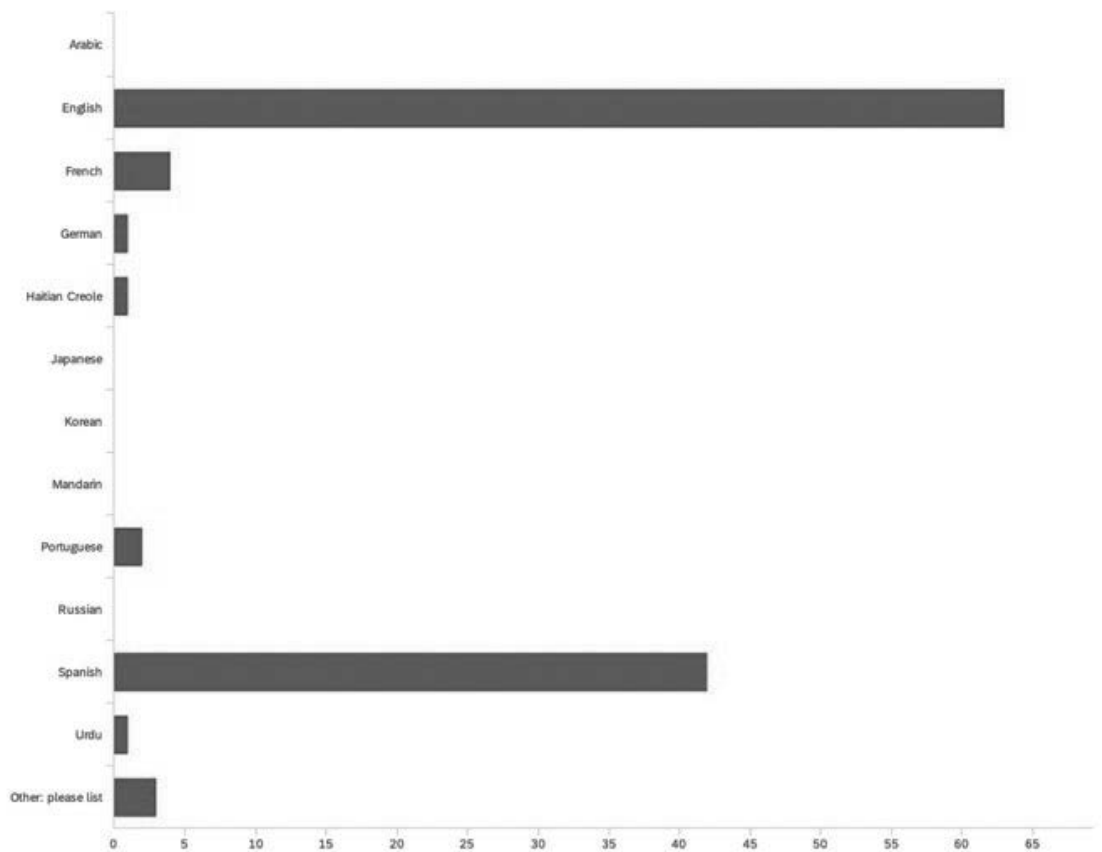


Figure 3. Q17: What languages do you speak?



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collect data via Qualtrics. At the end of the survey, we asked participants to enter their email address if they wanted to be part of a focus group to further explore alumni tutors' perceptions about how their tutoring experiences affect their academic and professional growth and why they perceive that to be so. Those participants' names, if identifiable, were changed into pseudonyms and those unidentifiable ones were kept anonymous, to abide by confidentiality rules prescribed by the IRB.

## Data Collection

We modified the PWTARP survey to address the experiences of alumni tutors at our institution (Hughes et al., 2010). We contextualized the original survey with 23 open-ended and closed-ended questions (in Appendix A). The 14 closed-ended questions were mainly used to collect demographic information at the end of the survey. The nine open-ended questions focused on alumni tutors' experiences and perceptions. We conducted focus group interviews via Zoom and recorded them. There were three small groups of nine interviewees respectively in three sessions, based on their availability. Some of the interview questions (for full information, please see Appendix B) were inspired by the survey responses, as below:

- A majority of people commented that tutoring at the CEW was their primary source of income. Can you comment on balancing work/school/other jobs?
- Did your work as a writing tutor affect your future career/graduate school plans? Please explain.

## Data Analysis

We combined the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data from the Qualtrics survey and qualitative data from focus group interviews. For quantitative data, we extracted the frequency and percentage of choices from Qualtrics analysis to display demographic information. For qualitative data, we used content analysis in a deductive approach (Elo et al., 2014, p. 2). The participants' responses to

the open-ended survey questions and those to the interview questions were coded in relevance to the research questions to create categories and concepts via color highlights (Elo et al., 2014). The coding categories were words and phrases that represented the regularities, patterns, and topics covered by the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), which were conducted by us as researchers respectively and compromised to reach its reliability. We categorized coding to find concepts and patterns and to help answer the research questions. For instance, coding related to pay or salary, academic and professional growth was developed into the theme of economic pressures and professional development. We then threaded the draft with themes.

## Findings Overview

We sent the survey to an email list of 344 students who took one of the tutor training classes and/or worked as a tutor. We received 66 Qualtrics responses, and we then conducted focus group interviews with nine respondents who volunteered by entering their email address at the end of the survey. In addition, Mario has added a narrative about his own experiences as an undergraduate tutor in response to the survey results.

## Findings of Contingency

As we considered contingency "a work status [that] remains dangerously invisible" (Fels et al., 2021, p. 353), we placed responses into three categories for this essay: economic pressures, emotional labor, and professional development. Comments from tutors on these topics have not been explored extensively in writing center scholarship. Therefore, we found the importance of pay, the emotional work of tutoring, and the need for professional development to be key issues that need to be made more visible in writing center studies.

### **Economic Pressures**

As 76% of our tutors in the survey said that their writing center job was their primary



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Jiang

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source of income, we also asked about any problems or drawbacks about the job, and tutors responded:

*It didn't pay terribly well and I lived far, so my bi-weekly paycheck would basically go towards gas and tolls. (anonymous survey response in 2022)*

*The amount of money provided or the work done in the writing center should be more equivalent to the living needs and effort provided by the writing assistants/fellows throughout the semester. (anonymous survey response in 2022)*

*Employee pay is nice but too low for Miami prices. (Ivan's survey response)*

For instance, some alumni had other jobs that seemed even more contingent:

*I didn't have other jobs, except for I wrote for the student newspaper, but that wasn't like a consistent thing. It's more like you get paid every time you write. (Judy's interview response)*

*The amount that you get per hour at the writing center when I was looking at all these other different jobs was higher, if by two or three dollars more. One that felt validating that they were willing to put this price on this job. (Luis's interview response)*

Like many of the alumni surveyed, Mario started working at the center in 2016 as a college student receiving support from scholarships, Pell grants, and living at home. At that time, \$10 per hour wasn't so bad for a part-time job on campus. After all, when he was a full-time student and looking for some extra disposable income to add to the other aforementioned means of getting money as an undergraduate, the \$10 hourly rate was nice. It was certainly more than the minimum wage at the time, which was what his previous job paid. Between financial aid refunds and some small scholarships that granted him some spending money every semester, Mario—like

so many other student tutors—was content with this employment situation.

However, Mario's family fell on some hard times in 2019 when his father was faced with some life-threatening tumors that forced him to stop working his security job and undergo several surgeries that left him in months-long recovery. Mario had just finished his undergraduate degree at the time, but while applying for several full-time positions on campus—none of which ultimately panned out—he worked extra hours in different positions at the center to make some extra money. Between 15 hours of tutoring, another 10 of serving as receptionist, and working under the stipend of a writing assistant that came out to 7.5 hours per week, he was able to work a little over 30 hours per week at \$10 per hour and was able to help support his household a bit during this period of financial uncertainty. Tutor pay, then, made a significant impact on the lives of tutors and their families. In our conclusion, we reflect more on how we reevaluated our pay system at the center.

## Emotional Labor

Many tutors commented that tutoring was the most fulfilling work they had ever done. But as Mario pointed out, it's not always *pastelitos* and butterflies. With the highs that came alongside the successes came the lows of the rigors of academia. Our survey responses noted the emotional labor involved with helping others with their writing, including conversations about the experience of writing in more than one language:

*I started noticing how feelings of vulnerability, how feelings of cultural identity, are coded within what they want to say in our dialogue together. . . . I feel like I've sort of been able to hone in or maybe tune into those different parts of language or speech that people sort of reveal themselves. (Sabastian's interview response)*

Such vulnerability did not stop at the linguistic level; instead, it goes deep into sociocultural and sometimes geopolitical levels. By

Hutchinson

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Jiang—  
Avalos

definition, emotional labor, according to Arlie R. Hochschild (2012), refers to the regulation or management of emotional expressions with others as part of a person's professional work role. This labor factors heavily in a space as intimate as the writing center. The strong ties built between tutors and their students can sometimes serve as double-edged swords. For example, Mario had a recurring student one semester many months ago—we will call her Julieta for the sake of this anecdote. Julieta was pursuing a master's degree at FIU after moving to Miami from Colombia, where she had achieved great success at a prominent university. She relished being back in school, even though she often expressed that it all felt tedious, as she had earned degrees in the same field back in her home country. Still, she liked her program and her professors and was happy to be back in the classroom. Most of the tutoring sessions were easygoing, where she and Mario often code-switched and fine-tuned some of the phrasing and tense shifts throughout her paper. However, a struggle she regularly faced was a palpable exclusion or othering from her classmates, some second- or third-generation immigrants themselves. On this day, Julieta was so distraught by how none of her classmates ever wanted to work with her on group projects that she broke down in tears halfway through the tutoring session with Mario. Nowhere on the job description did it say tutors offer emotional support to students on their worst days, but it's funny how often sessions went that route. Given the openness that comes with writing—especially in the daunting task of writing in an “academic” style and tone—emotions can at times run rampant. The work students share was often personal, and the intimate setting of a one-on-one tutoring session sometimes lent itself to instances of emotional vulnerability. For someone looking in from the outside, this might seem like a burden tutors shouldn't have to bear—and that might be so, but so many tutors were so deeply rooted in the humanities that when the opportunity to show some humanistic tendencies arose, they acted accordingly. Personally, there have been times where the brunt of what was being shared can be a lot to take, but Mario stayed

the course, listened, and ultimately recommended some of the free counseling services on campus. Some of those stories students share stay with him, and they go on to inform how Mario approaches future sessions with students. Sometimes a simple question regarding how things were going in a particular class, how a family member was doing, following up on a big undertaking the student had—it's enough to show them they are being heard and cared about. None of that was part of the job description, but it did amount to be one of the most significant and meaningful parts of the job as peer tutors. Reflecting on all of his years tutoring, Mario feels as though the straight-shot sessions where he and his students went through a text for grammar or citations all coalesce into one, but it has been the sessions where a student offered a part of their story, where they gave him just five minutes of vulnerability and candor that make the job feel so meaningful to him.

The temporal context of the current study also witnessed the main transition of the WC's physical to virtual tutoring, due to COVID-19 and campus closure. Tutors' workload increased intangibly with another layer of technical and virtual management; for instance, Katherina mentioned that “because of the pandemic . . . I feel like it's very hard to get that one on one [with students].” Thinking of tutees' other occupied priorities in the tutoring session, denial or restricted access of technical resources (i.e., no inserted camera or microphone on their computers/laptops, insatiable internet), yield participants' frustration and exhaustion, or as one former tutor, Sabastian, put it, “emotional availability and emotional labor”:

*Sometimes it takes [a lot] to be a tutor, specifically with groups and people who need much more assistance and need much more than you can actually give them in the 45 minutes. Um, that was pretty taxing—the mental toll of actually having to jump into new topics. Every 45 minutes was also very taxing.*

Other alumni tutors' comments highlighted the challenges with the emotional labor required to conduct a session:

Hutchinson

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Jiang—  
Avalos

*Some appointments can be very challenging, and those fifteen minutes between appointments are very useful to refresh and recharge for the next student. But when you love what you are doing, sometimes you forget to protect yourself and your boundaries. (Javier's survey response)*

*Sessions could become emotionally draining. A lack of physical space to compose yourself before another session. (Ivan's survey response)*

*I think I use my skills every single day and it helped me become familiar with different dialects and code switching and code meshing . . . but a lot of the time with the code switching, I would notice that a student was thinking really hard on what to say something, or sometimes they would even say something under their breath in Spanish. And then I would say, do you have a Spanish word for that? Do you want to share it? (Katherina's interview response)*

Seen from both tutor alumni and Mario's self-narrative, peer tutors' emotional labor correlated with student writers' emotions along the writing process in multiple layers—rhetoric, linguistic, cognitive, and metacognitive. According to Im, Shao, and Chen (2020), "Tutors must respond appropriately by being both sensitive and attentive to how the emotions are being expressed by the writer" (p. 206). Tutors are likely to vary in their emotional engagement and labors; some tutors, particularly tutors of color, may have experience and exercise more emotional labors than others (Hynes, 2019). And as Mario and other former tutors explained, there was an added dimension to this emotional labor for multilingual/translingual writers who are facing the pressures of assimilation and a perceived linguistic standard.

### Professional Development

Our surveys and interviews with former tutors also emphasized the need for professional development opportunities (see Figure 4). Tutor alumni discussed the importance of presenting

at a tutoring conference or publishing their own research. In addition, they commented on the anxiety they felt before engaging in such activities and appreciated professional development support. Over half of the participants speak two languages or more, which we view as professional benefits in the tutoring sessions. Among 61 answers regarding their majors, 52 responding participants majored in social sciences and humanities and nine majored in STEM (i.e., biology). With their linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary diversity, these alumni tutors had not only contributed to the WC with diverse student writers but also benefited from their experiences at the WC. In terms of academic growth, 33 (54%) of 61 responding alumni tutors attended or are attending graduate schools in various programs in the United States and abroad.

Parallel to academic advancement, alumni tutors also shared their growth in many walks of professional life: schoolteachers, speech-language pathologists, higher education employees, research/graduate/teaching assistants, scriptwriters, navy officers, managers, librarians, recruiters, copy editors, actors, and in the fields of medicine, law, or research. One alumni tutor, Madeline, spoke highly of their takeaways in their survey response:

*The sheer diversity of the students who came for tutoring was very eye-opening . . . I have gained more insight into different dialects of English, as well as the different phonological combinations that can occur in speakers of other languages when they are speaking English. Practically, this means that I am able to apply this knowledge in making intuitive decisions about how to teach syntactic or semantic constructs to students currently.*

For those who have never published or presented at a research conference, the very idea of doing such work can seem far out of reach. As a student, Mario remembers carrying a sense of imposter syndrome and feeling that his own work didn't seem worthy of sharing with a bigger audience. We don't give ourselves the credit we deserve—that is, until we actually *do the thing*. Mario certainly never

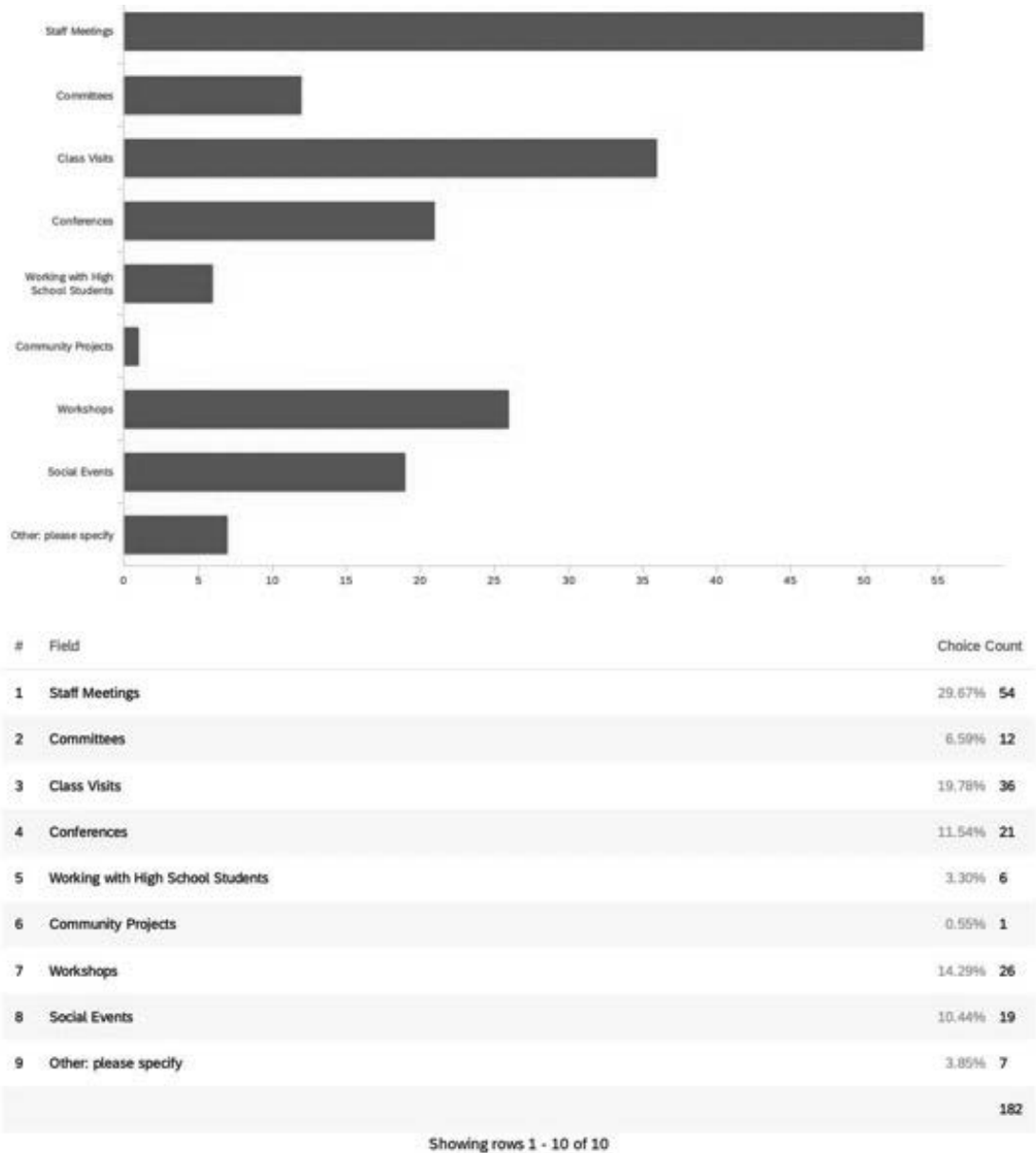


Figure 4. Q6: What forms of tutor development did you participate in?

believed anything he ever wrote was worthy of sharing in the context of a national conference, but after being asked to participate on two different panels for the 2019 iteration of the National Conference on Peer Tutoring and Writing (NCPTW), it became quickly apparent that these conferences were not the hyper-scrutinizing spaces that first-timers fear they are. The funny thing was that in preparation for the NCPTW conference, Mario sought opportunities to get comfortable with presenting and talking about his research in front of people. The writing center’s own staff meetings became a space where those of the staff attending the NCPTW could do mock runs of their presentations and get feedback from

peers and directors. There was comfort in the context of the center.

Mario commented that that was one of the many things Xuan has really excelled at during her time as the assistant director: She constantly pushes all staff members to do something new, to push their limits, to present their research somewhere, to collaborate with her in writing an article to be published. This kind of consistent support and encouragement has led to tangible results for many tutors. So many tutors from this new era after Xuan took over as assistant director can proudly declare they are published scholars and have presented their research, all before ever even applying for graduate programs. Having the

Hutchinson

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Jiang—  
Avalos

concepts of publishing research and attending conferences demystified at such an early stage in one's academic career can be significant in future pursuits. Beyond Mario's own newfound willingness to make efforts to publish and present at conferences, he can pass on the takeaways from his experiences to his own students and continue the cycle of mentorship that he has benefited so much from.

Another tutor, Connie, commented about the importance of such encouragement in a focus group interview:

*The writing center definitely showed me that like I definitely want to pursue teaching and that that was my passion and then I really enjoyed that kind of work, especially like with writing so that encouraged me to pursue like rhetoric and composition in grad school as well as like a career in teaching and education . . . because I really wasn't sure about the opportunities that I had just like as a first-generation student. So, and then also like with the mentorship from you . . . encouraging me about like different types of graduate programs that would interest me in the research I wanted to do and rhetoric and composition. So I kind of felt very ready and very like prepared like for the next chapter.*

Our survey, then, pointed out the importance of professional development opportunities for tutors and the need to encourage them to consider different pursuits in academia and the workplace.

## Conclusion

### Limitations and Significance

We had expected a higher response rate to the survey, but the contextual factors might have had a debilitating effect: outdated email addresses, technical glitches, and more importantly, COVID-19. Accordingly, we had a relatively small sample size for the survey ( $n = 66$ ) and follow-up interviews ( $n = 9$ ). Nevertheless, our survey results provided important feedback from tutors about their experiences as contingent workers, particularly

when considering economic pressures, emotional labor, and professional development needs. Our field, then, needs to give more attention to the experiences of tutors as workers. Our survey had its contextual significance—spatial and temporal, in addition to its demographics of the tutor alumni. We aim to enrich the existing literature by contributing to the WC contingency scholarship the following: (1) the voices about contingency from multilingual tutors as the part of the WC workers nationwide, (2) the practical connotations of contingency in diverse locations in the trying era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Suggestions for Future Studies

More research studies are encouraged to use the PWTARP survey as a frame of reference and to continue to fill the diversity gap in the existing literature. To ensure the highest comfort for current tutors and the richness and authenticity of participants' responses, WCs in different institutions may collaborate and conduct research for each other. It is exciting to know peer tutors' perspectives about contingency and other important topics from WCs in other HSIs, HBCUs, and institutions serving minorities.

### Practical Implications

Our findings highlighted the specific needs of contingent workers in the writing center. As Fels et al. (2021) discuss the need for better salaries for writing center workers, our tutors also emphasize the importance of a living wage. For most of our tutors, working in the writing center was their primary source of income. As a result of this study and the rising costs of living, center directors were able to advocate for an increase last year: Tutor wages have increased 50% for undergraduate tutors. We've also gained some tuition stipends for graduate tutors, but more support is needed for all tutors.

In addition, the responses about professional development showed that writing centers need to make such work a priority. Tutors need support and encouragement to write conference proposals, attend conferences, and publish their research. Centers need other



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professional development opportunities, including the ability to take leadership roles in staff meetings and other initiatives. As tutors learn and develop important skills as they tutor, they also need to explore what professional opportunities are possible for them in academia or other careers. And such conversations are perhaps even more needed in a writing center with tutors from underrepresented groups in academia. As Mario discussed in reference to imposter syndrome, tutors may not recognize how their impressive talents and skills can be used in different careers. Also, it is important to financially support this work with funds for tutor travel to conferences and blocking off time on the schedule to work on such projects. Such professional development should be compensated.

Finally, the responses about the emotional labor of tutoring connected with a growing awareness in our field about the mental stress tutors sometimes experience through their one-on-one sessions. Our surveys also pointed out that such labor often revolved around discussions about language and culture. Most of our staff speak more than one language, and even though our university is in a city where one hears multiple languages spoken, the pressures of assimilation and the concern about a linguistic “standard” create added layers of emotional labor. Our tutor training and professional development must continue to address these concerns, advocate for linguistic justice, and create space and time for tutors to decompress from such sessions. We have encouraged tutors to start conversation circles, for example, in different languages and invite other students to participate. And we also have started connecting our writing center with tutors in other countries, which provided another opportunity to de-center the monolingual mindset and engage in more translingual conversations.

WC administrators need to keep peer tutors’ working conditions in mind regarding break time, pay raises, self-care, professional development to empower contingent workers, space to refill emotions after emotional labors, and so on. Through holistic programming as such, peer tutors will have more assurance about their economic gains and professional growth, as well as more recognition about their

emotional labor. WCs, in this sense, also benefit from peer tutors’ well-being and a healthy system of research, praxis, and pedagogy.

## Acknowledgments

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Avalos

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## Appendix A

### Survey Questions

1. Which tutor training/education class did you take?
  - a. ENC 3491 (or 3990/3994): The Processes of Writing
  - b. ENC 3492: Writing Fellows/Writing Assistant Class
  - c. Other class \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. None of the above
  
2. Did you know you wanted to become a writing tutor before taking the class?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
3. What was your job at the writing center? Please check one or more of the following:
  - a. Undergraduate Tutor
  - b. Graduate Tutor
  - c. Writing Fellow/Assistant
  - d. None of the above
  
4. How long did you tutor in the Writing Center/Writing Fellows/Writing Assistant Program?
  - a. 6 months or less
  - b. 6 months to 1 year
  - c. 1-2 years
  - d. 2-3 years
  - e. More than 3 years
  
5. Please select which language(s) you used as a tutor:  
English, Arabic, Mandarin, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Haitian Creole, Urdu, Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. What forms of tutor development did you participate in (please check all that apply)?
  - regular staff meetings
  - committees
  - class visits
  - regional, national, or international conferences
  - visiting a high school to discuss writing centers
  - working with high school students visiting our writing center
  - engagement with a community project
  - workshops
  - social events
  - other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  - none
  
7. What are the most significant abilities, values, or skills (including your language skills) that you developed in your work as a peer writing tutor? Please list them.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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8. Describe one meaningful example from your work as a tutor that shows one of the above abilities, values, or skills.

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9. Did those abilities, values, or skills (including your language skills) that you developed as a peer tutor seem to be a factor in your choice of job or graduate work? Would you elaborate?

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10. Please rate the importance of your training and/or experience as a tutor in the interviewing or hiring process for future jobs.

5      4      3      2      1  
Very influential                      Not influential

11. In your occupation(s), have you used the qualities you developed as a writing tutor? Please explain.

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12. How would you rank the importance for your occupation of the skills, qualities, or values you developed as a tutor?

5      4      3      2      1  
Highly important                      Unimportant

13. To what extent do you think your own writing has been influenced by your experience as a writing tutor? Please explain.

5      4      3      2      1  
Positive              Neutral              Negative

14. What have you learned from working with the writing of others? For example, how did working with a diversity of students impact you (ex: diverse majors, backgrounds)? Please elaborate or provide an example.

---

15. Did you learn from working with other tutors in the writing center? Please elaborate.

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16. Did being a tutor help you to become a better student?

5      4      3      2      1  
Very significantly                      Not significantly

Please explain your rating. \_\_\_\_\_

17. Were there any problems or drawbacks from being a tutor? Please elaborate.

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**Demographic Information**

1. Ethnicity: Please check all that apply.

- a. Hispanic/Latinx
- b. Black or African American
- c. White Non-Hispanic
- d. Asian or Pacific Islander
- e. Other \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Are you a first-generation college student?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
3. What language(s) do you speak? Please check all that apply.

<input type="checkbox"/> English	<input type="checkbox"/> Portuguese
<input type="checkbox"/> Arabic	<input type="checkbox"/> Russian
<input type="checkbox"/> Mandarin	<input type="checkbox"/> Spanish
<input type="checkbox"/> French	<input type="checkbox"/> Haitian Creole
<input type="checkbox"/> German	<input type="checkbox"/> Urdu
<input type="checkbox"/> Japanese	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Korean	
  
4. What are your preferred pronouns?
  - a. He/him
  - b. She/her
  - c. They/them
  - d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Prefer not to answer
  
5. What was (were) your major(s)? \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. Was your tutoring job a primary source of income when you were working at the writing center?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
7. Please select all campuses where you worked:
  - a. MMC
  - b. BBC
  - c. EC (engineering)
  - d. Online
  
8. Please list your highest degree. Please specify degree(s) and institution(s). If you are currently a graduate student, please specify institution and degree.  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
9. What occupation(s) have you pursued since graduation?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
10. Is there anything else you would like to add about your time in the writing center?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
11. (OPTIONAL) If you are interested in being part of a future focus group of former tutors, please enter your email address here:  
Email address \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time and effort to respond to this survey.

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Questions

The following questions invite focus group participants to expand upon their answers from the Qualtrics survey.

1. Did tutoring students at the CEW affect the way you think about language? Dialects?
2. Discuss what languages you used while you were tutoring.
3. A majority of people commented that tutoring at the CEW was their primary source of income. Can you comment on balancing work/school/other jobs?
4. In your occupation(s), have you used the qualities you developed as a writing tutor? Please explain.
5. Did your work as a writing tutor affect your future career/graduate school plans? Please explain.
6. What have you learned from working with the writing of others? For example, how did working with a diversity of students impact you (ex: diverse majors, backgrounds)?

EXTRA:

7. When did you know you wanted to become a writing tutor?
8. What did you gain from your work as a peer writing tutor?
9. What did you learn from other tutors in the writing center? Please elaborate.
10. Did being a tutor help you to become a better student? Please explain.
11. Were there any problems or drawbacks from being a tutor? Please elaborate.
12. What would have made your writing center experience better?

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