

UWC MONTHLY

A publication of the James Madison University Writing Center

March/April 2013

Going to California: UWC Tutors Attend MAWCA

Six University Writing Center tutors traveled in early April to the annual Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association (MAWCA) conference, held this year at California University of Pennsylvania. For graduate tutors Emiline Buhler, Prabin Lama, and Megan Brenneman, it was a first opportunity to represent JMU and the UWC at an academic conference. For first-semester peer tutors Kellie Waryn, Alice Koganova, and Drew Watt, it was their first opportunity to attend an academic conference.

The goal of MAWCA is to hold conferences and events that further the knowledge and development of the writing center community in order to “provide opportunities for networking and professional development.”

This year’s conference theme—“Writing Centers in 3D”—prompted panelists to consider how people in the writing center community can view tutoring in three dimensions:

theory, practice, and research. Buhler, Lama, and Brenneman’s presentation, titled “Novice and Experienced Tutoring Strategies,” looked closely at the differences and similarities between novice and experienced tutors’ practice. Brenneman explained, “There really is no straightforward way to conduct a tutoring session, as we’ve confirmed through our research, and there are so many ‘dimensions’ to each session.” The presenters used examples from video clips to help their audience consider the multi-dimensional ways tutors can approach tutoring sessions.

By analyzing findings collected from observing tutoring sessions, Buhler, Lama, and Brenneman were able to recognize lessons from the Tutoring Writing course reflected in first-year tutors’ sessions, while more experienced tutors were less structured in their approach. Additionally, Brenneman said, “We recorded what transferrable skills the *(continued on page 6)*

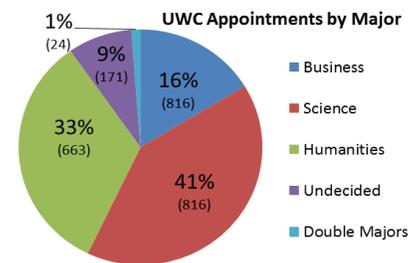
Behind the “Magic Numbers”

The UWC assessment team has worked this semester to mine demographic information from the current dataset, slicing up results by college, by major, by course, and by professor.

One interesting trend is that the UWC had more appointments from science students than from humanities students during the Fall 2012 semester. The team plans to match this data with the *courses* for which students visit the center to assess how much science *content* the UWC sees during tutoring sessions.

In the meantime, kudos to the UWC marketing team: UWC services are reaching diverse student populations.

- Emiline Buhler, graduate tutor



Presenters Megan Brenneman, Emiline Buhler, and Prabin Lama at MAWCA

The Magic Numbers

March

Wilson Hall consultations: 266
Carrier Library consultations: 35
Rose Library consultations: 25
FYI consultations: 15
APC consultations: 2
Total: 343
Workshops total: 3
Students and faculty attending: 100
Link Library visits: 389

I Can Show You the World

The University Writing Center has deepened its effort to serve JMU's growing population of international students by recruiting tutors who are multilingual writers themselves.

The Center currently has two multilingual tutors: Alice Koganova, who grew up learning Russian at home and English in school, and Prabin Lama, whose first language is Nepali. "I do know the difficulties of growing up learning two languages at once," Koganova said, "and I think it would make students much more comfortable knowing that someone can relate to them." Lama, too, recognizes the importance of providing a relatable environment for ELL students. "I think students, when they see me, might be more open or comfortable and less apprehensive because they may look at me as one of them," he said.

Creating diversity within the UWC becomes increasingly important as the diversity across campus grows. Last semester, two peer tutors were cross-trained with English Language Learner Services (ELLS) and now work as ELL specialists. The Tutoring Writing class has also been revamped, adding additional readings, guest speakers, and classroom visits from peer tutors and ELLS specialists who share their experiences tutoring ELL students. The UWC hopes to continue this effort by recruiting additional multilingual tutors.

- Sarah Stacy, ELL specialist



UWC Graduate Assistant Prabin Lama with Sarah Stacy

Photo credit: Caroline Prendergast



Laura Schubert (center), Jared Featherstone, and Kevin Jefferson at the IWCA Collaborative

What Happens in Vegas...

UWC Coordinator Jared Featherstone and faculty writing consultants Laura Schubert and Kevin Jefferson participated in the 2013 International Writing Centers Association Collaborative this March at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

The UWC is a place for interactive tutoring and learning, and so is the IWCA Collaborative. The annual conference's "unconference spirit" eschews an "I read, you listen" format in favor of give-and-take dialogues that afford participants a chance to share and reflect on their local practice.

Featherstone, Schubert, and Jefferson facilitated a round-robin discussion on ways writing centers can identify, understand, and repurpose their assessment efforts. The aim, said Featherstone, was to help participants "make more immediate use of session reports, tutoring observations, and satisfaction surveys to revise daily operations, training, and tutoring practices."

The three faculty members emerged from the day-long collaborative armed with valuable insights. "It's not hard to feel inspired after *any* conference," Jefferson observed, "but the IWCA Collaborative stands out: good things happen when you have a room full of dedicated tutors ready to share their similar experiences and goals."

- Lauren DiRuggiero, peer tutor; and UWC Monthly staff

Everything's Bigger in Texas

The adage holds true for their Capitol Building (bigger than that one they got in DC) and their writing centers. The Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin is one of the country's largest. In honor of its 20th anniversary, the UT center hosted a symposium on "The Future of Writing Centers," and many of the tutors who got their start at UT returned to talk about their work and the challenges they foresee.

One of these alumni was JMU Writing & Communication Specialist Paige Normand, who dusted off her cowboy boots and wrangled two peer tutors to join her on a panel about new demands on our JMU Writing Center.

Caroline Prendergast discussed her work with the Psychology Department to improve discipline-specific tutoring and Sarah Stacy presented on her experience cross-training with English Language Learner Services to better serve ELL writers.

Paige, excited to be back in Austin, calmed herself long enough to present strategies for expanding writing center work to include usability testing and new media consultations. Sarah and Caroline were two of only five undergraduate panelists at the symposium, and afterwards were surrounded by audience members praising their professionalism. Paige did ok, too.



Caroline and Sarah in Austin photo: Paige Normand

- Paige Normand, Writing & Communication Specialist

The UWC Heads East, to ISAT

More than thirty tutors and tutors in training convened in April in the Health and Human Services building for the UWC's second annual Cross-Disciplinary Writing Panel.

The UWC serves students across campus and is always looking for opportunities to cultivate interdisciplinary tutoring skills. "We

serve the university, not just specific departments, so we want to hear directly from experts in different fields to learn about the expectations and norms for writing," explained UWC Coordinator Jared Featherstone.

This year's panel featured ISAT faculty members Dr. Jeff Tang, Dr. Amanda Biesecker, and Dr. Mike

Deaton, who discussed ISAT writing assignments and ISAT professors' expectations. Deaton observed that ISAT students "write to make research accessible to those who want to understand the concepts but who are not necessarily experts in the field."

The panelists encouraged an open dialogue: "Not only were we able to better understand ISAT writing by asking questions about their discipline, but they were able to better understand the UWC mission by asking questions about our services," said peer tutor Brooke Covington.

- Alexa Livezey, peer tutor; and UWC Monthly staff



ISAT professors Mike Deaton, Jeff Tang, and Amanda Biesecker at the Cross-Disciplinary Writing Panel photo: Jared Featherstone

UWC Alumna Andrea Keffer: From Tutor to Counselor

Andrea Keffer, known as Andrea Smith during her tutoring days, joined the University Writing Center staff in 2010. After graduating from JMU in 2011 with a degree in Psychology and a minor in Writing and Rhetoric, Keffer began her career in social work as a mental health paraprofessional with New River Valley Community Services (NRVCS) in Blacksburg, Virginia.

Keffer remembers the University Writing Center as a place where everyone was a colleague and where peer tutors were encouraged to be independent, responsible, and willing to take initiative. She also remembers playing an important role as “counselor” for anxious students visiting the UWC.



Some of her most unforgettable University Writing Center tutoring experiences came as she helped initially overwhelmed students shift their focus from stress about a grade to an enjoyment of and greater confidence in their writing. “Once they recognized the positives rather than felt scrutinized for the negatives,” Keffer remarked, “I found that students were better able to make changes to their essays without viewing every modification as a failure.”

The experience Keffer gained as a tutor in the University Writing Center helped her when she interviewed for her current job with NRVCS, a public agency that provides

“community-based programs for mental health, intellectual disabilities, substance use disorders, and related prevention services.”

After the interview, Keffer said, “my employer shared that my writing center experience—particularly guiding the student through the writing process—was attractive to them.” Keffer’s UWC experience equipped her with other marketable skills as well: “Since my current position involves intensive writing and documentation,” she said, “I had an advantage over other job candidates.”

In addition to helping her to cultivate an approach centered on each student’s individual concerns and needs, Keffer’s time in the UWC developed her belief in the importance of active listening. This experience has served her well during her one-on-one counseling sessions in her role as a mental health counselor. “It is essential for my job that I put my clients first by listening, analyzing their statements, and assisting them in viewing the broader picture,” she said. “These are relational skills that I developed through my writing center experience.”

When working with clients in her role as a mental health counselor, Keffer guides them through anxiety, depression, and other stressful emotions by asking them questions and helping them see the “bigger picture,” instead of offering a “quick fix for the moment.”

Keffer amassed over 200 tutoring hours during her time in the UWC. Looking back, she has only two regrets: she wishes she had become a peer tutor earlier in her undergraduate career, and she wishes she had taken advantage of opportunities to serve in the Center’s University Writing Fellows Program.

This hindsight informs Keffer’s advice to current University Writing Center peer tutors: “When in doubt, write. Take time to develop your craft. And capitalize on all the great opportunities for growth and development at the UWC.”

- Matt May, graduate assistant

Camille Corum: Taking Her Skills to New York City

When Camille Corum enrolled in her Fall 2010 WRTC 336: Tutoring Writing course, she never could have guessed that an unforgettable journey with the University Writing Center had begun. Now a senior in her fourth semester of tutoring, Corum sees how her experiences as a UWC tutor have sharpened her skills and helped her to discover her interest in a career in revising and editing texts for publication in both magazine and book formats.

Over the last three years, Corum has worked at all four UWC locations: the UWC headquarters in Wilson hall, Write Nights in Carrier and Rose Libraries, and the new satellite location in the Athletic Performance Center. She was honored this past fall along with thirty-two other JMU tutors for her dedication, excellence, and enthusiasm at the Learning Centers' inaugural Tutor Excellence Recognition Celebration.

Corum enjoys tutoring in the relaxed atmospheres of the libraries during Write Nights, but she has also appreciated being one of the first tutors to work in the Athletic Performance Center. "Tutoring the students there is much different because they have different obligations," said Corum, "It's been refreshing to work with new students, and I've learned new tutoring techniques through my experiences there." Concerning the future of UWC tutors at the APC, Corum is optimistic: "The students I've worked with in the APC truly appreciate what we do. Writing is new as a tutoring program there, and I think it has great potential to grow."

Corum's career as a UWC tutor will come to an end in May, when she will graduate with degrees in English and Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication. She is excited to have already been offered an editing position

for a parenting and lifestyle magazine in New York City. "I interned with the company in Summer 2012, and they offered me a part-time position as an editorial assistant after I graduate," said Corum, "but I am also applying for other positions right now. I'm planning to take some more time to explore other editorial and publishing possibilities in New York."

How has tutoring prepared you to be an editor?

I have learned how to better communicate my thoughts to the person I am working with. I've also learned the importance of being professional with everyone I work with. Even if I've had a bad day, when I'm on the job, I have to be the best that I can be. That applies to both tutoring and my next job.

Besides tutoring, what have you enjoyed most about the UWC?

Some of my favorite moments were off the clock during lunch hours with other tutors, hanging out in the UWC talking, laughing together, and building friendly professional relationships. I've also enjoyed professional development groups and the opportunities they afford to discuss tutoring concerns with coworkers. I love learning new things from other tutors. Not only are the professional development meetings chances to address problems, but they are also chances to learn the craft of tutoring and even the craft of writing.

One of your most memorable tutoring sessions?

I was working with a student from the College of Business who was writing a memo for a marketing course. Although I was daunted because I had never seen the assignment before, the student and I started from scratch and worked to help him draft his memo. It was a *(continued on page 6)*



Camille Corum

photo credit: Caroline Prendergast

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Editorial Advisor: **Kevin Jefferson**

Camille Corum continued

very successful, very interactive session. The student participated and engaged, and he left with a great first draft that he was proud of.

What does the UWC mean to you?

I feel that the UWC has more than one mission—the center goes above and beyond the average workplace. We’re constantly developing new tutoring strategies that push the boundaries of what’s possible in the writing center environment. Many of our staff members attend regional and national conferences to present our research and innovation. It has been awesome to be a part of such a visionary program.

Any advice for new tutors?

Don’t be afraid to ask the writer a bunch of questions. Asking questions allows you to utilize your skills most effectively and to provide the best feedback.

- *Lindsay Ragole, peer tutor*

MAWCA continued

student was able to glean from the tutor, whether the session was tutor-oriented or student-oriented, and what higher and lower order concerns were addressed.”

For first-semester peer tutor Alice Koganova, traveling to MAWCA and hearing about the craft of tutoring outside of the center was a special experience. “As a new tutor, I had no idea what to expect and was very happy with how my first conference went” said Koganova. “It was interesting to attend the different panels and learn strategies I wouldn’t normally think about.” All three first-semester tutors found the conference and the chance to appreciate writing centers work in a new way enlightening.

Across the board, the University Writing Center’s commitment to supporting tutors’ participation in academic conferences allows all members of the JMU writing community to benefit from the latest developments in tutoring theory, practice, and research.

- *Kellie Waryn, peer tutor*



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