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Undergraduate Perception of Peer Leadership in the Writing Center

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Thesis of Sabrina Louissaint

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

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UNDERGRADUATE PERCEPTION OF PEER LEADERSHIP IN THE WRITING
CENTER

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Sabrina Louissaint

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

Nova Southeastern University

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ABSTRACT

Writing center scholarship offers a plethora of research in the field of composition including different practices and skillsets offered to students. Hosten et al. (2016) describe writing centers to be an incubator for leadership skills, one that creates a blueprint for student leaders to succeed. Situated within the field of composition and rhetoric, this IRB-approved thesis acknowledges a gap in research on the role writing centers play in the development of undergraduate consultants' leadership skills. Through interviewing various writing center directors as well as current and former undergraduate consultants from five universities, I examine peer leadership perception, while uncovering the nature of peer leadership in the writing center environment, in order to understand its effectiveness. The results of the study show that peer leadership happens in the writing center in various ways. Directors and consultants prompt peer leadership through everyday practices. This research is useful for empowering leadership through writing centers as a space that cultivates and strives for student success and calls for directors and peer consultants to examine how leadership is being practiced in their centers, as well as to increase peer leadership opportunities.

Keywords: Leadership, peer leadership, writing centers, undergraduate

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	3
Leadership.....	3
Leadership in Higher Education.....	6
Leadership in Undergraduate Co-Curricular Activities and Engagement	8
Leadership in WPA.....	12
Undergraduate Leadership in Writing Centers.....	15
<i>Professional Development</i>	17
<i>Mentorship</i>	18
<i>Collaboration</i>	19
<i>Ambassadorship</i>	20
Conclusion.....	21
Methods.....	22
Directors.....	24
<i>Interviews</i>	25
Current Consultants.....	25
<i>Interviews</i>	26
Former Consultants (FCs).....	26
<i>Interviews</i>	27
Results.....	27
Director Interviews.....	28
<i>Director 1</i>	28
<i>Director 2</i>	30
<i>Director 3</i>	32
Current Consultant Interviews.....	35
<i>Group 1</i>	35
<i>Group 2</i>	40
<i>Group 3</i>	45
<i>Interview 4</i>	51
Former Consultant Interviews.....	54
<i>FC 1</i>	54
<i>FC 2</i>	58
Discussion.....	60
Leadership.....	61
<i>Informal Leadership</i>	61
<i>Interpersonal Leadership</i>	62
Agency.....	62
<i>Buy-in</i>	63
<i>Growth Mindset</i>	64

Community.....	64
<i>Support</i>	65
<i>Mentorship</i>	65
Conclusion	66
Limitations	68
Further Research	69
References.....	71
Appendix A. Study Introduction Message.....	82
Appendix B. Informed Consent Form	83
Appendix C. Director Interview Questions	87
Appendix D. Current Undergraduate Consultant Interview Questions	88
Appendix E. Former Undergraduate Consultant Interview Questions	89

Introduction

The role of student leaders in writing center contexts warrants special attention because their work uniquely combines administration, research, and leading learning experiences for their peers.

— Julia Bleakney et al. (2017, p. 44)

This thesis situates peer leadership in the writing center environment, a space full of professional development opportunities, collaboration, and support. The writing center is a general academic support space for students. It is a place that fosters growth, from professional, academic, and leadership development. Sanders and Damron (2016) describe the benefits of peer tutoring to include, “increased understanding of the writing and collaborative learning process, improved oral and written communication skills, critical analysis, adaptability, leadership skills, and preparation for academic and professional communication” (38). There are countless opportunities for experiential learning,¹ which enhance consultants’ capabilities and enable them to develop their interpersonal skills, and more important, leadership skills.

Research on undergraduate writing center consultants does not focus on the undergraduate perception of peer leadership. There is limited research on the benefits of cultivating leadership in the center, and thus, further research is needed. This thesis focuses on writing center studies as it is situated within the field of composition and rhetoric. The study is designed to assess undergraduate peer leadership in the writing center. In an effort to answer the question, “what does peer leadership look like in the writing center for undergraduate consultants,” there was an examination of scholarship

¹ David A. Kolb’s (2014) Experiential learning theory is a process of learning through experience followed by reflection on that experience.

surrounding leadership, higher education and student engagement, writing program administration (WPA), and undergraduate consultants in the center. The terms “tutor” or “consultant” are often used interchangeably in the field of writing studies, however, for the purposes of this thesis, the phrase peer consultant will be the preferred term to represent this student role that encompasses many traits and responsibilities. In addition, nine qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty-one writing center practitioners (WCP) including directors, current and former undergraduate consultants. Each participant provided insight into the effectiveness of peer leadership in writing center space. The interviews confirmed the importance of peer leadership in the center and the vast number of opportunities writing centers grant consultants for leadership development. From the data collected, themes emerged to create a discussion of the importance of allowing agency in the center.

Through discovering answers to this question, the nature of peer leadership in the writing environment is examined to understand its effectiveness and contribute this knowledge to the field. Ultimately, the purpose of this research study is to illustrate how working in a writing center influences peer leadership among undergraduate student consultants.

Literature Review

Bleakney et al. (2017) acknowledge the growing conversation of writing centers and leadership. They argue much of the talk on leadership focuses on writing center directors (WCD) as leaders (Bruce et al., 2013; Simpson, 1985) along with graduate students. There should be larger conversations in student leadership as an area of study in writing centers. To understand the undergraduates' perspectives of peer leadership in the writing center, it is imperative to review leadership as a larger capacity within higher education, then specify it through writing centers and undergraduate students. This review establishes the gap in current research on leadership and writing centers, specifically, undergraduate perception of peer leadership in the writing center. Through examining the works of early and contemporary scholars, this review of literature identifies how leadership is cultivated in writing centers, as well as undergraduate engagement.

Leadership

To first unpack the role of peer leadership in the writing center, it is important to understand *leadership* on its own. There is a plethora of definitions for *leadership*, as well as theories of leadership that exist in literature. Leadership is an art, something of a form of expression and creativity. There are many different avenues, theories, and styles to leadership. From research and years of speculation, there is still no concrete definition for the term. Definitions can be simple or complex, depending on the author's understanding, making the term *leadership* ambiguous. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), *leadership* can be defined as, "the office or position of a leader," or "capacity to lead." For this reason, *leadership* often gets confused with *administration*. The two words

are distinct. Through his research on leadership definitions, Kolzow (2014) insists that leadership is more than an individual “who is widely recognized or possesses organizational authority” (p. 9). A leader can be an administrator, but not every administrator is a leader. In academia, our understanding of leadership is more than just position. There is a certain level of heart that comes with being a leader.

Leadership is something that can be shown in many ways through many different people. Through the many components of leadership as an area of study, it is known to build character and include several traits attributed to being a leader. Arguably, the function of leadership is to grow, learn, produce, and make a difference. Many people might think of it as the act of directing a group of people towards a common goal, but it can mean much more than that. If we examine earlier scholars’ works, they look at leadership primarily in terms of style and theory, with the example of Burns’s (1978) transformational leadership styles, Bass’s (1985) transactional leadership, and more recently, Heifetz et al.’s (2009) adaptive leadership. The list goes on and the term continues to be worked with.

Scholars have also sought to define leadership in terms of application, with varying definitions focusing on personality perspective (Parr et al., 2016) or the power relationship between leaders and followers (Kellerman, 2008; Murji, 2015). It is easy to understand leadership in terms of individual representation and relational views; however, the definition of leadership often considers other parts. No matter how complex or trivial definitions may be, it is interesting how scholars compare or contrast meanings. Analogous to Kolzow (2014), Bogenschneider (2016) lays out an extensive list of definitions for the term *leadership*, including scholars such as Northouse (2010) who

defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 33). Many scholars relate to this definition as it includes several points: leadership includes collaboration, requiring the support of others; leadership is ongoing, it is a process; and leadership is action, not position.

The definition of leadership can be examined from different perspectives, from a management and corporate perspective, or more specific to this review, educational, especially for the evaluation of student support services. Student leadership has been explored by many scholars (Komives et al., 2013; Newton & Ender, 2010) focusing on enabling students to realize their leadership potential and deepen their understanding of leadership, because “leadership development is now an integral part of the educational program of college students” (Posner, 2012, p. 1). Leadership empowers students and enables them to grow. Looking at leadership education in the context of writing center work, “undergraduate peer leaders need an understanding of leadership concepts, and an awareness of university resources to fulfill their roles in assisting the educational experiences of their peers” (Friedel et al., 2016, p. 38). Within higher education there are misconceptions about the true nature of a consultant’s role and how leadership plays an important part of consultants’ development. Considering the traditional definitions and the role of leadership in the writing center, the personal definition that the researcher returns to—leadership is individuals working to be the best versions of themselves for the betterment of the group or organization as a whole—establishes the value of offering leadership opportunities to peer consultants.

Leadership in Higher Education

Leadership is relevant to higher education on a variety of levels. According to Spendlove (2007), “studies of leadership in higher education tend to focus on the role of the Vice-Chancellor, President or Rector” (p. 407). Not enough credit is given to undergraduate students. Leadership is captured in many aspects of the educational setting. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) states that “regardless of differences in academic discipline, organizational affiliation, cultural background, or geographical location, students must be better prepared to serve as citizen leaders in a global community” (CAS, n.d.). Students are able to learn about leadership and become leaders throughout their studies. Colleges and universities are dynamic organizations that perform leadership through several capacities and often convey the term through their mission statements, ingrained as a core value. Many colleges and universities pride themselves on the variety of programs that foster leadership development for students, offering valuable resources to fund campus members’ attendance at leadership training workshops and events, such as annual student leadership conferences.

Now, we see growth in leadership as a field of study for students as well as an increase in students actively taking on positions exhibiting leadership within the university. Classes also often aim to inspire students to realize their leadership potential and equip them with knowledge for working with others and leading in different capacities, and through writing centers, we often see courses such as Writing Center Theory and Practice, preparing students for work. Gialamas et al. (2020) note that students “benefit from exposure to leadership models and practices regardless of the

career paths they undertake” (p. 54). Leadership skills are transferable across disciplines. Universities continue to provide students with opportunities to develop leadership skills, particularly through student employment, as they are instilling the importance of transferable skills that students can carry with them after graduation.

Earlier scholarship identifies the effectiveness of leadership in higher education. For example, Ramsden (1998) finds leadership to be determined by several factors: teaching, research, strategic vision and networking, collaborative and motivational leadership, fair and efficient management, development, and recognition of performance and interpersonal skills. We see these factors attributed in many extra-curricular activities in which students get involved (as discussed later in this review of literature). Brown (2001) provides a smaller framework, focusing on two main components of leadership development: the inner work of intense personal development and the outer work of leadership in action. When these two come together, the leader can make a lasting difference. When students are involved in leadership development opportunities, they are at a higher advantage of increasing skill levels that will lead them on to success after graduation. Similarly, Drew et al. (2008) examined two categories of effective leadership practices: interpersonal people skills and engagement. Interpersonal skills include areas of building relationships, inspiring trust, motivating staff, and more. Considering the benefits of leadership within higher education, in addition to how students gain experiences in the areas listed above, it is important to assess how many of these leadership components can be achieved through student employment and co-curricular activities.

Leadership in Undergraduate Co-Curricular Activities and Engagement

Higher education and leadership are synonymous with engagement. Scholarship in leadership education often focuses on peer learning in leadership roles (Jenkins, 2012; Katsioloudes & Cannonier, 2019). Understanding leadership allows for organizations to grow and develop students. Students are not simply enrolled in classes, they are involved in all aspects of the school, through athletics, clubs, interning/working, and more, furthering their leadership development. Rodríguez and Villarreal (2003) define student leadership as the “ability of the student body to influence major decisions about its quality of education and learning environment,” (para. 2) and argue “student leadership is an integral part of student success” (para. 1). Students have the capability to evoke great change in the university; their ideas are valued and can contribute to many new initiatives.

Student engagement has been an area of study in higher education, rooted in the works of 19th century scholars (Pace, 1984; Trowler, 1998). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) quantifies data each year to represent the characteristics and quality of undergraduate students’ experiences and measure engagement. They define student engagement as, “the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities...[and] how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities” (NSSE, n.d). More research focuses on the relationship between student engagement, for example, as defined in *College Extracurricular Activities Impact on Students, Types of Extracurricular Activities* (n.d.), “Extracurricular activities provide

a setting to become involved and to interact with other students, thus leading to increased learning and enhanced development” (para. 2). There is power in peer-to-peer learning.

Considering the impact of extracurricular activities, students can showcase their involvement in many ways. Astin, a prominent higher education scholar, spent years studying student involvement in college and the positive contribution of co-curricular involvement in relation to student learning. Astin (1999) defines involvement as, “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). He argues, “the greater the student’s involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development” (p. 529). Student involvement can lead to great opportunities upon graduation, setting students apart from their peers, when applying for the workforce. In another review involving research on student involvement, Astin (1984) proposes a theory of student development, student involvement theory, which considers several key factors that contribute to student involvement. He examines how students learn effectively through interactions with faculty, peers, and other components, which often provides a positive impact separate from traditional classroom learning experiences.

Engagement and involvement are two areas of undergraduate leadership development that impact student success. Scholars have spent years exploring the correlation. Soria et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study using data from the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership survey on 18 institutions to examine whether undergraduate’s involvement in leadership activities were associated with students’ leadership efficacy. Their study determined students’ participation in some leadership programs may increase students’ confidence in their leadership capacity.

As we continue to look at writing centers in conjunction with leadership development, it is undeniable that the writing center can be considered a form of leadership program, especially related to peer leadership. Drawing from Lytle (2018), who examines writing centers and student engagement, studies of participation in educational purposeful activities, such as learning communities, co-curricular activities, extracurricular activities, and student employment, influence students' engagement with their institutions (Leung et al., 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Noticing how writing centers impact the engagement of students utilizing centers' services (Parisi & Graziano-King, 2011; Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011), Lytle fills in the gap of research that neglects to address how writing center work influences the student engagement of consultants as they work in the writing center. Her research investigates, "how writing centers, as an educationally purposeful activity, influence the engagement of the students working in them" (p. 2). These ideas continue to support why student engagement is important in higher education. Hazeur (2008) suggests that co-curricular activities offer a wide range of "out-of-classroom, but sponsored on-campus programs and services, designed to promote leadership, life skills, and personal development for students while enhancing campus life" (p. 1). By providing students opportunities to enhance development and learn as they work, writing centers prove to be an effective peer leadership program that engages student-workers as well as provides them support and assistance.

Though this research examines writing center work, the focus is on undergraduate consultants. Consultants are student leaders (peer leaders). They should be regarded as such in higher education. Consultants are not only working with students in the center, but they are often involved in many other engagement opportunities to boost peer

leadership. We see the center as a space that allows for each skill set to develop, whether it is public speaking, problem solving, or creating thinking. Writing center work can influence student engagement, promote areas of involvement, leadership development, and faculty/peer interaction.

While in the center, consultants have the opportunity to lead by assisting with different activities, course teachings, and more. A peer leadership program provides students an opportunity to “assist in the development of other students’ leadership skills, knowledge, or abilities” (Haber, 2011, p. 70) while honing their own proficiency. Writing centers allow for development to happen through various opportunities relevant to students’ fields of focus. According to Tiven (2002), “A strong peer leader program has the potential to create an environment where peers can maximize their abilities to create change and, by taking action, can have a measurable impact on school climate and peer relationships” (p. 25). All writing centers are unique in that each is designed to fit the needs of its student population and catered to who is on their staff. Writing centers are successful for many reasons; one being that they nurture the growth of student writers and support the leadership of consultants, through encouragement, development, and innovation. Bruffee (1998) argues that peer tutors “can help change the interests, goals, values, assumptions, and practices of teachers and students alike” (p. 95). Much of what we learn from assisting students is from students, including our understanding of peer leadership. To this point, Bruffee (1999) explores collaborative learning as the framework for one-to-one or group peer tutoring in writing centers. Collaboration is important to the foundation and success of WPA.

Leadership in WPA

Writing centers are not merely a place where students go for student employment and academic support; there is much more that goes into each center. From early years of study to more recently, writing centers have grown, from the discipline to the organizations and students. Writing center research is a large part of the foundation of WPA work. The WPA Council is a national association of higher education faculty with professional responsibilities for directing writing programs. Members include directors of freshman composition, undergraduate writing, writing across the curriculum (WAC)/writing in the disciplines (WID)/communication across the curriculum (CAC), writing centers, etc. (WPA council, n.d).

Leadership is situated within WPA at a variety of levels, from director work to graduate and undergraduate development. Writing center leaders, “have a responsibility to help our tutors [consultants] cultivate a range of skills they can use in their professional and personal lives” (Concannon et al., 2020). For the purposes of this section, bringing back the idea of leadership as art, Kouzes and Posner’s (1995) definition of leadership is most effective in discussing WPA and writing center work. They insist that leadership is “the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” (p. 30). WPA work encompasses each part of Kouzes and Posner’s (1995) definition, not only through a variety of programming for student success but also in acknowledging the challenges that may arise in the process.

As we consider the growth of writing center studies and how many factors contribute to the uniqueness of different perspectives, it goes without saying, there is leadership in almost every area of writing center work. Maimon (1986) states, “in the last

decade, WPAs on campuses of all sizes and traditions have become ambassadors to diverse academic departments in an attempt to promote a comprehensive approach to writing” (p. 9). In addition, consultants serve as leaders, which provides them chances to develop many unique skills.

Each year, WCP meet at various conferences to discuss challenges within the center and field and come up with solutions (e.g., “Helping with Multimodal Writing Projects: New Challenges in Writing Center Tutor Training,” The Southeastern Writing Center Association [SWCA] 2020 Conference). Understanding challenges through leadership, Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) state, “the leadership life, we recognize, is a complex balance of conflicting forces and tension in that manages to function most of the time; however, school leadership can take a person from an inspired moment to a crisis in an instant” (p. xii). Similar to how universities employ visions for the university, each WPA upholds a set of standards for pursuing the success of student work. For example, writing centers list their mission statements on their websites. In a section from the WPA council position statement, “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration,” (2019) the council states, “Writing administrators provide leadership for many different kinds of programs—such as first-year courses, writing-across-the-disciplines programs, writing centers, and law programs—and they work in a wide variety of institutional settings” (“Evaluative Criteria” section, para 1). Supporting this section, Gialamas et al. (2020) write, “embedded in the word leadership is the ability to motivate and inspire a vision and then work together to reach that vision and achieve its common goals” (p. 56). These findings support how WPAs facilitate leadership opportunities and how writing centers can foster leadership through collaboration.

Trimbur (1983) states, “the way WPAs organize students in writing centers offers an important measure of their program’s sense of identity and purpose” (p. 37). Students are often seen as the first priority for any WPA branch, whether it is through developing first years’ skills through WAC, providing writing assistance in the center, and more.

Focusing on writing centers as a WPA branch, we can see how leadership happens from all aspects of the writing center. Grutsch McKinney (2013) discusses the grand narrative of writing center work, arguing “writing center work is complex, although the storying of it often is not” (p. 20). What we have come to understand about the development of writing center work is that there are a diverse range of tasks divided between consultants, graduate assistants, and directors. These include creating and facilitating writing, professional, and reflective workshops for students, ensuring and developing training and education materials and resources, conducting research, and more.

Much research on writing centers has come from individuals in the center writing about their experiences. Earlier scholars, such as Leahy (1990) describe the simple mission of writing centers is to get people together and talk about writing and consultants constantly switch “around among the roles of listener, teacher, coach, counselor, fellow writer, editor, and critic” (p. 44). This idea illustrates the multifaceted role of a consultant. Writing centers create an environment for all involved, to learn from and support one another. Harris (1988) explains, though “writing centers may differ in size, specific services, source of staffing, and organizational procedures” (p. 1), they share similar approaches, such as writers work on writing from a variety of courses. Through

working in different disciplines and being an essential part of the education system, the idea of a collaborative space defines the work that takes place.

Further research highlights the roles within WPA work, primarily of WCD, which vary from institution to institution (Geller & Denny, 2013; Mattison, 2008). Considering studies of composition, there have been long debates about the role that WCD play in the center. Directors are primarily responsible for managing the daily operations of the writing center, including developing and implementing the strategic vision and priorities, goals and objectives, policies and procedures, and assessment measures for the center. Devet (2019) argues the role of WCD is not just of a supervisor but as an educator. The work of “directors in fostering the growth of consultants should be called *peer tutor development*” (Devet, 2019, p. 30). Additionally, directors provide “a demanding academic environment and make tutoring a genuine part of the [consultants’] own educational development” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 97). The director also assists in the professional development of consultants. Bleakney et al. (2017) state, many WCDs “intentionally develop students’ leadership skills by encouraging them to lead meetings, run training sessions or workshops, undertake writing center research, or participate in decision-making” (p. 40). Through initiating these opportunities for staff in the center, a community is cultivated, along with the potential of increased peer leadership, which consultants can especially take advantage of.

Undergraduate Leadership in Writing Centers

Undergraduate consultants are also no stranger to the research in writing centers. According to the Writing Center Research Project 2018-2019, undergraduates make up the majority of tutor classifications (Denny, 2018). Grutsch McKinney (2013) argues that

consultants have equally complex lives as WCDs. Consultants are an integral part of writing centers, as the center would not be complete without their work and the leadership they bring. Carino (2003) argues, “the use of undergraduate peer tutors [consultants] has powerfully shaped writing center practice for more than twenty years” (p. 96). Scholars have defined the role of undergraduates in the center through focusing on the job requirements. Understanding the role of a consultant, Harris (1995) describes consultants as being “other than teachers in that they inhabit a middle ground where their role is that of translator or interpreter, turning teacher language into student language” (p. 37). Bruffee (2008) agrees by stating, “one thing you do as a writing peer tutor [consultant] is help students understand what professors are asking them to do... You help your tutees to write in one of the ways that you have already learned to write” (p. 7). These tasks alone set the minimum for the consultant’s daily work. Consultants are not only conducting one-on-one sessions with students, but they are also fellows embedded in writing and communication courses, assisting students with their writing assignments for their particular course (Carpenter et al., 2014; Dvorak et al., 2012). Consultants are presenting at conferences and taking initiative in their centers, demonstrating leadership. Research on writing fellow programs often include the idea of ambassadorship (Severino & Knight, 2007) and writing fellows as agents of change (Hughes & Hall, 2008).

Writing center research on the topic of identity also includes undergraduates (Bitzel, 2013; Latterell, 2000; LeCourt, 2004). As students and employees of the college/university, tutors offer unique perspectives that allow writing centers to flourish. They are the ones bringing in the fresh ideas and new programs to the center, as they were not too long-ago freshman coming into the writing center for the first time. Whether

it is through identifying with students from past experiences in the courses or bringing in fresh perspectives through innovative practice to better accommodate students, their voices in the center are important. Undergraduate work is also evident through writing center publications, conferences, and organizations.

Concerning recent interest in undergraduate research, Ianetta and Fitzgerald (2012) add to scholars' awareness that recent interest in undergraduate research contributions need to be recognized. They address the 2011 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW) keynote speaker, Brian Fallon, whose speech called on the field "to pay more attention to peer tutors [consultants], to what they tell us about learning, teaching, and writing, and to what they bring to our scholarly conversations in the writing center and composition studies fields" (p. 10). The contributions of undergraduate consultants need more recognition. Undergraduates are unique to say the least, as most fall into the age of 18-20, having just completed one year of college before working, and assisting almost 10-20 students a week. While working in the center, students have the opportunity to learn from being a consultant and step into a student-leadership role, being empowered in that role. Through examining the major themes of leadership within writing centers—professional development, collaboration, mentorship, and ambassadorship—this section briefly explores how writing centers employ opportunities for undergraduate students to engage in leadership development.

Professional Development

Writing center scholars often acknowledge the various benefits in professionalism from working in the center. According to Bleakney et al. (2017), "Writing Centers are important sites of development for student leaders" (p. 41). It is common to see

undergraduates work in the center for several years. Exploring professional development, Dvorak (2010) demonstrates how writing centers “can be a site where tutors grow in many professional directions and where tutors can see first-hand returns from the amount of time and effort they invest in their positions” (p. 1). Working in a writing center means continuously working to improve the culture of the writing center and meeting the demands of the college/university, through providing support for students, and continuously training consultants to meet new citation updates or assignment creations. Bleakney (2019) lays out a few examples of ongoing development for tutors. By conducting a qualitative study using results from a national survey of WCP and interviews, the study identified “what WCPs believe are smart practices for ongoing tutor education” (para. 3). Bleakney (2019) found that by “inviting tutors to get involved with the day-to-day running of the center and with the ongoing development of their peers, directors are also encouraging tutors to seek out leadership opportunities and to develop leadership skills” (para. 22). She suggests that this focus on professionalism “helps position writing centers as important sites for developing students as leaders and future members of the workforce” (para. 26). Consultants continuously go above and beyond to support the needs of students, providing assistance and adapting to various changes throughout the discipline.

Mentorship

Consultants’ roles go beyond helping students, they also help each other. Drew et al. (2008) note that, “mentoring comes under the umbrella of an experiential learning approach to leadership development” (p. 11), while it has also been argued that mentorship is crucial to professional development (Clary-Lemon & Roen, 2008). There is

added value in having students who have had previous experiences working with faculty, or enrolled in classes, that can empower students to feel better supported. Rafoth (2010) lays out several points consultants from different writing centers have made as to how students benefit from the writing center. One found that “when students realize their peers are the ones who are helping, it is easier for them to relax and be more outgoing and elaborate on exactly what they want to accomplish” (p. 150). There is a level of trust between consultants and students, which highlights the peer aspect, especially when the consultant is a fellow in their class. Mentorship also takes place within consultant-to-consultant relationships. Dietz and Pearson (2013) outline positive engagement strategies to improve training practices for new and returning peer writing tutors. They argue that peer leaders are particularly invaluable because, “as recent recipients of training, they can offer creative and practical recommendations for meeting the training and developmental needs of the staff overall” (para. 14). Returning consultants take the task of showing the ropes to new consultants, giving advice and feedback. In some writing centers, they serve as official mentors in the center.

Collaboration

One of the most effective modes of learning within the center is collaboration among peers. When it comes to the literary works of the writing center, Bruffee and collaboration are discussed unanimously. Collaboration allows students to “test the quality and value of what they know by trying to make sense of it to other people like themselves—their peers” (Bruffee, 1981, p. 745). The function of the writing center lies in the dynamic relationship between students and consultants who work collaboratively throughout the session. It is a joint system facilitated through support and community

engagement within the center. Consultants often empower students to build confidence within their writing, talking through ideas and providing the opportunity for peer-to-peer collaboration. In her thesis, Cooper (2018) writes of the importance of community building. Cooper (2018) recognizes helping students with their writing is the main purpose for writing centers and, “the best way to ensure writing centers meet that goal is by facilitating community between tutors” and adds, “building community within a writing center should be a priority for all writing centers” (p. 1). Collaboration also takes on the work between consultant, students, and faculty. Another well-known scholar, Lunsford (2003), claims that “collaboration aids in problem finding as well as problem solving [...] collaboration promotes excellence” (p.49). It is no secret that the collaborative learning and practice of writing center work is impactful.

Ambassadorship

Consulting across various writing disciplines invites a wealth of knowledge, writing styles, learning styles, and personalities. When we think of an ambassador, we refer to that person as a representative. In the same regard, Severino and Knight (2007) discuss the work that their writing fellow ambassadors do across campus, “working with other students in a range of courses, helping to demonstrate clearly the nature of what happens in the writing center to greater numbers of faculty and students” (p. 20). They discuss the implementation of the fellows program that has brought the campus community to them, while also bringing out “Writing Center philosophy and practice across the UI campus” (p. 20). These fellows are taking the work out of the writing center to promote and help students on the outside. Writing fellows from various colleges and universities are doing the same work, embedded in different classes, and providing work

in locations outside of the center. Writing fellows provide many benefits to the students and faculty of the university. Students benefit from collaboration and engaging in the social nature of writing and knowledge-making and faculty benefit from receiving “tangible help” with writing instruction, in the form of a trained, experienced writing fellow dedicated to students’ development as writers (Hall & Hughes, 2011).

Ambassadorship is not only limited to writing fellows, rather there are many more examples, such as presenting at conferences, engaging with social media, and often, centers utilize satellite locations, to reach students who do not have access to the main location.

Conclusion

Leadership brings value to any organization or group. There may never be a perfect definition for leadership, but what will always remain is the importance of leadership within higher education. While consultants work in the writing center assisting various students from different disciplines, many are also involved in other campus activities or clubs, whether that is student government association, intramural sports, etc. The writing center truly is a place where students employ different skill sets that can be transferred to various roles, and they are building confidence. Research on writing center studies supports student leadership in a positive way. The role itself encourages student engagement by utilizing a campus resource center, enabling students to interact with the university, faculty, and peers.

Opportunities for leadership, engagement, collaboration, mentorship, and professional development are presented every day in the writing center. Within writing center scholarship exists a common thread of collaboration and support embedded within

the work between all parties involved. The value of writing center studies is clear, however the value of leadership within the center is not discussed enough. There is a lack of scholarship that investigates how undergraduates perceive peer leadership in writing centers. Writing centers ought to include undergraduate perceptions of leadership to continue to improve and support their staff. Using the scholarship throughout this literature review as a foundation, this study will further examine how undergraduate consultants perceive peer leadership in the writing center. Participants' experiences as writing consultants will shed light on the leadership opportunities awarded throughout writing centers.

Methods

The methodology used for this research was qualitative. According to Fossey et al. (2002), "Qualitative research aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds" (p. 717). Student leadership is often assessed through tools and assessments involving competencies and StrengthsFinder (Kouzes & Posner, 2005; Seemiller, 2016). While assessments prove useful for evaluating skills, leadership is more than what is written on an inventory list. Peer leadership should be examined through meaningful interactions. In addition to drawing from scholarship on leadership, higher education, and writing centers, interviews were the primary method conducted in this study to obtain a descriptive and thorough understanding of participants' experiences regarding peer leadership within their respective institutions. Conducted interviews were semi-structured with standardized open-ended questions. The semi-structured approach allowed for follow-up questions to be asked. According to Saldana and Omasta (2017), interviews are

the most commonly used method for qualitative inquiry, and semi-structured is the most common type. Open-ended questions were used because they help “to explore topics in depth” and “to understand processes” (Weller et al., 2018, p. 1). Nine interviews were conducted from October 2020 to February 2021 with a total of 21 participants.

This study required acknowledgment that participants understood what their involvement in the research entailed. Therefore, Nova Southeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was requested then granted on September 14, 2020. This was a voluntary study that involved minimal risk. To begin, five writing centers were selected based on the type of college/university, size of staff, and geographic location. Saldana and Omasta (2017) note that sampling of participants is subject to evolve over time. The original selection of schools was adjusted based on responsiveness and changes within the center; for example, two centers had a change in administration. Overall, each school was located in the United States. WCDs, as well as current and former peer consultants, were the participants for this study. Deliberation for this study used Saldana and Omasta’s (2017) purposive sampling, which aided in selecting participants who would best contribute to the research. Because this study focused on perspectives of peer leadership, it was important to gather a sample of participants that could contribute to the conversation.

The purpose of interviewing WCDs and peer consultants at different universities was to examine how peer leadership looks or what it means to them. By interviewing current directors, along with current and former peer consultants, insight into the effectiveness of undergraduate peer leadership in writing center spaces was gained, because leadership looks different and means a lot of different things for many centers.

Gathering information from different writing centers helped to support the importance of discussing peer leadership. Directors provide an important contextual framework for how centers are run, while consultants provide their hands-on experiences, both creating an interesting look at how leadership is situated differently. Even after leaving the center, the experiences gained leave an impact on individual lives. Interviews are more personal, and connections can be made through new interactions. Talking with participants allowed for organic conversations, rather than sending out surveys.

All participants were invited to participate via email (see Appendix A). Upon receiving responses from subjects willing to participate, further contact was conducted via email and consent forms were sent. The consent form can be viewed in Appendix B. Afterwards, interviews were scheduled. One interview was held via email, while the rest were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were recorded using the recording function of Zoom, which allowed for developing transcriptions afterward.² Notes were also taken during each interview and aided in developing themes for the study.

Directors

There was one set of interview questions for directors. Each director received the same set of questions that included, besides the standard demographic questions (name, role, etc.), five study-specific questions that sought to understand the leadership opportunities awarded to their staff within the center. One question asked about the organizational structure; two questions focused on leadership involvement in the writing center, including how it is incorporated; and two asked about opportunities for peer

² Please note interviewees were given pseudonyms—all results have been anonymized and direct correlation will not be made between Director and their consultants in the study.

leadership in the writing center. Director interview questions can be seen in Appendix C. Interviews lasted an average of 32 minutes, with the longest lasting 35 minutes.

Interviews

- **Director 1.** Director from a mid-size, public, 4-year regional university was interviewed on October 19, 2020 at 11 a.m. The interview lasted 35 minutes.
- **Director 2.** Director from a small, private, 4-year urban liberal arts college was interviewed on December 10, 2020 at 12 p.m. The interview lasted 34 minutes.
- **Director 3.** Director from a large Hispanic serving 4-year public research university was interviewed on January 22, 2021 at 10 a.m. The interview lasted 28 minutes.

Current Consultants

After completion of the director interview, interviewees were asked to identify and reach out to a group of current peer consultants (4–6) in their center. This method, according to Saldana and Omasta (2017), refers to snowball sampling and was employed to gain a larger pool of participants. Through email correspondence, the group interviews were arranged.

Besides the standard demographic questions (name, role, years working, etc.), consultants were asked seven study-specific questions that sought to understand the leadership opportunities awarded to them within the center. One question focused on interviewees' perception of peer leadership, including how it looks in the center; two focused on leadership practice in the writing center; two concentrated on the influence of leadership as a result of writing center work; and one focused on what they are learning

overall about leadership. Group interview questions can be seen in Appendix D. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes, with the longest lasting 45 minutes.

Interviews

- **Group Interview 1.** Undergraduates (Michael, Jessica, Lauren, Carmen, Brittany, Gabriella) from Director 1's center. Interviewed on October 30, 2020 at 10 a.m. The interview lasted 50 minutes.
- **Group Interview 2.** Undergraduates (Tia, Marie, Tracee, Maya, Kendra) from Director 2's center. Interviewed on January 22, 2021 at 11 a.m. The interview lasted 40 minutes.
- **Group Interview 3.** Undergraduates (Elizabeth, Tori, Solange) from Director 3's center. Interviewed on February 4, 2021 at 12 p.m. The interview lasted 58 minutes.
- **Interview 4.**³ Undergraduate (Anna) from Director 3's center. Interviewed on February 8, 2021 at 1 p.m. The interview lasted 30 minutes.

Former Consultants (FCs)

Two unique participants were chosen for this study based on previous writing center experiences, specifically serving as undergraduate consultants and continuing writing center work post undergrad. The set of questions were specific to the former writing center consultants' past experiences. The participants were asked standard demographics (name, role, etc.) and to discuss their involvement with writing center work. These questions can be found in Appendix E. One interview was conducted via Zoom and the other via email.

³ Please note that one student from Director 3's was unable to attend the group interview scheduled, so there was a separate 1:1 interview.

Interviews

- **FC 1.** Director from a mid-size 4-year public research university was interviewed on December 16, 2020 at 4 p.m. The interview lasted 32 minutes.
- **FC 2.** Ph.D. Candidate and graduate instructor from a large 4-year public research university. Interview questions were emailed on January 7, 2021, and responses were received on January 21, 2021.

Themes were created based on what was gathered through the interviews, and participant responses were compared regarding leadership and the writing center. The coded data was then grouped into the following themes: leadership, agency, and community. Each theme was decoded based on interviewees' explicit use of these terms as well as examples that fell into one or more themes (e.g., professional development, meetings, and support).

Results

The information obtained from the interviews captured the in-depth experiences of directors as well as current and former consultants regarding leadership in the centers and peer development opportunities. It was important to showcase the nature of what each of the interviewees said in this portion to accurately portray authenticity and feelings of leadership. They helped to understand *how* peer leadership happens in the center and *why* leadership is important. Overall, there were positive examples gathered from each school. Specific examples speak to student leadership, student-student interactions, and involvement in professional development opportunities.

Director Interviews

Director 1

Leadership, peer leadership, leadership development, these are skills that we can help instill in our consultants, that will serve them well beyond the time that they're working in the center. And if we are strategic about it, it complements a lot of the academic content that we give them.

— Director 1, personal communication (October 18, 2020)

Director 1 represents a multiliteracy center that offers integrated support for writing, speaking, research, and multimodal communication to students. As the founding and first director of the center, his role as executive director involves overseeing strategic operation of the center and its programs along with ensuring the university's vision and mission of academic success and excellence are supported. The director explained in any given semester there are usually 55-65 students and staff members serving a variety of different roles and explained that typically there are more undergraduate consultants (around 13-15 graduate) because the majority of the student population served is undergraduate. The university serves over 15,000 students, 13,000 of which are undergraduate students.

The Director explained there are a number of leadership roles in the center. He first mentioned the role of workshop facilitators. Faculty typically request pre-planned or customizable workshops led and planned by consultants. He then explained the Course-Embedded Consultant (CEC) Program, which is designed to provide additional feedback and support for writers enrolled in First-Year Writing (FYW) courses. There is a student coordinator assigned to the program. There is also the social media coordinator role.

Regarding professional development, the Director explained it is emphasized in the center, as there has been “a great deal of success in the design and enhancement of the program” and students “having a vested interest in it” (Director 1, personal communication, October 18, 2020). Having buy-in, the consultants assist with the design of the program and many consultants are leading seminars each week, which “has allowed us to develop succession planning for the students, staff members, and to expand mentor/mentee roles” (Director 1, personal communication, October 18, 2020). When asked if consultants are able to take initiative, Director 1 explained, through professional development, “that is where we see a lot of innovation, they’ll take on projects in areas that they like to contribute more to, areas of interest and passion. Sometimes they’re bringing in their disciplinary perspective” (personal communication, October 18, 2020). He identified other roles that have gone well, including reporting and data collection, as well as research and analysis. There is also an undergraduate student assigned to a teaching and learning center. Students also take on projects and present them at the end of the semester, some of which have been implemented, whether it is a new resource or program.

When asked how peer leadership looks in the center, Director 1 explained it is highly collaborative, positive, and highly supported; consultants visit with each other, observe each other’s consultations and workshops, and check in with each other throughout the semester. In terms of mentorship, Director 1 explained he wants to make sure the center continues to cultivate great mentorship by offering students the support and the skills they need to be role models. He added that the model they have been working with for several years has worked well, with senior consultants often mentoring

junior consultants. They focus on a growth mindset for students, and staff members invest time in them. Director 1 stated, “We are cultivating leaders here, we’re looking for areas of improvement, we’re giving them the resources that they need and then helping them scale up those leadership abilities as they move into future semesters or potentially to the graduate program” (personal communication, October 18, 2020). An interesting note was that many of the graduate assistants came from the undergraduate programs and served as consultants. Director 1 further explained that they are currently using the 5 Paths to Leadership Assessment Tool, to help in designing programming, interpersonal and relationship building, as well as technical programming. To close, the Director ended the interview by saying,

We have so much leadership potential at the student level and it looks different.

What we need is peer mentorship, we need peer leadership, because your program is only going to ever be as strong and as good as your student leaders. Our programs are far too large to risk micromanaging them. (Director 1, personal communication, October 18, 2020)

Director 2

I think part of the role of a leader: leaders don’t just tell people what to do, leaders extend a hand and make you feel like you’re important, make you feel like you’re valued.

— Director 2, personal communication (December 10, 2020).

The writing center represented by Director 2 is a space for students and faculty to create projects with passion and for the campus community to discuss writing. He began as associate director then moved up to director, and has since served as the director,

coordinator, and promoter of the center. The center offers a variety of services for faculty and a population of less than 1,000 students, from consultations to workshops to CEC.

There are about 33 staff members, all undergraduates.

When asked about the dynamics of leadership, Director 2 explained, the center is not as formalized with titles, but there are plenty of opportunities. He stated that the center believes in the philosophy of each one teach one. The process to work in the center includes recruitment and then the student takes a class with the Director and “they’re also assigned to be mentored by staffers [consultants] who are juniors or seniors” (Director 2, personal communication, December 10, 2020). Mentioning the importance of shadowing, the director went on to explain the peer-to-peer learning in training. In addition to the mentoring, there are also full class workshops led by the staff. Course embedded roles are given to consultants who have shown exceptional potential. One key highlight to the leadership in the space involves staff meetings, as each decision the Director makes “is with the input of the staffers [consultants]. I refuse to make any decisions without it being a collectivist model” (Director 2, personal communication, December 10, 2020).

On the back of the directors’ door are the words: *community*, *collaboration*, and *creativity*. He tells his staff, “if you’re buying into this, if we do those three things every day, then everything’s going to be alright” (Director 2, personal communication, December 10, 2020). Director 2 instills in the center purposeful strategies that help shape leadership within the staff. His aim is to cultivate a space of equity and inclusion. He wants staff members to “find what makes them intellectually excited and capitalize on it” (Director 2, personal communication, December 10, 2020).

When asked if staff members often take initiative in the center, Director 2 explained it is not a formalized procedure, rather it happens in staff meetings in an organic or holistic way. He provided an example of a staff member recognizing areas where they want to provide more assistance for students, whether it is through more workshops or programs. He also gave an example of the website, which was designed by a former staff member and is now maintained and improved by two staffers [consultants]. Consultants also engage in research projects in the field of writing center studies that have been featured in journals and presented at conferences.

Director 3

For the writing center to be as strong as it can be, we want people to feel open: that it's a space that's open to new ideas, new perspectives, a place where you can ask questions, try out new ideas and take on a new world.

— Director 3, personal communication (January 22, 2021)

The writing center represented by Director 3 is a collaborative environment that assists students and faculty in all stages of the writing process through face-to-face and online tutoring as well as workshops and community engagement for a university serving over 50,000 students. The staff includes a diverse range of undergraduate consultants, totaling about 40. Consultants take a course: Processes of Writing, as part of a writing certification. The director explained how students typically do not think of themselves as tutors at the beginning of the semester, but by the end, they do. The center also has about 35 writing assistants who are embedded tutors assigned to certain classes and work with students and their writing throughout the semester. Some consultants do both; however, they are primarily distinct roles.

Continuing to discuss student work, the director explained the initiative they take with projects that interest them. Director 3 described the value of language in the center, adding, “One of the things we value is that many of our tutors speak more than one language, and if they do not, they have an appreciation or at least a knowledge of other languages” (Director 3, personal communication, January 22, 2021). He provided examples with some of the programs that happen in the center, such as conversation circles in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and American Sign Language, all led by consultants. The consultant who led the Mandarin circles had been studying the language and worked with the Assistant Director to create a weekly conversation circle for people to practice the language skill and learn more about the language. With the American Sign Language circle, the consultant was interested in the language and brought the idea to the director and the rest of the staff. It generated a lot of interest from the consultants, and other groups on campus learned about it and wanted to participate.

He also mentioned writing groups led by consultants, such as a creative writing and a writing group based on mindfulness. They even have a book club, which consultants are a part of and get to select the book. The director mentioned how he supports consultants and encourages them to present at conferences. He described an example of consultants who had co-authored and published a position paper in *The Peer Review*. He also explained how the consultants maintain the center’s social media and created a social media committee, which has “been great for them to take the lead on that. I think it gives them the opportunity to do something that they perhaps like to do. And then also something to put on their resumes” (Director 3, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

Touching more on the practice of leadership in the center, the director described how most of the weekly staff meetings involve short presentations led by consultants on chosen topics. The weekly meetings aid in allowing consultants to talk about ideas and for newer consultants to learn from the veteran tutors. He added that “it’s emphasizing the conversation that as people graduate or leave the center, that there’s going to be a need for people to continue that group/project...or for people to think of a new idea” (Director 3, personal communication, January 22, 2021). The director also talked about the mentorship program in the center. It started “so that people can volunteer to work with a tutor [consultant] who’s just starting and have a weekly meeting where they will talk about any questions that they have about getting started as a tutor” (Director 3, personal communication, January 22, 2021). Through this mentorship, veteran consultants are put in a leadership role.

When asked to describe the peer leadership in the center, Director 3 explained, “In terms of leadership, I noticed that those spaces are really important for new tutors to interact with veteran tutors” (personal communication, January 22, 2021). He also went on to describe the sense of community built in the center. Going back to the previous example of the book club, the director talked about a student taking a graduate course on writing centers he taught. The student expressed interest in writing her essay about how the book club may have contributed to a sense of community in the center. He further explained how each of the different opportunities help consultants see themselves as leaders. When asked why leadership is important in writing centers, the director answered that,

It first ties to the idea that we see ourselves as a space where we learn from one another. I think most writing center pedagogy [and] composition pedagogy that focus on how we learn from one another and community, instead of decisions just being made by one person or some sort of hierarchical fashion...I think because of that need for us to work together as a group and as a community, that means that people should recognize their own leadership potential. (Director 3, personal communication, January 22, 2021)

Director 3 highlighted that even students who work in the center and have taken the preparation course identified themselves as being shy and concerned with the social skills needed to be a tutor interacting with students on a regular basis. However, what he found was that the consultants develop skills and gain a sense of confidence in themselves. He also found that, from interviewing former consultants, through the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), “a big part of their responses has included the idea that they’ve gone to conferences, [presented in] staff meetings, [had] the opportunity to participate in leadership roles” (Director 3, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

Current Consultant Interviews

Group 1

The first group interview was a group of six undergraduates who worked at the writing center with Director 1. The group included Michael, course embedded consultant (CEC) coordinator and English major, who has worked at the center since Fall 2017.

There was Jessica, CEC, who worked in the center for 4 semesters and is an elementary education major. Carmen, also a CEC, who worked in the center 3 semesters and is a communication disorders major. Lauren, also a communication sciences and disorders

major, is a general consultant this year, and has been at the center 3 semesters. Brittany, a general consultant, has been at the center 4 semesters and is an English teaching major with a creative writing concentration. Finally, Gabriella, a general consultant and English major, has been at the center 2 semesters.

When asked how the consultants feel leadership is incorporated and practiced in their center, several examples were provided. Jessica mentioned the weekly seminars were a good way to build leadership. She had the opportunity to lead one and enjoyed it, explaining how within the seminars, students are learning from one another and are able to grow by leading them. To add, Gabriella described her experiences applying what she has learned in the seminar from discussions and practices to present in classrooms. She spoke about the informal leadership practices within the center, including getting help and advice from other consultants. Gabriella also mentioned, a lot of the time, they are reaching out to one another and “we’re trying to gain insight from each other. And I find it to be very helpful. I definitely feel more confident and improved as a consultant, because I have others to go to” (personal communication, October 30, 2020). Carmen also agreed with this point, describing her first semester working in the center. At the time, she was only a freshman and found it easy to reach out to those around her because everyone was welcoming. Michael also noted the communication channels between the consultants aided in support and building community. Lauren, who served as a CEC and general consultant, felt comfortable transitioning to a general consultant, adding,

Most of the time, I forget that I’m a general consultant, because I still ask the same people for help...Transitioning from both has been really rewarding for me because I just have a bigger community that I can ask help from and just, I guess,

develop my leadership skills even more. (Lauren, personal communication, October 30, 2020)

The group was asked, “do all your opportunities have to be given to you or are you allowed to initiate your own?” Carmen answered that at any point consultants can make resources and share them with other consultants. Brittany touched on an example of a general consultant who noticed a lot of students coming in with punctuation and grammar issues, so they created flyers for students to take home. Also, in her own experience, she created a Google Slides activity for brainstorming during consultations, since being online, consultants did not have the whiteboard to work with students.

When asked how everyone perceives peer leadership, the participants went around and described their experiences. Jessica mentioned when she joined the center, she understood leadership as related to seniority. Starting at a young age, she latched on to the older consultants for help, and then, she began to reach out to consultants all around who have had experiences to learn from and advice to offer. Michael mentioned the sense of camaraderie noting, “I really believe the majority of our consultants and CEC share leadership and perform leadership every day” (personal communication, October 30, 2020). He also echoed the importance of asking questions and learning from the experiences and advice of each other. Touching back on informal leadership, Michael included that “true leadership” is important in the studio. He added that formal positions like directors and coordinators are important, but he also likes “the fact that we’re all willing to listen and talk to each other and help each other regardless of seniority” (Michael, personal communication, October 30, 2020). Gabriella added that, though the role is “peer tutors,” each of them acts as “peer mentors” and they do not often think of

each other as authority figures. They have cultivated an environment where it is okay to make mistakes and have no fear in messing up because, “there’s always going to be someone out there wanting to help you and not just to help you with the project, but just improve you as a consultant in general” (Gabriella, personal communication, October 30, 2020).

Brittany also discussed how she started working at the center at a young age, and it was her first job. In the beginning she was intimidated but soon realized the friendly side of everything. She described how the director often would sit out with the consultants and engage in random conversation and how she has made appointments with other consultants. Speaking more on the impact of the director, Lauren added, in the center, consultants are not scared to ask the director for help. She mentioned that she was also intimidated coming into the center because she was not an English major and was used to clinical writing, but she learned fast, there was nothing to worry about. She attests that being in the relaxed, comfortable environment contributes to the informal leadership. Carmen, agreeing with what everyone said, added that she saw how more experienced consultants were asking questions and quickly learned open communication helped form camaraderie.

When asked about their perceptions of peer leadership, Jessica touched on the growth aspect that comes from building friendships and being in the environment for years. Michael mentioned that he had not thought about peer leadership before working in the center. He mentioned noticing a caring element that takes place in relating to one another empathetically. Jessica added that her perception of leadership has been more

positive since working in the center. Carmen mentioned that before the writing center, she viewed leaders as older individuals but learned how relational peer leadership is.

The group was asked to explain what they are learning about leadership that will be helpful as they develop in their careers. Jessica has learned the mutuality and interchangeable aspect of leadership in being able to help each other. She added, as she grows into her career, she would like to take that with her, “the leadership that is really community based and making sure that we’re growing as a community, [and] we’re helping each other where we can” (Jessica, personal communication, October 30, 2020). Lauren added that the idea of “being a leader” was stressful, but working in the center, she noticed the importance of meeting people where they are and not thinking about being “above” anyone. She also stated, “If I didn’t have this job, I don’t think that I would have been able to be that kind of calm down to earth-like leader” (Lauren, personal communication, October 30, 2020). Brittany, like Jessica, also viewed leadership through authority figures, but working at the center, the peer element is something she wants to take with her in her career. Gabriella added that she learned “leadership is not necessarily someone who is in charge, it’s someone who is a guiding force and is like a resource to you” (Gabriella, personal communication, October 30, 2020). Finally, Michael added that since working in the center, in such an empathetic environment, his idea of leadership has been caring about others, using what he knows to help them, and respect. Carmen mentioned something she struggled with when she came in was being an independent person, adding, “I really don’t like asking for help, but I think that this job has shown me that there’s nothing wrong with asking for help” (Carmen, personal communication,

October 30, 2020). She felt she has grown, and the center has prepared her for her future invoking the positive side of leadership.

Group 2

The second group interview was a group of five undergraduates who worked at the writing center with Director 2. The group included Marie, undergraduate consultant, senior, and psychology major with a communications minor; Tracee, undergraduate consultant, senior, and neuroscience and English double major with a psych minor; Maya, CEC, junior, with a double major in computer science and digital arts and media; Kendra, undergraduate consultant, senior, and English major with minors in philosophy and political science; and Tia, undergraduate consultant, junior, and psychology major with a minor in education and social change. Each student began working in the center in August 2020 (two semesters), with the exception of Kendra who has been working in the center for four semesters.

In discussing the organizational structure of the center, the group made it clear there is no hierarchy in the center and that everyone is equal. There is mentorship that happens, but they even consider those relationships more like a partnership. Going into how leadership is incorporated and practiced in the center, the group touched on the process of getting to work in the center through nominations. They also discussed aspects of consultations involving assisting students with higher-order concerns. Tia mentioned, “I learned that leadership does not always have to be an unfair power dynamic” (Tia, personal communication, January 22, 2021). She described how one of the major points that is communicated in training is that consultants do not have to control every aspect of

a session. In reflecting on a quote an advisor told her back in high school that “leaders eat last,” Maya explained in the group the quote means,

The idea that leaders are there to empower the other people around them to be the best that they can be and to produce and the best work that they can create...I think that leadership is really represented in the writing center in that way. I think a lot of people when they do become writing center [consultants] are already leaders on campus in some form and to be able to translate the work that they’ve already put in, allows that leadership to be amplified more. (Maya, personal communication, January 22, 2021)

Discussing more of the leadership opportunities in the center, Kendra described the in-person workshops that consultants would give to classes. 3-5 consultants would work equally with the class, depending on the size. She said it is a great way to mix tutoring styles and added, “if you have a conversation with a student and you [get] a question, [or] you don’t know how to approach a particular issue, you have three or four other people there with you” (Kendra, personal communication, January 22, 2021). These types of settings further support equality in the center as students work with each other and do the same work together.

Touching on more of the opportunities in and outside of the center, Maya explained the impact of working in the center: “I’ve been able to amplify my own leadership on campus and be able to get practical research experience, because I have the connections and skills that I’ve gained for the writing center” (Maya, personal communication, January 22, 2021). This semester, she had the experience of working with the director and two other consultants to present their reflections at the 2021 SWCA

conference: “That has allowed me to take leadership in another realm of my life” (Maya, personal communication, January 22, 2021). Adding to that point, Marie expressed how she has grown comfortable working with professors and others in authority, providing an example where she asked one of her professors if she could assist them in coding for their research, and explained how two years ago, she would not have had the confidence to ask. According to Marie, the leadership skills she has gained within the writing center have created not only her own voice in writing, but her own voice.

In thinking more about the opportunities allowed for consultants to take initiative, the group agreed they felt comfortable going to the director or a peer to discuss a new idea. Tia added that,

[Director 2] is so apt to hearing what we want to do and what we think would be best. I do think that there is a lot of flexibility between if anybody has any ideas, they’re more than welcome to come forward and provide them. (Tia, personal communication, January 22, 2021)

Discussing their perception of peer leadership, the group went around and provided their past ideas of how they viewed peer leadership. Tia talked about how before she saw it as someone who was involved and held explicit titles. She noted that being in the writing center, she learned one does not necessarily have to always go beyond the work one does, sometimes just being involved is more than enough. Tracee viewed leaders as those who stand back, allowing others to put their ideas out there and help, rather than always being in the spotlight. She explained, “well, it hasn’t changed. I think I believe in that kind of leadership style even more after joining the writing center and just the idea of

contributing ideas and then slowly kind of stepping back a little as your person gets more confident” (Tracee, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

When asked what the group learned about leadership, there were a variety of answers. Maya learned about the individuality aspect of leadership, stating, “the kind of leadership you portray and the way that you access it, is very unique to you, and in order to get the most out of the experience you have to claim and to be able to say to yourself that, ‘I am a leader’” (Maya, personal communication, January 22, 2021). She explained that the number one thing she learned from working in the center is how to go for it: “I think that having that confidence and being able to go for the things that are going to make you a better leader make you a better student in the future” (Maya, personal communication, January 22, 2021). To this point, she even touched on how it is amplified by her status as a woman and seeing how gender plays a role in leadership, regarding claims that women are supposed to stay in the background and not strive for different opportunities like men. With plans of going to grad school, Maya discussed how working in the center gave her opportunities she would not have had, if she did not work there, such as working with different professors and gaining research experience. Kendra, who wants to go into law for human rights, described how her experiences on campus and working in the center have taught that, “leadership is about advocating for other people and being in a position to do that and communicate that” (personal communication, January 22, 2021). She noted that in a leadership position it is important to have conversations with individuals, regardless of seniority, at the same level. The writing center has helped her as she notes, “we’re on that sort of equal level, where yes, I’m tutoring you and you’re my patron, but at the same time, what we’re doing is just having

a conversation about your writing” (Kendra, personal communication, January 22, 2021). Marie, agreeing with the importance of advocacy, added how it was a huge part of what she learned while working in the center. She talked about her post graduate plans to get into clinical mental health work or organizational psychology, and how both fields are about “collaborative advocacy work” (Marie, personal communication, January 22, 2021). She expressed a passion for advocacy and confidence that the opportunities that have been given her in the center will help her to decide which route she wants to take. Echoing the topic, Tia also had a similar takeaway and discussed her goal of going into school counseling with elementary or adolescent kids and what she has learned, stating,

I like the idea that you can personally assume a leadership position in some capacity, and you can have it. You can be so prepared, and you can have your own feelings and ideas and you will never be able to have control or an idea of how the other person perceived that same experience. (Tia, personal communication, January 22, 2021)

Closing off the group interview, Tracee described a message that the director says a lot, “writing is collaborative” (personal communication, January 22, 2021). She noticed how often she has seen it in the center and how it transfers over to leadership. She also added that, as a society, we see leadership as someone against the world; “kind of like leading a charge, which is not at all it, and I think my time in the writing center has really kind of brought that idea home that leadership is a collaborative effort with other leaders” (Tracee, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

Group 3

The third group interview was a group of three undergraduates who worked at the writing center with Director 3. The group included Elizabeth, undergraduate peer tutor, senior and English-creative writing major; Tori, undergraduate peer tutor and writing assistant, senior and English major with pre-law certificate; and Solange, undergraduate tutor, sophomore, and English and psychology major.

Talking about how leadership is practiced and incorporated in the center, the group emphasized how they are all encouraged to be leaders in their own way, especially in weekly staff meetings where everyone is encouraged to come up with ideas. Tori described how in the staff meetings, the director and faculty give the students many opportunities for programs or research and the option to lead the meeting with a song, poem, or story. Elizabeth, speaking of her personal experience, was only working in the center half a semester when she came up with the idea to do the ASL conversation circle. She mentioned, “It wasn’t like I had to wait to have seniority, immediately I talked to [Director 3] and I said I had this idea and, he was like ‘do it 100% we’re behind you’” (Elizabeth, personal communication, February 5, 2021). She also talked about how there is not a strict hierarchy between veteran and new staff members. Solange talked about the conferences that consultants are encouraged to go to and present, and even during the staff meetings, students can give mini presentations about what they presented at the conference. Tori also added that part of the leadership happens in the consultations where they take the initiative in guiding the student and asking questions as well as during class visits when talking about the writing center and sharing information.

Going into the perception of peer leadership in the writing center, the group described how much of a supportive dynamic they have with their faculty and fellow peers and how understanding everyone is. Elizabeth talked about not feeling pressured to do things and how the director and faculty echo the point that, “we’re here to serve what you want to get out of this,” (personal communication, February 5, 2021) and this comes across in each of the meetings. Elizabeth also added that, through the environment of the center and her experience, she has learned,

You get out what you put in...there’s people who just work their hours and that’s totally fine and they’re just as welcome to be a part of a community as people who are going to conferences and doing research and starting language circles and all these things. (personal communication, February 5, 2021)

Agreeing with Elizabeth’s point, Tori mentioned how the community aspect in the center was one of the first things that impressed her. She described how when she first started working, she was shy and a little skeptical but was, “impressed by the encouragement, the support that everybody had” (Tori, personal communication, February 5, 2021). She gave several examples of the community aspect in the center and described the support in the center, giving the example that if there are any announcements about their personal lives, they can share and also celebrate birthdays. Tori described the community as healthy and family-like, and an open and safe place, “especially in these times, where people feel really isolated and kind of far away and disconnected, this is a place where you can kind of come back to what the writing center is based on” (Tori, personal communication, February 5, 2021).

Solange also agreed with the community aspect in the center. She described how she is an active participant in the center, joining clubs and supporting her peers. She mentioned how even though she does not lead any groups, she still feels very much “like a member of the writing center community” (Solange, personal communication, February 5, 2021). She mentioned how when she joined the book club, she started feeling more involved. She further included that, even the people who do not necessarily lead circles, “are beneficial to the center. It’s very much a community where everyone has a role to play, even if that role is you show up at book club and you say one sentence; you did all you needed to do” (Solange, personal communication, February 5, 2021). She also echoed the point Elizabeth made. In her words, even by being less active or an active participant in the center, “everyone’s a leader in their own way, like you have something that you can contribute to some degree” (Solange, personal communication, February 5, 2021).

Solange also touched on missing the dynamic of being in the center in person (versus online) and how things have changed, but she also included how much she still enjoys the engagement that happens through the different clubs and programs the center offers. Tori, who started when the pandemic struck, agreed with this point, reflecting on how when she first started, she did not get to experience being in person and talking with everyone face-to-face. Her first experience in the center was before she started working. She later went on to take the writing course and was offered the position, but still felt, “I didn’t really think I was qualified to be a tutor [consultant], I didn’t think I had enough knowledge...I was surprised how much I was able to help students and how passionate I became about it” (Tori, personal communication, February 5, 2021). She further

described how much more involved she has gotten in the center, attending more meetings and going to the ASL circle, which she described as, “amazing.” Elizabeth, who also started working around the same time as Tori, described the online community, stating,

I still feel that same sense of community because we have the staff meetings, the book club, we also have a bunch of different conversation circles and the writing club and a bunch of just ways that we still feel that connection outside of just being at the center in person. (Elizabeth, personal communication, February 5, 2021)

Talking more about the peer-to-peer relationships happening between the consultants, the group described the encouragement they get from one another. The consultants support and show up for each other. According to Tori, “It’s really awesome to see that kind of coming together and that same kind of community spirit in each and every activity that we do in every single club and program that we have” (Tori, personal communication, February 5, 2021). Solange agreed with this and added how the mentorship program helped her break out of her shell. Like Tori, she mentioned how easy it is to fall in the trap of feeling unqualified to be a consultant, mentioning “there’s so much encouragement to get to know each other and talk about things that are related to writing or unrelated to writing” (Solange, personal communication, February 5, 2021). She also added how the center encourages conversations, not simply about how consultants can improve themselves as consultants, but how they can improve themselves as readers, writers, students, etc. Solange stated, “There’s definitely that encouragement of peers supporting peers, and learning from your peers, like we are all peer tutors [consultants]

but we're also peer tutors [consultants] to each other" (Solange, personal communication, February 5, 2021).

Thinking about their experiences working and what they have learned, Elizabeth learned that leaders do not have to have special qualifications, they just simply have to want to be a leader. The resources and the support will be there, and everything else will fall into place. She described that when she started the ASL circle, she was not fluent in the language and just had a love for it since high school and wanted to start something new in the center. She thought, "Am I qualified to teach it?" Elizabeth expressed that she wanted to be a leader. She told [Director 3] "I'm not fluent, I just want to create a space where people can come and learn together and I'll learn and they'll learn and we'll practice, and he said 'sure'" (Elizabeth, personal communication, February 5, 2021). She also added the personal growth that she experienced working in the center. She explained how working with students who are appreciative and make multiple appointments, and even seeing her peers support her in the language circle she facilitates, helps illustrate the value of one's contributions and to realize one has something to offer.

It just makes me feel really good about what I'm doing in the community, and it makes me value myself more...helping me feel that, like, I was succeeding in something and doing something. So, it's like two-fold right, I believe in myself as a leader, and I also believe in myself as a person, and who I can be for others.

(Elizabeth, personal communication, February 5, 2021)

Tori also agreed about the point of believing in herself. She discussed how working with students allowed her to find her style, voice, and passion. Tori explained that she loves working with students, adding, "I love when I have a consecutive student where they'll

come back to me and they will show me the same assignment and they progress in their writing and I'm like 'that is so good, that sounds really good'" (Tori, personal communication, February 5, 2021). She gave a few consultation examples, including a Non-Native English Speaking (NNES) and another student who had a vision impairment. These interactions have made her feel more confident in her work, and confident in her writing. She shared that the tips and resources she uses to help students are the same tips and resources she uses for her own writing, and "we're all learning but we're all learning together and it's just like that community is the best...you start valuing yourself, you start valuing your own writing and what you have to contribute to others, so it's really awesome" (Tori, personal communication, February 5, 2021).

Solange agreed with the sentiment of finding value in the work and talked about how important it is for consultants to know their worth and what they deserve. Helping students with their writing is not always easy and takes true dedication. Solange added that becoming a consultant was one of the best things that happened to her, and "It's just made me feel really accomplished and made me appreciate myself more" (Solange, personal communication, February 5, 2021).

Finally with the last question, the group had a moment to reflect on everything they learned and discuss their future plans. Tori has plans to go to law school and described how being in the position has helped her to take initiative, be a leader, and assist students. The experience has also motivated her and helped her grow. She admits that before she was in doubt about pursuing the law degree, being a first-generation college graduate, but through working in the center, she knows now how capable she is. The skills she has learned, from working with students and communicating with

professors as a writing assistant, participating in conferences and the conversation circles, doing research, and being part of the community, has built her confidence as a student and consultant. Tori emphasized, “I know those skills, I’m going to take to law school and I’m going to succeed because the writing center helps you build yourself up” (Tori, personal communication, February 5, 2021). Elizabeth touched on taking initiative and putting oneself out there. She has plans of being a writer and described how the route to becoming a writer requires finding opportunities, doing research, and finding value in one’s work, similar to the work she has done and learned in the center. She applied for a Fulbright Grant to teach English in Spain and credits the confidence she gained working in the center to being able to apply in the first place. Elizabeth stated, “having the confidence in my own knowledge to say I’m ready to go somewhere and teach or I’m ready to go somewhere that contributes to somebody else’s education, that 100% came from the writing center” (personal communication, February 5, 2021). Solange, who also hopes to be a writer someday, explained how an important quality of being a leader, is knowing how to support others. She closed the interview stating, “I think it’s important to recognize the fact that everyone has to work together as a community” (Solange, personal communication, February 5, 2021).

Interview 4

This 1:1 interview was with a consultant who worked at the writing center with Director 2 and group 3. She is a junior and English major specializing in linguistics with a minor in public policy and service. She has been working in the center as a writing assistant and undergraduate writing consultant since December 2019 and is part of the social media committee, which she admits is one of her favorite parts about working.

Anna described that she likes being on the committee because she enjoys creating social media content and getting to mesh her job with “expressing creativity” (personal communication, February 8, 2021).

Anna talked about how leadership is incorporated in the center by describing how the center allows student initiatives and values the different ideas that consultants bring. She described how having that kind of environment motivates students to “try and go outside of the box and to expand not only their professional and personal development, but also to expand the writing center” (Anna, personal communication, February 8, 2021). She talked about the planning and decorating committees that existed, and the presentations students can give during staff meetings. She once gave a presentation on helping STEM majors at one of the weekly meetings.

Anna touched on what led her to start working in the center. Her freshman Composition teacher told her that her writing was very good and said if she wanted to improve, she could go to the writing center. She eventually switched her major to English and picked up a certificate in Professional and Public writing and later took the elective course to become a consultant.

In regard to how peer leadership is in the center, Anna discussed how it is created by peer support. She described times when a consultant is starting a new project, other consultants will block off their hours to support them and in turn, they are helping the consultant develop their own leadership skills. Anna explained that, “It helps put the person who wanted to start it in a position to be a leader and to have the confidence to continue what they wanted to start” (Anna, personal communication, February 8, 2021). Thinking more of the specific examples with the different programs in the center, peer

leadership is fostered because all of the programs are student led and student driven. This not only offers more engagement for the staff, but for the students at the university as well. According to Anna, the student centeredness, “really helps build a better environment to build a bigger environment, to where we can reach more students” (Anna, personal communication, February 8, 2021).

In being in such a supportive environment, Anna expressed how much it makes her enjoy working, as she has learned a lot, especially in the staff meetings; “we always are just bouncing off ideas on how to improve ourselves, how to improve tutoring, how to improve our center as a whole, and it just makes it enjoyable to be there and to be in this position” (Anna, personal communication, February 8, 2021). Her future goals are to become a professor in public administration or public policy or become a think tank fellow in Washington. She talked about how important it is that the skills she learns in the center relate to her future work, as she has learned patience, interacting with other students, and being able to see things from different perspectives, which will all be necessary to her goals. She included the aspects of being able to read, write, edit, which will be equally important.

Additionally, thinking about her role as a student employee, Anna explained how her first real job was working in the center, and now, she has more experience and involvement. Considering her work in the center and an internship she has outside the center, Anna explained the importance of drawing personal boundaries and balancing personal life and work. She gave an example of working with a student and trying to make the most out of the appointment time, recognizing that it is okay if a person cannot

get to everything. She gives credit to the supportive group of peers in the center who keep her on track.

Discussing her perception of leadership, Anna admitted it has changed since working in the center. She noted feeling inspired seeing how students can be leaders. She discussed how when she first started working, she was young and witnessed the confidence of the other consultants stepping up and talking about difficult topics. She saw how dedicated the consultants were and how they were “integrating themselves into something that they’re so passionate about and taking the drive and initiative to become a leader” (Anna, personal communication, February 8, 2021). Anna reflected on this and thought, “I want to be like that” (personal communication, February 8, 2021).

Former Consultant Interviews

FC 1

I really don’t think directors have the expertise to know exactly what’s most important for the writers and their staff, unless they ask, and unless they find ways to encourage those people to step up as leaders in the space. I just don’t think we can because we’re not peers.

— FC 1, personal communication (December 16, 2020)

FC 1 was unique from the other directors interviewed. In her current role as director, there are no undergraduate consultants; however, she has had previous experience directing undergraduates and started working in her university’s writing center when she was an undergraduate. The first question asked FC 1 to describe her experiences with writing center work. She explained, as a freshman English major, she visited the writing center and found it useful, so she decided she wanted to work at the

center. FC 1 began working at the writing center as a sophomore, and “It was an on-campus job that I could enjoy. I liked writing. I liked helping writers. It just was something I liked, and I felt was valuable, and just working with [Director 2] was so awesome” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020). She described the atmosphere of the writing center, specifically how she liked the open collaboration and genuine support the director gave.

After graduating, FC1 went on to do traditional work, and then, she decided to go back to school to pursue a master’s degree in English, adding, “When I reflected on my undergrad experience and what was most significant for me, it was the work and the writing center. That’s what I thought was the most valuable” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020). She took a few writing center and theory practice classes, worked in the writing center for the first year, got more involved in writing center studies in the second year, and focused a lot of her seminar papers on writing center theory and practice. During her graduate school experiences, she was a representative for the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) and built relationships with people throughout the field. She stated, it was “really motivating to have that kind of support and just find people that were supportive,” which furthered her continued interest in writing centers (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020). She then decided to apply to Ph.D. programs broadly, while continuing to focus on writing center work and completing an ethnographic study of the writing center for her dissertation. Afterwards, she knew she wanted to be a director for a writing center, stating “That was really sort of my dream job...I was sort of preparing for that, I think, from the beginning, from before I even realized” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16,

2020). She started her career directing a writing center at a public university and loved the experience there.

When asked what peer leadership looked like while working and directing in the centers, FC 1 reflected on her first experiences at the writing center. She explained that “as open the director or the administration is willing to be, that just opens up countless possibilities for peer leadership. I found that students are really interested in leadership opportunities if you present them” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020). Reflecting more on her first experience directing, she explained how she had students enrolled in the Writing Center Theory and Practice class do their own writing center research projects, allowing them freedom to explore whatever they wanted. FC 1 explained, “I wanted them to think about what their interests were and what other knowledge they had and use that to shape what they wanted to do in the writing center” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020). Students came up with ideas like designing a mindfulness workshop, citation workshop, development workshops focused on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and even delivered them in the center. Really setting the stage, the Director expressed to students, “You can do one-on-one tutoring and that can be your primary thing. But if you want to do other things, you can” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020). FC 1 also had a grant for a project focused on cultivating Brave Spaces in the center and hired some writing consultants to facilitate writing groups for students.

FC 1 explained that a lot of peer leadership has been through students pursuing independent projects. She described experiences with graduate students, drawing from their own expertise, involved in opportunities to educate staff and faculty. FC 1 also

emphasized the importance of highlighting, celebrating, and encouraging consultants whenever they did projects. In her new role as director, she sets the same stage, telling consultants, “If you have a project, if you want to try something, if you want to do research, come talk to me and we can find a way to do it” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020). She explained peer leadership as consultants realizing they can have an impact on the work done in the center, as well as the space overall.

Another question asked: Understanding the opportunities for undergraduate peer leadership, how different is it considering working with graduate students now in your current center? While working with graduate students specifically, FC 1 recognizes the job market for students can be tough, so she encourages students to work to distinguish themselves, especially through their work in the center and administrative responsibilities. She also explained the importance of having students from different disciplines bringing new perspectives to help writers and staff.

The final question asked, what is the importance for peer leadership within writing centers? Thinking of the reason writing centers were made and what makes them special and unique on campus with the value of peer-to-peer work, FC 1 explained, “the more that people feel like they have some ownership and say over a space or their work or whatever, how it goes or unfolds, I think the better they’re going to do, and the happier they [will be]” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020). She explained that in her position, she wants to help students with what they are interested in, provide them with resources, and support them along the way. FC 1 expressed, “I only have so many

strengths that I can bring, but when you bring in a whole staff, you have so many more strengths” (FC 1, personal communication, December 16, 2020).

FC 2

Peer leaders are essential for writing centers. For the writing center as a whole, they reinforce a culture of mutual learning and reciprocity. For the peer leaders themselves, they offer important—some might even say career-changing—professional development opportunities.

— FC 2, personal communication (January 21, 2021).

FC 2 is currently working to obtain a Ph.D. in English with a specialization in rhetoric and composition. She received her master’s in writing and bachelor’s in English with a minor in writing. Her writing center journey began in the fall of 2012, where she served as an undergraduate writing fellow for a center that was just starting out at the university. Through her time there, she progressed as a graduate writing fellow, having served as one of the first graduate assistants to the director in the center. She then moved on to another university where she currently teaches and has had a few roles within the center, including Digital Studio Coordinator, Reading-Writing Center Assistant Director, and now, instructor for a peer tutoring course.

When asked to describe her best moments working in the writing center, FC 2 expanded on her 2013 experience presenting at a writing center conference with a panel of other writing fellows for the first time. She explained, “This experience showed me that I could contribute to the writing center community through scholarship,” and “I am really grateful for that experience” (FC 2, personal communication, January 21, 2021). She described how her former director and graduate writing fellows introduced them to

the writing center conference world, helped them craft topics, and sat with them through practice presentations. She also described how in spring 2016, she got to work with a group of undergraduate writing fellows who went on to become peer leaders after she graduated. The group name at the time “was the *adminis* (has since changed to graduate assistant coordinators) and working with them that semester was so rewarding” (FC 2, personal communication, January 21, 2021).

When asked: What has peer leadership looked like while working and directing in the centers? FC 2 had a lot to say about the value of peer leadership. Having felt it from her first moments working in the first center, she admitted feeling intimidated by the graduate students at first, feeling like there would be a hierarchy based on experience, but to her surprise, there was none of that. According to FC 2, “The graduate writing fellows were kind and supportive. They wanted to work with, teach, and even learn from us” (personal communication, January 21, 2021). She described how peer leadership was “deliberately” ingrained in the center, which created a strong team.

Staff are invited into a work culture that values mutual learning and reciprocity.

When I was an undergraduate writing fellow, I looked to two graduate students for guidance. When I became a graduate writing fellow, I saw myself wanting to take on a similar role that would help—in some cases, mentor—undergraduates and new graduate writing fellows. (FC 2, personal communication, January 21, 2021)

Shifting to the current center, FC 2 described how peer leadership helped her learn from an administrative perspective how to prepare peers for the transition of positions that rotate each year. She identified her background working in the first center as providing

the opportunity to be in the administrative position at her current center, along with the help she had from peers, teaching her behind-the-scenes administrative work and the different aspects of the role.

When asked how she incorporated and practiced leadership in her experiences working in writing centers, FC 2 answered that she tries to implement it on a daily basis. In the context of “never losing sight of what happens on the ground level,” FC 2 explained, “It can be easy to get caught up in big picture ideas and issues when you’re in an admin position, but I think it’s so important to connect (and stay connected!) with everyone on staff” (personal communication, January 21, 2021). She also described moments of peer leadership during group workshops and initiatives, from mentoring “new and returning consultants in visual, audio, and film-editing software,” to “leading an initiative to redesign the Digital Studio webpages” (FC 2, personal communication, January 21, 2021). FC 2 has also led a committee to organize Tutor Collaboration Day and in the last year, has led a committee to certify the center.

Discussion

Following the results from each of the interviews, this section analyzes and synthesizes the results to show patterns of peer leadership that exist in writing centers. Each center offers a plethora of experiences related to leadership and peer leadership relevant to the study. Of the correlated interviews between schools, much of what the directors had to say about the center was supported by what the consultants had to say. Consultants had no prior knowledge of what was said during the director interviews. Still, the two interview groups took similar stances on many of the proposed topics. Even with the anonymity provided to participants, it is clear that between director and current

consultant, there is a lot of value and respect for the work taking place in the center. Additionally, FCs provided subsequent reassurance to the value of writing center work and the impact of leadership.

There were many key points identified between interviews with overlapping ideas. Following the descriptive analysis of the interviews, the responses were coded into three categories. The key categories—leadership, agency, and community—became apparent based on coding. Response-based themes were then isolated within each category, speaking to the impact of peer leadership on participants' writing center work as they connect to leadership and writing center literature. These examples demonstrate how working in a writing center influences peer leadership.

Leadership

Writing center work promotes an environment where leadership is fostered in others, formally and informally. Between the support and opportunities present in each of the centers, there were common threads of leadership that supported the peer-to-peer interactions. Working as an undergraduate consultant is an opportunity for exponential professional growth and development as a leader.

Informal Leadership

In the interviews, the current undergraduates discussed the value of undergraduate work. Much like the varying definitions of leadership identified in the literature review, consultants had their own ideas of what leadership was before working in the center. Many of them admit how their views of leadership involved seeing others as authority figures or holding formal positions but quickly realized that leadership is more than a position. As the consultants in Group 1 identified, the non-traditional approach of

informal leadership takes place in many parts of the center. Seniority is not a defining characteristic of leadership nor does it hinder their ability to seek advice from their veteran peers. Hierarchies are flattened and consultants gain a greater sense of ownership over their work.

Interpersonal Leadership

Having strong interpersonal relationships is important to have in any work environment. Drew et al.'s (2008) study calls attention to people skills that are central to effective leadership and engagement. The interpersonal relationships consultants gain in the center foster learning and motivation for work. There is duality in the undergraduate consultant role. In one sense, students act as leaders, and in another, they are learning to be leaders. This position is evident in many of the topics discussed in the results. The consultants who participated in the interviews were, for the most part, very involved in their university, whether it was through clubs and organizations, Greek life, or other forms of student employment (e.g., freshman orientation leader). The research shows that consultants have been making the most of their time at the university and in the center. It was very important to ask students about the impact working in the writing center has had on them, because despite their many roles in the university, writing centers offer a unique environment for fostering growth and transferable skill sets. From the answers the students provided, it was evident that the leadership and experiences they gained from working in the center was valuable and, in many respects, transformative.

Agency

By far, the consensus among directors was to allow consultants free reign to develop. Consultants have agency, meaning they have the capacity to act independently

and to make their own choices and take initiative to start their own programs. Directors have an important role in writing centers that contributes to consultants feeling enabled to have such agency and encourage them to see themselves as stakeholders. Many of the directors not only have the responsibility of directing the writing center, but they also teach, conduct research, and more. Through all of their work, they still make an effort for consultants to have a voice in the center. By recognizing the importance of their roles and taking pride in their work, consultants gain a sense of responsibility and ownership of their leadership development. In turn, they feel valued and happy in the center and take their own meaningful approach to their everyday practices.

Buy-in

Bleakney (2019) offers strategies and recommendations from directors developing ongoing tutor education. One of these suggestions is to “cultivate tutor buy-in.” Through this section, directors expressed their thoughts such as, “putting tutors first,” “flattening the hierarchy,” and “listening to tutors.” FC 1 and FC 2 can attest to the sentiment of “tutor buy-in” based on the dedication and experiences they have had working in the centers as undergraduates and continuing to work in the field. Additionally, each of the interviews with directors and current consultants described the many opportunities presented in the center, including following, facilitating a workshop, or highlighting their passions. Consultants are often able to choose or create their own opportunities in the center. Consultants do not feel micromanaged, and directors want consultants to feel important.

Growth Mindset

A prominent theme identified by several participants was the growth they experienced from working in the center. As Director 1 mentioned, having a “growth mindset” is the focus of the center (personal communication, October 18, 2020). Director 3 even recognized that when many students start working, they may think they are not qualified to work, but eventually, they become confident in their work. Consultants expressed characteristics of imposter syndrome, which comes from being young, having no previous experience, and fearing that they lack the ability to help students. Ultimately, they quickly realized being in the supportive and empowering environment cultivated by the center built their confidence. The growth mindset does not simply imply growing in their roles but goes so far as to include growing as students, researchers, facilitators, and more importantly, leaders.

Community

In terms of community, there was unanimous agreement about a collaborative, positive, and highly supportive environment. Consultants described how they formed friendships among each other and felt supported overall. Working together for 1+ years, consultants developed a sense of “camaraderie” (Michael, personal communication, October 30, 2020). Through the space, mentorship is happening, and consultants are provided with the necessary tools to succeed. As evident in the WCD interviews, centers focus on peer-to-peer engagement; they check in and learn from one another. Additionally, consultants are a part of the planning that goes on in the center, further contributing to the community aspect. As Director 2 puts it, the philosophy of *each one*

teach one, a focused idea to spread knowledge for the betterment of a community, is carried on in the center.

Support

Being in a supportive environment makes all the difference for consultants to feel valued in the center and in their work. From writing groups, language circles, weekly meetings/seminars, consultants are engaging with one another in several capacities. Not only do they work together, but they also make appointments with each other, attend events together, and most important, grow together. Michael, in group interview 1, mentioned the caring aspect of the center and how consultants empathize with one another. Tori, in group interview 3, mentioned the family-like space created in the center. Consultants consider the support they provide to the students they assist and the support among their peers and faculty at the center to be important contributing factors to leadership.

Mentorship

Mentorship was another word used throughout the interviews. The importance of including mentorship in writing centers further supports scholars research on the impact of learning mentoring on the work environment (Drew et al., 2008). Consultants feel comfortable learning from each other and having those peer-to-peer interactions. Mentorship takes on two forms of leadership: newer consultants are being mentored by veteran consultants, putting them in a leadership role, and consultants are also considered mentors to the students they work with, especially in having returning sessions and being in the CEC roles.

All these examples do not come close to capturing the leadership experiences described in each of the interviews. Directors, along with current and former consultants provided unique examples of the work being done in their centers and with each other. When connecting participants' responses with existing literature regarding leadership and writing center work, it is evident how peer leadership is shaped in writing centers. Writing centers are providing consultants with personal and professional development opportunities to apply themselves in the writing center and when they graduate. It is clear, through each of the interviews, how important writing center work is in higher education and the role of leadership. Opportunities are abundant, undergraduates are supported, encouraged, and empowered. Each of the centers have a lot to offer and undergraduates have taken advantage of the opportunities, recognized the importance of their work, and have learned a lot in the process about themselves, their professionalism, and even their passions. This study demonstrates that three common elements shape peer interactions in writing centers: leadership, agency, and community. When these elements are provided in the centers, consultants and directors benefit together, and there is even the possibility for consultants to continue their careers in the field, as evident through the interviews with FC 1 and FC 2.

Conclusion

This thesis examined how undergraduate peer leadership in the writing center is important to the experiences of writing center work. The findings suggest that writing center work can significantly and positively impact the leadership development of consultants. Findings also suggest that writing centers positively impact consultants' and directors' perceptions of the importance of leadership, while enabling room for personal

and community development. Most importantly, writing centers are a space for students to build character and indulge in several traits attributed to being a leader. Consultants recognize the leadership potential of working inside the writing center. They are practicing peer leadership every day. There is an added value to the importance of discussing the growth and development that is taking place.

The intention of this study is to continue a conversation about student leadership in higher education, specific to writing center spaces. As mentioned in the literature review, the function of leadership is to grow, learn, produce, and make a difference, as is the work of leadership in the center. We have seen examples of undergraduates starting new initiatives in the center, providing new resources, and learning from one another: there is no limit to the power of peer leadership. What we learn from other centers and the peer leadership that is present can be valuable research and learning tools for centers to follow and implement. Every center is unique, and each staff member brings their own unique attributes. Adding leadership to the equation, all this combined can create an empowering and dynamic relationship for all parties involved. As a result, the consultants benefit from the opportunities.

We need young students to understand leadership, not for what Merriam-Webster defines it to be, but for what experiences like working in the writing center allow it to be. It starts with peer-to-peer work. We must continue this work and foster this perception of peer leadership, not only for the success of students' futures, but for the success of writing centers all around. From this research, three elements—agency, mentorship, and support—can be emphasized for centers looking to increase peer leadership in the center. With agency, directors must empower consultants by giving them opportunities to

develop leadership qualities and make their own choices. Through mentorship, a formalized approach must be taken to enable consultants to build community and continue on their development. Mentorship should be intentional and impactful. It must go beyond the task of developing as a consultant. Lastly, with support, consultants' voices need to be heard and centers must embrace their ideas, allow their creativity to spark, and uplift them. As showcased in the interviews, many consultants come up to directors with ideas, and directors provide them with the resources to develop the plan. More of these exchanges need to happen, along with achievement recognition outside of the center. Utilizing these recommendations, consultants will feel like they matter, that they are getting more out of student employment, and directors will have increased buy-in/retention, helping leadership to continue to strive in the center.

Limitations

Interviews conducted with directors and current consultants from each center do not represent the entire center, they are merely a small sample voicing their opinions of their experiences working. Furthermore, the interviews for this research were limited as far as availability. Five original universities and colleges were chosen to get a diverse range of perspectives. The goal was to hear from writing centers and directors from a large scale, private, liberal arts, and a historical Black university, as well as a 2-year community college. However, due to changes in administration, structures within the center, and failure to respond, interviews were conducted with a new direction. Nonetheless, the schools included provided enough information, but not as much if more schools had participated.

Further Research

This study acknowledged the importance of leadership in writing center spaces. Writing centers provide student workers with much more opportunities than the apparent help with student writing. Writing center work is valuable, and the skills are transferable. It is not merely a job, but a chance to grow. As students grow professionally, they are developing as leaders. The peer-to-peer engagement and support instilled in centers allows for students to make the most out of their time working. Further research should include more case studies studying more centers to demonstrate the leadership and value of writing centers. To encourage leadership in the centers, directors should provide consultants with support to branch off from consultations and explore areas they are increasingly interested in. Further research could explore the growth scale of undergraduates who work at the center two years or more, and alumni experiences with leadership. As evident in the FC interviews, further examination can look into consultants who stay within the writing center field versus those who leave for different fields. Information about patterns of leadership that emerge in the center can help to quantify how beneficial working in the center is and staying in the field can be.

Writing centers need to explicitly showcase themselves as leadership spaces. In higher education, the roles of resident assistant, orientation leader, or club president are often regarded as leadership roles for students, we seldom hear of the writing consultant in this category. If leadership is happening in the center, further research needs to support how. Hutchison (n.d.) compiled a list of 100 mission statements from writing centers in the U. S. in order to analyze how writing centers advertise their work through mission statements posted on their websites. Of all the mission statements compiled, only four

directly mentioned the word *leadership*. Broadcasting leadership within the center serves not just to amplify the work of the center, but to further recognize writing centers for what they are and debunk the common “fix-it shop narrative.”

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Appendix A. Study Introduction Message

Hello [participant name],

My name is Sabrina Louissaint, and I am a master's student in the Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program at Nova Southeastern University. I am currently completing my master's thesis and wondered whether you might participate in my study.

The study is ultimately seeking to understand what peer leadership looks like in the writing center for undergraduate consultants and assess the nature of peer leadership in the WC environment, to not only understand its effectiveness, but to also contribute this knowledge to the field. I am reaching out to several writing center directors to get a better understanding of their experience with undergraduate consultants' peer leadership in the writing center. For this study, I am asking you to participate in one interview that should last approximately 30-45 minutes. This interview will be conducted via Zoom.

In addition, I am hoping to interview a group of peer consultants in your center. Would it be possible to work with you to arrange this type of interview? Please note that all results will be anonymized, and direct correlation will not be made between director and their consultants.

Your contribution to this study will help provoke a conversation about undergraduate perception of peer leadership in the writing center.

If you are interested in participating, I would love to hear back from you, and we can discuss the next steps. Thank you in advance!

All Best,

Sabrina Louissaint

Appendix B. Informed Consent Form



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
 3301 College Avenue
 Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796
 PHONE: (954) 262-5369

NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled *Undergraduate Perception of Peer Leadership in the Writing Center*

Who is doing this research study?

College: Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Principal Investigator: Sabrina Louissaint, B.A.

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Kevin Dvorak, Ph.D.

Site Information: Online, web-based

Funding: Unfunded

What is this study about?

This is a research study designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to research what peer leadership looks like in the writing center for undergraduate consultants and assess the nature of peer leadership in the writing center environment, to not only understand its effectiveness, but also contribute this knowledge to the field.

Why are you asking me to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this research study because you currently serve as an undergraduate writing center consultant.

This study will include about 25 people.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?

While you are taking part in this research study, you will complete 1 group interview that will last roughly 30 minutes.

Research Study Procedures – As a participant, you will complete one 30-45-minute, group interview with the researcher through Zoom video conferencing. Interview questions will pertain to your experience working with undergraduate consultants.

Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study, but you may request that it not be used.

What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will contribute to the understanding of undergraduate peer leadership in writing centers.

Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

How will you keep my information private?

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. All confidential data will be kept securely on a password-protected computer and in the researcher's possession. Recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer. Interviews will be transcribed using headphones and pseudonyms will be given to participants to protect participants' privacy. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files from all researcher computers.

Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?

This research study involves audio recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure

that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to the recording.

Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:

Sabrina Louissaint, B.A. can be reached at [REDACTED].

If primary is not available, contact:

Kevin Dvorak, Ph.D. can be reached at 954-262-8108.

Research Participants Rights

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790

IRB@nova.edu

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

All space below was intentionally left blank.

Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Tell the researcher you agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights agreeing to this form.

AGREE TO THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research.

Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent Signature Section

The Participant has voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

Printed Name of Person Obtaining
Consent and Authorization

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent &
Authorization

Date

Appendix C. Director Interview Questions

Questions for Directors

Name:

University:

Name of WC:

Role:

Staff size (# of grad/undergrad)

What is the organizational structure of your WC?

How do you incorporate/practice leadership in your WC? What does peer leadership look like in your WC?

How do the undergraduates in your center perceive peer leadership?

Can you describe opportunities for peer leadership that you give to your consultants?

Do opportunities have to be given, or are consultants allowed to initiate them?

Appendix D. Current Undergraduate Consultant Interview Questions

Name:

University:

Major:

Role:

Staff size (# of grad/undergrad)

How many years have you worked as (role)?

How many hours per week do you work in the WC?

What is the organizational structure of your WC?

How do you feel leadership is incorporated/practiced in your WC? If it is not, why?

Can you describe the peer leadership opportunities provided to you?

Do all your opportunities have to be given to you, or are you allowed to initiate your own? How do you perceive peer leadership?

What does peer leadership look like in your WC?

Has your involvement in the WC influenced your perception of peer leadership?

Can you provide what you are learning about leadership that will be helpful as you develop in your career?

Appendix E. Former Undergraduate Consultant Interview Questions

Name:

University:

Name of WC:

Major/Program:

Role:

Can you describe your experiences with writing center work, from the beginning to where you are now?

Has your involvement in writing center work influenced your perception of peer leadership?

From your time as an undergraduate consultant, what led you to become a director?

What has peer leadership looked like while working/directing in the centers you have been in?

How do you (if applicable) incorporate/practice leadership in your writing center?

Understanding the opportunities for undergraduate peer leadership, how different is it considering working with graduate students now in your current center?

What is the importance for peer leadership within writing centers?