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### A Lasting Community in the Writing Center

This is a paper about community, and a major part of the development and success of communities is the resource that more knowledgeable and experienced members provide. In RHET 302, the class Writing Associates take as part of their training, Professor Tennyson O'Donnell constantly reminds us of our relationship to the students we are tutoring: we are future versions of them. We are who they want to become through their sessions at the Writing Center. We, whether we see ourselves this way or not, are the more knowledgeable and experienced writers to most of the students coming into the center, particularly those there of their own volition. Through my analysis of the alumni book originally created by Elizabeth Goetz, *The Writing Edge*, I have realized that we, current Writing Associates, are to the student what the Writing Center alumni are to us. They are the more experienced versions of us. They have already left their days at Trinity and our writing center behind and entered into the professional world, like all of us eventually will. Yet, my deep-dive into *The Writing Edge* has shown me that the community fostered by the Writing Center lingers throughout the lives of Writing Associates. Our success is possible because of the continued devotion of alumni that are invested in our community and its success. Now more than ever, because of the tragedy and isolation caused by Coronavirus, we must hold onto and utilize this community. This paper will begin by analyzing how the Writing Center has managed to remain united within the Trinity community throughout the issues presented by the global pandemic and continues to do so. Then, I will move into how this community exists and persists in the “outside world” allowing for a cycle of give and take that promotes the advancement of the Writing Center.

When Trinity students were sent home for spring break in March of 2020, there was an expectation that we would not be returning for the remainder of the semester and would instead work remotely to stop the outbreak of COVID-19. For those of us who packed heavy for this trip, a smart decision was made because students in fact did not return to campus to retrieve the rest of their belongings for months. At this point, the information coming from the administration was vague. Change happened suddenly and frequently and required constant adaptation from everyone, including the Writing Center. In order to determine how the Writing Center managed this situation, I interviewed Lyn Kelly, the current administrative assistant for the Writing Center. She provided me with a timeline of the Writing Center's response to Coronavirus. Her and Tennyson O'Donnell, the Director of the Writing Center, began planning for a possible move to the virtual realm over spring break. Like many students, they were hopeful for a return to campus but prepared for the worst. The administration encouraged them to continue to find a way to offer services online, if possible. This support demonstrates how the administration views the Writing Center as an important resource for students and a valued part of the Trinity community. Not every writing center in the country sees such appreciation from their administration. In "A Brief History of University Writing Centers: Variety and Diversity," Susan Waller recalls how Stephen North identified "example after example of misunderstanding and of condescension towards centers" (10). At Trinity, we are lucky to not have this experience, especially in a difficult time like that presented by COVID.

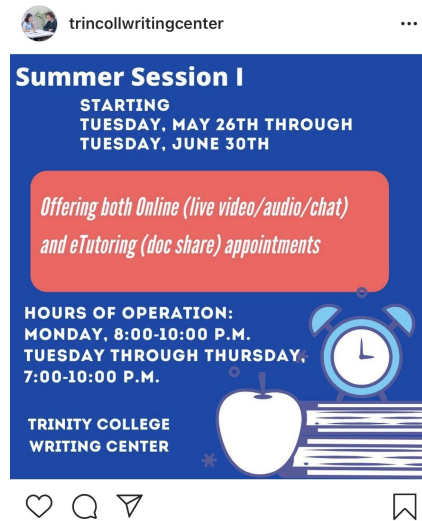
Once the official decision to make the rest of the semester remote was announced, Lyn surveyed the Writing Associates to see who would be interested in continuing their work. As much as the administration supports the Writing Center, the center in turn cares about its tutors. It was a very stressful time, and no student was required to continue working. The mental and

physical health and wellbeing of the community came first for the Writing Center. In fact, even in normal semesters, associates are allowed to take a step back from their job if the workload becomes overwhelming or for personal reasons like mental health. Amazingly, all but one tutor replied that they would like to continue tutoring. Even some of the students that had previously been abroad (and thus were not working for the semester) that had to return home early reached out to Lyn to ask if they could work as well. Similar to how the Writing Center cares for its tutors, here we see that the tutors equally care about the Writing Center community and the community it supports, the student body. To further help ease the burden of associates and considering that they would now be using their own resources, such as internet and computers, Lyn and Tennyson decided to do only eTutoring in the spring, rather than a combination of eTutoring and online like was done in the fall and summer. ETutoring appointments are asynchronous. The student uploads their paper, and the tutor is expected to work on the paper for up to an hour and read approximately six pages in that time. The tutor then returns it with edits and suggestions through WCOonline no later than 24 hours after the appointment. WCOonline is the scheduling and data collection service used by the Trinity College Writing Center. Although that same sense of community that is easily fostered in face-to-face sessions was more difficult through eTutoring, the efforts that the Writing Center and its staff went through to continue to provide for students was appreciated and helped to maintain that bond. Upon transitioning, WCOonline advised the Writing Center on how to make the transition to eTutoring when it came to scheduling, and Lyn worked hard to create a new schedule based on the response from tutors about their availability and interest in working.

After Lyn and Tennyson determined a game plan for moving forward, the Writing Associates had to adapt their in-person tutoring skills and strategies to an asynchronous, online

form. To help them succeed, Lyn created a written guide both for tutor and tutee use to help navigate the new platform. A Moodle page was also established for tutors with resources about online tutoring as a form of training. Tennyson emailed associates with vague, general advice for how to tutor on a new platform, but for the most part, it was emphasized that tutors should continue to use the skills they have already honed in their in-person tutoring sessions. Thus, things changed but in many ways stayed the same. That sense of familiarity was a comfort to many in an unfamiliar time. The Writing Associates were able to continue their work and remain entrenched in the Writing Center community and, along with the rest of the student body, found that they could count on the Writing Center and their support even in the darkest of times.

An interesting change that came out of the shift to remote tutoring was the inaugural summer session following the end of spring semester. Only two tutors were employed for the entirety of the two five-week summer sessions, and just twelve hours of tutoring were offered per week because the student body is significantly smaller in the summer. Figure 1 demonstrates how social media was used to promote the new addition to the Writing Center schedule. Social media is often used by the Writing Center to promote community engagement. They feature new and graduating associates, share upcoming events, and do polls for events like the National Day of Writing. Social media was more important than ever, as in-person community was difficult to come by in the fall 2020 semester.



**Figure 1: Post from the Writing Center’s Instagram account advertising the beginning of the first ever summer session offered by the Writing Center.**

Also seen from Figure 1, the first summer session is when online tutoring was introduced to the Writing Center. It was the perfect opportunity to begin understanding the technology in a lower-stakes, smaller scale scenario. Online tutoring differs from eTutoring in that it is synchronous. Tutors and tutees meet over video chat, and WOnline offers a service that allows the two to edit a paper together in a way similar to Google Docs. It is important to note that eTutoring and online tutoring were not terms determined by the Writing Center. They were created by WOnline. Early in the fall, the similarity of the terms presented a challenge for Writing Associates as they attempted to differentiate between the two.

The value of community is further demonstrated by the fact that the Writing Center notices the needs of the student body as well as the tutors and adjusts its action. Many of the changes in the Writing Center are related to changes in Trinity’s course requirements. Following the addition of online tutoring to our center, Lyn updated the online guide she had previously created for associates and students to include the new form. For further training, Lyn hosted a Zoom session in which she walked associates through the new technology. The practice time

allowed by the remote summer 2020 sessions is crucial because of how Trinity College restructured the semesters in response to COVID-19. Instead of requiring a minimum of 4 credits and a maximum of 5.75 credits per semester, they combined fall 2020 with J-term 2021 and spring 2021 with summer 2021 sessions. For example, students are allowed to take between 4 and 5.75 credits between fall and J-term without the extra cost that J-term normally is. Because J-term and the summer sessions are to be fully remote, the plan will allow for a less crowded campus during the regular semester and lower the risk of a COVID outbreak. However, because there will be far more students taking classes in J-term 2021 and summer 2021 compared to the previous summer when online tutoring was implemented, it is necessary for the Writing Center to adjust how they handle completely remote tutoring. Lyn tells me that the current plan is to have five or six associates working these mini semesters and offer fifteen to eighteen hours of tutoring a week. Thus, there will be a significant increase from two tutors and twelve hours, but there will still be less hours and tutors available compared to fall 2020.

There is a similar change occurring when it comes to changes from fall 2020 to spring 2021; they are currently monitoring student preference when it comes to online versus eTutoring appointments. According to Lyn, online appointments tend to fill up more quickly than the asynchronous option. She assumes that tutors also prefer online but is hoping to gain more clarity with the upcoming availability survey to determine the tutoring schedule for J-term and spring 2021. As things stand now, the Writing Center is planning to offer more online appointments moving forward, especially in the spring, because that is the desire of the community as a whole. The preference of online appointments in and of itself demonstrates the value of face-to-face interaction, or as close as it can be, when it comes to community building. Tutors and tutees alike enjoy the form of communication and conversation only possible through live sessions. The

Writing Center administration recognizes these benefits and the response that they elicit and work diligently to provide the best possible service and work experience to their community.

These changes being made to the Writing Center because of the pandemic are important because a number of them may be here to stay. For instance, Lyn remarks that the response to both the eTutoring and online options has been positive. Her claim is supported by the system analytics compiled by WCOonline via the anonymous surveys sent out to students after each appointment. I think the message of the student body is conveyed particularly well by one student's response to the question regarding how the Writing Center could be improved: "I have no complaints, especially considering COVID." There is a respectful recognition that the Writing Center is working hard and doing the best they can to provide for the student body during an unprecedented time. Yes, there are a few complaints about the platform (WCOonline is still working out the kinks because its online tutoring option was not widely used up until this point), but there are no complaints about the efforts of the associates or the center; rather, there are compliments about the help that students have received from tutors. Furthermore, despite any glitches in the system, 100% of students have said they can see themselves returning to the Writing Center based on the experience they have had this semester. The return percentage is the most important number in regards to community. It demonstrates that the Writing Center makes students feel so welcome that every single student could see themselves coming back and continuing to be a part of the community. 99.22% agreed that they made progress on their assignment during their visit. More impressively, 85.93% of students either agree or strongly agree that they improved as a writer. Based upon this response, Lyn believes that both forms will likely continue to be offered, even if only for a few appointments a week. Because tutors will remain tutoring online in some capacity, RHET 302, the course required for new Writing

Associates, will have to keep current changes to curriculum that discuss the specifics of online tutoring. A change in platforms also led to a slight change in the structure of tutoring sessions. Previously, sessions were often half an hour, or a student could book multiple sessions back to back if they needed more time for a longer assignment. Now, all sessions are booked for one hour. Although tutors are always paid for the entire hour of the appointment regardless of its actual length, Tennyson has mentioned that the Writing Center administration will be analyzing the total time spent on the session to determine the length of appointments the Writing Center should offer going forward. Once again, we see how the adaptation of the Writing Center to best suit the needs of its tutors and tutees continues to create a sense of community.

While there is not enough information to analyze how COVID-19 has impacted community amongst the Writing Center alumni, the way community on campus has moved beyond and into the “real world” can be analyzed generally. The Trinity writing center community would not be as strong as it is without the continued support of the alumni. After all, what kind of community ends immediately after graduation? Thus, I have combined my study of the community fostered in the Writing Center on campus, especially in times of Coronavirus when community is hard to come by, with the study and slight addition to the alumni book created by Elizabeth Goetz. *The Writing Edge* includes survey results from Writing Associates from the class of 1990 until 2014 in its original form. I sent a slightly adjusted survey to graduates from 2015-2020 (see Appendix) to update it. My survey featured the original questions asked by Goetz as well as two additional questions to account for the changing environment of the world due to COVID-19. To study how the community produced by the Writing Center has changed and stayed the same over the past thirty years, I data-mined the various profiles. The number of alumni interested in being a part of the project (39) already speaks to the strength of



the community. I looked most closely at graduation year, the impact of the Writing Center on career paths, the advice alumni would give to current Writing Associates, and their willingness to attend future Writing Center events. I separated the responses into three distinguishable time periods: the 1990s, the 2000s, and the 2010s. Alumni were sorted into these decades based upon the year they graduated.

When it came to finding patterns in the impact of the Writing Center on alumni, I began by reading over all thirty-nine profiles contained in *The Writing Edge* (Table 1). Then, I determined the main impact the Writing Center had on the path that alumni took post-graduation. It was easier to determine this for some than others. Some alumni responded with a brief sentence about the impact they recognize the center as having. Others wrote long paragraphs with various points. In the end, I found five different categories of impact. The percentages found in Table 1 add up to 100% for each decade because each alumni response was placed in only one category. The total percentages, which show overall how many alumni described a certain impact, also add up to 100%. I chose to use a 1:1 ratio because some categories are the “next level” of other categories. For instance, some alumni described realizing they enjoyed helping others as an effect of working at the Writing Center. However, unlike other alumni, they did not specify directly that it influenced their choice in career, so they are not included in that category. Responses such as discovering talent for writing and improving writing is a precursor to those who specify that their basis in writing is helpful every day in their current jobs. Others that mention developing skills beyond writing are often not suggesting that their basis in writing is not crucial for their jobs, only that in addition to honing writing skills they have developed additional skills such as communication, leadership, or revising colleagues’ work while maintaining their original voice.

**Table 1: Impact of Writing Center on Professional Life of Former Writing Associates**

Year Graduated	Discovered talent for writing and honed that talent	Realized they found enjoyment in helping others	Basis in writing is crucial to current job	Developed skills beyond writing that are crucial to current job	Directly stated influence on choice in career
1990-1999	3/9 = 33.3%	2/9 = 22.2%	3/9 = 33.3%	1/9 = 11.1%	0
2000-2009	2/18 = 11.1%	0	9/18 = 50%	5/18 = 27.8%	2/18 = 11.1%
2010-2018	4/12 = 33.3%	0	1/12 = 8.3%	1/12 = 8.3%	6/12 = 50%
Totals	9/39 = 23.1%	2/39 = 5.1%	13/39 = 33.3%	7/39 = 17.9%	8/39 = 20.5%

In the tables, I include both unreduced fractions and percentages. I chose to do this because it better allows the reader to analyze the data moving from decade to decade and from category to category throughout the decade, since there was not an equal amount of responses per decade. The individual percentages are useful for finding patterns across decades or between decades, and the total percentages demonstrate the most common and least common impacts regardless of graduation year. Here are the most notable patterns found by data mining *The Writing Edge* demonstrated in Table 1:

- The two equally most identified impacts of the Writing Center on alumni from 1990-1999: discovered talent for writing and was able to hone that skill at the Writing Center and basis in writing is crucial to current job.
- Two alumni from 1990-1999 were the only former associates to specifically identify realizing the enjoyment in helping others as an impact. This category is therefore also the least common impact.

- When it comes to honing skills beyond writing, most alumni that identified this impact graduated between 2000-2009. It is the second largest impact from that decade and the fourth largest overall.
- Half of all Writing Associates that graduated from 2000-2009 claimed that writing was crucial to their current job and the basis they gained at the Writing Center was extremely helpful. This category is also the most common overall.
- However, very few alumni fell into the category of writing being crucial to their line of work from the years 2010-2018. Instead, there was a large increase in explicit statements of working at the Writing Center directly influencing choice of career. This category is the third largest overall, with discovering and honing writing talent in second.

The fact that the Writing Center has a notable impact on life after graduation according to every respondent to the survey shows the value and endurance of the lessons and experiences gained from being a part of the community. From many of the categories listed, it is clear that former associates continued to seek out places of work that value community as well, especially those that claim a direct impact on their choice of career. Belonging to a strong community like the Writing Center in their formative college years pushed them to continue pursuing opportunities of community. Some continue to pursue opportunities in which they can help others (with writing and with other things). Others that have noticed the development of useful skills like strong communication or leadership qualities demonstrate the qualities that are fostered in Writing Associates, qualities that are important to the strength of community.

Table two, the table describing the patterns in advice given to current Writing Associates by former Writing Associates, varies from Table 1 because the percentages do not add up to 100%. This is because several alumni offered more than one piece of advice. Sometimes they

were related and could be marked as one larger piece of advice and put into one category, but other times they were vastly different and had to be counted as such. I wanted to identify how many alumni gave a certain piece of advice rather than what the pieces of advice were generally. Overall, there were forty-four different pieces of advice given from thirty-eight former associates. (One chose not to include a piece of advice in her profile.) After once again combing through every profile in the book, I sorted the advice given into six main categories. Two pieces of advice remain uncategorized.

**Table 2: Advice Given to Current Writing Associates by Former Writing Associates**

Year Graduated	Keep writing	Learn from others	Do what you love	Enjoy/remember time at WC	Continue to use skills learned at WC	Advice Pertinent to working at WC	Uncategorized
1990-1999	2/8 = 25%	2/8 = 25%	2/8 = 25%	0	1/8 = 12.5%	2/8 = 25%	0
2000-2019	3/18 = 16.7%	5/18 = 27.8%	1/18 = 5.6%	2/18 = 11.1%	6/18 = 33.3%	4/18 = 22.2%	2/18 = 11.1%
2010-2018	0	3/12 = 25%	0	1/12 = 8.3%	3/12 = 25%	5/12 = 41.7%	0
Totals	5/39 = 12.8%	10/39 = 25.6%	3/39 = 7.7%	3/39 = 7.7%	10/39 = 25.6%	11/39 = 28.2%	2/39 = 5.1%

Here are the most notable trends in advice given by former Writing Associates to current Writing Associates:

- Overall, the most popular type of advice is that which is pertinent to current work being done in the Writing Center. Advice in this category included bringing back the *Writing Associate Journal* and working with people living in Hartford. Notably, the first two suggestions here are deeply embedded in ideas of community. One suggests bringing

Hartford residents into the community and another would strengthen the bonds between associates. Furthermore, such advice demonstrates the continued investment that alumni have in the work being done in the Writing Center, even though it no longer affects them.

- Closely trailing behind this category are the recommendation that Writing Associates continue to learn from others now and after graduation. This category appears equally as frequently as the idea that current associates can and should continue to use the skills they have learned in the Writing Center in their future professions. Interestingly, these two pieces of advice are similar in their relationship to community. They are two sides of the same coin. One is recommending that students always remember they have more to learn and can learn it from mentors and professionals and also from the students they help. The other is suggesting that associates continue to use their skill set to help others (and themselves) post-graduation.
- The love that Writing Associates have for writing is apparent in the fact that 12.8% say current associates should keep writing throughout life. 7.7% also recommend doing what you love and following your passion. For many of these alumni, writing is that passion in one sense or another. Their love for the center itself is also apparent through the 7.7% that claim current associates should enjoy their time at the Writing Center while it lasts. Alumni clearly remember their experience at the center, being a part of the community, fondly.
- Only one of thirty-nine respondents chose not to include a piece of advice in their profile. The willingness of former Writing Associates to help current associates and the Writing Center succeed shows their continued connection to the community.

From the impact of the Writing Center on alumni career paths, the lasting effects of the Writing Center community are apparent. The desire of former Writing Associates to give back to the community that enables their success after graduation is clear from the amount of crucial, thoughtful advice given. The final aspect of community demonstrated by *The Writing Edge* is alumni willingness to attend future writing center events (Table 3). This final table is similar to Table 1 in the way the percentages add up to 100%. I carefully read through every response to the question of current location and interest in attending events at the center, and created four categories based on the patterns I noticed in responses.

**Table 3: Alumni Willingness to Attend Future Writing Center Events**

Year Graduated	Yes	No	If I'm in the area or if the event is in my area	No response
1990-1999	4/9 = 44.4%	1/9 = 11.1%	0	4/9 = 44.4%
2000-2009	10/18 = 55.6%	1/18 = 5.6%	3/18 = 16.7%	4/18 = 22.2%
2010-2018	7/12 = 58.3%	0	2/12 = 16.7%	3/12 = 25%
Total	21/39 = 53.8%	2/39 = 5.1%	5/39 = 12.8%	11/39 = 28.2%

The responses to this survey question tell us several things about alumni willingness to attend future writing center events:

- Over half of all survey respondents would be willing to attend future events at the Writing Center.
- The more time has passed since alumni have graduated seems to correlate with less interest in events. However, it does not vary too greatly. 44.4% of graduates from 1990-1999 answer yes, and still, only one of nine say no. There is a notably larger lack of response from this group.

- Most people don't outright say no: only 2 out of 39 did, and one of these qualified her statement by saying she would still be happy to help out in any way she could. For those who did not respond, most included their current location but not whether they would be interested in attending future events. In these cases, the current location was typically pretty far from Hartford. Thus, these responses can likely be taken as a no. Yet, the pattern of unwillingness to say "no" directly demonstrates the care and regard they have for the Writing Center. It is likely that they want to come and would do so if possible, and they don't want to suggest the opposite by saying no, so they instead leave the question unanswered. It is the other side of the coin when compared to the response that an alumni will come if the event is in their area or they are in the Hartford area. Ideally, they would love to feel the sense of community that alumni events provide, but it is not always possible due to various constraints. Therefore, hardly any former associates suggest a *disinterest* in attending events.

The Writing Center clearly fosters an amazing community on campus and beyond it. With remote tutoring, the Writing Center is in people's homes and dorm rooms. In times of Coronavirus and with the added pressure of political polarization, community is more important than ever. As students, we are lucky to have a resource and place to go like the Writing Center on campus; as tutors, we are even luckier to be able to consider the Writing Center as a part of our lives for the rest of them. To make our community even stronger, I have a few suggestions moving forward to help connect the alumni to current students. Social media is an easy way to stay connected and updated within a community. It could be interesting to feature alumni updates on Instagram every once in a while. An alumni could be chosen from the book, and a short summary of their journey after the Writing Center could be shared. This would likely require

reaching out to the alumni to make sure that they would be okay with this and checking for any additional, recent news they would like to include. One former Writing Associate, Emily Turner '18, suggested to me that one way the Writing Center could continue to support alumni is to have a job board to keep alumni up to date about any career opportunities the center is aware of. This could also be useful for current associates on the cusp of graduation. Another way to make the alumni more present in the lives of current Trinity students is to create something on the website similar to the display of what students have to say about the help they have received at the Writing Center. This display could feature advice from former associates on the importance of writing and learning from others and any other advice that could benefit the entire student body. Finally, I would say that every current associate should read the alumni book if possible.

Through my reading of *The Writing Edge*, I found a community of people that love writing as much as I do and have found ways to incorporate it into their lives however they possibly can. I found a wealth of knowledge and advice from people who have been where I have been. I found why the work we do in the Writing Center matters, not just now and not just to the students we help, but to us, for the rest of our lives. This paper demonstrates that all Writing Associates could benefit from the experience of reading about the alumni the way that I did. I would like to end this paper with the piece of advice from Britt Lee '93 that I found most beautiful in *The Writing Edge* that aptly demonstrates the sense of community that the Writing Center represents: "Write! And be kind to those who are still learning how to do that. Love the message behind their words as you guide them toward the best ones."



Appendix

Dear Former Trinity College Writing Associate,

My name is Sara Lambert, and I am currently a junior at Trinity College and a new Writing Associate at the Writing Center. I am reaching out to you because I am continuing a project begun by Elizabeth Goetz in 2015 as part of my final project for RHET 302. Some of you may be familiar with the amazing alumni book she put together titled *The Writing Edge: Profiles of Past Writing Associates*.

Her book contains profiles of past Writing Associates, but it has not been updated to include you! Thus, I am contacting as many associates as I can that graduated from 2015-2020. The goal of the project is to connect the current Writing Associates with the alumni of the Center and to foster a community of past, present, and future Trinity College Writing Associates. It will also provide a way to keep track of those who have worked at the Center.

In order to add you to the book of Writing Center alumni, I would appreciate if you would take a few minutes to respond to the following questions by replying to this email. These are the same original questions asked by Elizabeth:

1. In what year did you graduate from Trinity College?
2. What did you do after graduating from Trinity, and what is your current profession?
3. Did your experience at the Writing Center impact your career path?
4. What advice would you give to current Writing Associates?
5. Where are you currently located? If you are regionally located, would you be willing to attend future events at the Writing Center for alumni and students?
6. What is the best way to contact you?

In addition to adding you to the alumni book, I am attempting to update the recent writing center history. We have undergone many changes this semester and the previous one because of the COVID-19 pandemic. To tie these projects together and because I believe institutions should give back to their alumni the same way they expect their alumni to give back to them, I would like to ask the following questions if you are comfortable sharing this information:

7. How was your employment situation impacted by the pandemic?
8. Is there anything the Writing Center could do to better support their alumni?

Thank you very much for taking the time to contribute to the book. If you have any questions about the project or the Writing Center in general, please let me know.

Best,

Sara Lambert

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