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Wholistic Accessibility: Mental Health Matters!

INTRODUCTION:

Mental illness, despite its growing presence nationwide, is often overlooked in the realm of college academia. In growing numbers, college students suffer from a variety of mental illnesses that too often go undiagnosed and undiscussed. This is in part serviced by college writing centers, who are unavoidably not an entity of their own and are under the financial control of university budget and therefore overall institutional power. Most prior discussion and past efforts to discuss mental health issues in the realm of the writing center fail to consider writing associates, assuming that tutors have a neutral stance and that their mental health is not worth discussing in the context of their work. While the writing center is/has a client-centered practice in nature, a work environment that focuses on the wellbeing of peer tutors should still be implemented, which in turn will foster the growth of writing centers as a whole. In this paper, I will address the stigma of mental illness in the scope of the writing center with emphasis on tutees. Next, I will display research from our own institution on tutee mental health and compare it to a research study conducted by the Michigan University Writing Center. I will also address, then, how inclusivity and a rhetoric of welcoming can positively impact our writing center, along with tutor mental health and the institution as a whole. Lastly, I will propose an updated accessibility statement for the Trinity website that encompasses these goals and ideals.

CURRENT PREVALENCE IN STUDENT POPULATIONS:

To preface with the severity and prevalence of mental illness, it is reported that 1 in 4 adults ages 18-24 have a mental illness diagnosis (Babcock). Additionally, in regard to this specific age group, it was reported that almost half of college aged students have “met the DSM-IV criteria for at least one mental disorder” (Hunt, 4). This solidifies college aged students as a particularly vulnerable population that can and will be a model for research about mental health and stability in generations to come. Within this growing research, writing center work must be assessed in the consideration of college academia. Plenty of literature centered around writing center work discusses the ideas of mental health in regard to students, mindfulness, and disability treatment: these ideas all in tangent. Unfortunately, this research tends to disclude tutees from the narrative, despite their status as members of this vulnerable young-adult population. This is problematic because writing associates are still students and should be considered as such. Some institutions’ associates, though, are either graduate students or employees, so it is important to keep in mind specifically institutions that employ undergraduate students, such as Trinity’s Writing Center. Relatively, research on tutor well-being is underexplored in writing center scholarship, and as a whole, mental illness in the scope of college academia is overlooked. Along with lack of research, there is a silence around discussing and addressing mental health concerns due to growing stigmatization of mental conditions: stigma of which does not escape the walls of the writing center.

DISSECTING CURRENT ATTITUDES TOWARD TUTOR MENTAL HEALTH:

Due to this stigmatization and lack of representation, there is an undeniable silence around mental health issues and a default position of nondisclosure for those suffering (Degner,

29). Physical disabilities are more quickly catered to and discussed in writing center scholarship than mental conditions. Behaviorally, there is a reported dominant fear of ‘coming out’ when relaying mental health status and fearing the risk of rejection, specifically in the walls of the writing center. This stigma and silence shows how mental disorders are not considered to be as serious as physical disabilities. As well as this, there is more shame associated with having a mental health illness than a physical disability, as there is a misconception that only physical disabilities are involuntary and uncontrollable, whereas both are. Writing centers, despite efforts to be progressive, contribute to this silence, dis-servicing their tutors who struggle with mental health challenges. In lieu of tutee research, research conducted about students with disabilities can just as accurately be applied to Writing Associates’ mental health. There are destructive mindsets that have arisen in writing center work that both limit student success and foster a ‘Me vs. Them’ dynamic between both the tutor and the tutee, and the tutee and writing center administration.

First, the “Natural Exclusion of Disability” presented by Titchkosky (Hitt) positions students with disabilities as radically and inherently ‘different’ than their peers, making accessibility to resources limited for disabled students since they are deemed too difficult to aid. This similar mindset is limiting to tutees with mental illness because it promotes the idea that differences are radicalized and explicitly ‘bad,’ lessening the probability that students will come forward with their mental illness to writing center staff. Similarly, the “You can’t accommodate everybody” mentality presented by Sherwood (Hitt) trains tutors to see students with disabilities as a hassle, cuing tutors that students with disabilities are therefore to be treated differently. With similar tendencies to this mindset, tutors may believe that the writing center staff or administration will view them differently in their position of work because of their mental

illness. Battling these mindsets in terms of both issues, disabilities and mental illnesses, is key in creating an entirely accessible and inclusive environment for multiple student populations.

EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENT TUTORS:

Within the writing center specifically, there are certain expectations about the composure of student tutors that can negatively influence tutors' mental health. Initially, it is important to acknowledge that tutors may have pre-existing mental health conditions that persisted prior to joining the Writing Center staff. Job expectations and work environment have the potential to exacerbate these symptoms, the pressure of the role overwhelming peer tutors. There is an expectation that tutors remain neutral and assistive, not swaying away from the narrative of asking generative questions and letting students take agency. This set of guiding principles is ingrained within writing center pedagogy. The tutors are trained to be sensitive to a multitude of differences and struggles, our motto being to create better writers, not better papers (Emmerson). As a peer writing tutor, Sara Emmerson states, "How I tutor is not by saving students but guiding them to save themselves" (Emmerson). This is allowing students their own personal agency not only in their writing but in their expression of emotions and struggles, too, which is extremely beneficial and is shown to positively affect appointments on part of the students. Tutors are encouraged to lend "a tissue, an ear, or a phone number for more in-depth help" (Mills, 5) in times of student need, but this emphasis fails to think about the tutor, their needs, and/ or their personal challenges. The reality is that no two tutoring sessions are exactly the same, and no piece of theory can fully encapsulate the sheer variety of situations that tutors are exposed to daily; therefore, trying to conform tutors to a certain way of acting in peer tutoring sessions can inadvertently be restrictive and have negative impacts. These similar ideologies must be applied

to tutors' wellbeing as well in order to make the writing center a wholly inclusive and welcoming environment. To fail to accommodate and have a system set in place that does not acknowledge tutee mental health makes the system very one-sided, not representative of the writing center population as a whole and failing to acknowledge the individuality of every student tutor. There is a responsibility not only to the institution, but to the writing center as well, to implement practice that caters to the needs of every student alike, peer tutor or not.

PERSPECTIVES AT OUR OWN INSTITUTION:

I was curious to examine Trinity's Writing Center in regard to the aforementioned idea of nondisclosure and to see how prevalent this issue was at our own institution. Taking mental health into consideration in regard to our work at the Writing Center, I wanted to get a brief sample from my classmates enrolled in RHET-302 this semester in order to gauge the issue on our own campus. For context, RHET-302 is a course composed of all first-year tutors from various grade levels. I conducted an anonymous survey among 21 of these student tutors asking about mental health/disorders to see where Trinity stands in terms of stigmatization of mental health. I also wanted to compare our results to that of Degner's research.

In researching mental health in regard to tutors, Hillary Degner's article, "Opening Closed Doors" was the sole piece of literature to discuss this topic directly. Within her paper, Degner discussed a 2014 survey conducted by the Michigan University Writing Center to investigate the mental health status of their tutors and their comfort level in discussing these issues within the center. The survey was given to 127 writing center tutors. The results of Trinity's sample, despite not being fully representative of the entire current Writing Associate

population, reflect the same trends of the 2014 survey. Comparative data from the two surveys regarding Writing Associate mental health is shown below:

Type of mental illness/disorder	Michigan sample reported symptoms	Michigan sample formally diagnosed	Trinity sample reported symptoms	Trinity sample formally diagnosed
Depression	41%	29%	33%	9%
Anxiety	36%	21%	94%	0%
ADD/ADHD	15%	6%	11%	0%
Bipolar	7%	6%	0%	0%
Eating disorder(s)	6%	3%	22%	0%
Substance abuse	6%	1%	0%	0%
PTSD	5%	3%	5%	0%

***Note:** one tutor left a note that they experienced symptoms of OCD but has not been formally diagnosed; this was an error on my part, as I did not include OCD as a multiple choice option but left a space for ‘Other’ to fill in the blank.

As seen above, writing associates at both Trinity and Michigan University experienced the same trends; more tutors report experiencing tendencies and symptoms of mental disorders despite not being formally diagnosed. Both columns that give data for ‘reported symptoms’ are always larger than the ‘formally diagnosed’ column for the corresponding disorder. Following the idea of nondisclosure, 72% of students experiencing symptoms hadn’t disclosed to anyone in the Writing Center (Degner). This almost exactly parallels the collected data from our own institution; 73% of students at Trinity had not disclosed this information to anyone in the Writing Center. There were also specific trends in tutors’ reasons for nondisclosure. Degner detailed that students believed that their concern/illness did not affect their tutoring and that the majority were nervous about being seen as unprofessional and less capable. This fear left students feeling uncomfortable with discussing their disorder/ mental health concerns with others (Degner, p.31). Similar lines of reasoning can be seen in Trinity students’ responses, one student stating their reasoning as that they are, ““Not formally diagnosed and overall pretty closed off about it” and another stating that, “It is too personal.” Similar statements such as, “I wouldn’t want to make a big deal about it” can be seen as students minimizing their struggles in order to cope and conform to a system that makes them feel oppressed/ limited in expressing their mental health concerns.

One of the most overwhelming pieces of data gained from the survey results was the prevalence of experiencing anxiety symptoms vs. anxiety disorder diagnoses. There is a potential limitation to my conducted survey given that the results are from 2020, where student tutors are living amidst a global pandemic and have differing and heightened roots of anxiety: concerning overall public health, personal well being, fear of the unknown, and a bevy of other COVID-19 related struggles. Also, in terms of surveying exclusively first-time Writing Associates, dealing

with an almost entirely online platform, this eTutoring platform could present some challenges and increased anxiety among student tutor populations. Regardless, 94% of Writing Associates surveyed reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety, despite no tutors being formally diagnosed. This calls to question if there are other pressing factors of Trinity student anxiety, such as its high academic stress, social scene, or political climate.

The common denominator between every student surveyed is their status as a peer tutor, and this pertains to the Writing Center's partial responsibility to attempt to mitigate these symptoms. This is not to say that the root of all student anxiety is their role as a tutor, but it does make the issue relevant to the Writing Center. Foremost, this asks what more the Trinity Writing Center can do to help tutors de-stress on a daily basis, COVID-era times or not, and to manage anxiety levels that seem to be an eminent issue at our institution specifically. Addressing these concerns with every student tutor and implementing mindfulness practice into our work could be a start, but ultimately, there are implications that transcend these simple actions and bring to light a greater issue: student accessibility.

A CHANGE IN MINDSET: ADAPTIVE AND ACCESSIBLE

So, what do we do with this information? There is a dire need for the transformation of the writing center into an entirely accessible space, not just for students but for peer tutors as well. In tangent with the discussion of mental health issues, it is vital that we openly acknowledge other disabilities and view mental health as a component of addressing disabilities in the writing center. In the celebration of student differences and experiences, writing centers tend to be interested in promoting access; therefore, writing center practice and pedagogy should wholly encompass all aspects of accessibility, of which inclusivity is exclusively intertwined

with. The issue at hand is that there is a dire need for repositioning disability representation in writing center scholarship and tutoring practices. Traditionally, tutors are taught to view disabled students as ‘special cases,’ instead of viewing the individual needs of each student. Similarly, tutors are found to believe that writing centers will entirely overlook their mental health issues or that negative tendencies due to stigma will affect their work or that they will receive unfair judgement. This is seen in the aforementioned ideas of the “You can’t accommodate everybody” and “Natural disclusion of disability” mindsets.

Escaping these negative mindsets entails embracing student individuality while simultaneously treating individuals with the same respect, care, and attentiveness as the next person. Allison Hitt describes this phenomenon as, “Treating each student as *different*, but not treating students with disabilities *differently*” (Hitt, 2). Originally, this statement pertained to tutors interacting with tutees, but its meaning can apply to tutors as well.

An important stepping stone in moving toward this progress is encouraging the acceptance of neurodiversity in order to further diversify and universalize the writing center. Nick Walker defines neurodiversity as, “the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species,” and neurodivergent as “having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Batt, 1). In this way, cognitive differences are not scorned but are accepted and normalized, both socially and scientifically. “Neurodiversity” neutralizes the stigma that has traditionally been accorded to autism, ADHD, and other neurodevelopmental conditions, and it presents an alternative view: all these conditions are normal variations within a wide spectrum of human neurodevelopment.

This normalizes both disability and mental conditions as part of identity instead of addressing it as an ‘issue’ that needs to be treated. It can boil down to the simple terminology of referring to conditions such as dyslexia and ADHD as ‘conditions’ rather than ‘problems.’ Despite its positive sounding impression, neurodivergence among writing center workers may be impeded by the pressure to keep one’s differences hidden in the academy (Batt, 13). This, though, would stifle individuality and remain with terminology that refers to individuals as ‘lesser’ than their student counterparts. The aim of writing centers is to unite students and tutees as a cohesive unit, but this is only realistically attainable if we can accept our differences and unite for a common purpose: to create better writers and grow together.

THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTION: ACTION-FOCUSED

In terms of mental health specifically, there is certainly more that writing centers can do in order to ensure quality mental health resources to its students and tutors. Writing centers should, according to Degner, “revise training, refer tutors to the counseling center, provide resources/info on mental health, create regular conversations around mental health and disclosure, and conduct more research on the topic” (Degner, 32-33). These specific suggestions ensure that the writing center is catering to tutees’ mental health and serve as an adequate stepping block for future methods of inclusion. Encouraging this conversation is essential, as there is value in spoken word and in speaking about mental health and disability without limitations.

Strategically, in order to take steps to fully encompass the entirety of the student population, writing centers must use a combination of universal design and universal design for learning in order to develop a multimodal pedagogy: a universal writing pedagogy that supports

multiliteracies and is accessible to a wide range of students, assisting both able bodied and disabled students alike (Hitt). A multimodal pedagogy would encompass a combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic techniques; this multisensory approach can help cater to needs of every student with, “visual, aural, gestural, spatial, and multimodal” (Hitt, 28) needs in mind. This practice can help both student and tutor in adapting to different platforms and diversifying the scope of writing center help. Universal design refers to accessibility in terms of physical space, ensuring that workspaces are comfortable for all. Jean Kieaisch and Sue Dinitz describe this as, “an approach advocating for the design of products and services so that they are suited to a broad range of users” (Hitt, 2). Universal design for learning refers to the framework for designing curricula that enables all individuals alike to benefit and gain knowledge, abiding by the principles of multiple means of representation, actions and expression, and engagement.

The combination of the two, both universal design and universal design for learning, makes this sentiment of treating students with fairness and equality so important. This combined approach ensures equal opportunity for collaboration and growth within the writing center and guarantees the physical and mental means to get there. Adapting to this technique not only ensures care to all students, disabled or not, but it also ensures focus on the tutee and their state of wellbeing, too. This, in tangent with accepting neurodiversity and implementing mental health discussion and training, have the potential to better the writing center as a whole in regard to its acceptance and adaptability to all student needs.

TRINITY COLLEGE WRITING CENTER: ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT PROPOSITION

After having established how important inclusivity is in the scope of writing center work and ideology, I propose that we should alter our student accessibility statement in order to better

address all student needs. Given that Trinity's Writing Center is always striving to be more inclusive and adaptable to all students alike, an all-encompassing statement regarding this willful strive towards full accessibility is not only necessary but proactive. We want to cater to all students, minority and majority alike, but there are times that we need to make an extra effort to make sure that the minority feels just as included and welcomed as the majority: an action of which can be initiated by the implementation of the statement to the Writing Center website. This can be put in universal terms that encompass both tutor and tutee mental health, students with disabilities, and minority groups on campus.

Below is the University of Kansas official statement of Accessibility and Accommodations at the Writing Center, as posted on their website. It reads as follows:

ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Your Needs and the KU Writing Center

As our [diversity statement](#) indicates, we welcome all writers in the KU community. Although our consultants do not currently receive formal training in disability accommodations, their continuing consultant development training prepares them to meet the needs of all writers - including writers with physical, sensory, mental health, developmental, and learning disabilities.

If there are any accommodations we can provide in order to better facilitate your learning during a consultation or improve your experience in the writing center, just let us know. Unless otherwise indicated below, accommodations do not require documentation from [Student Access Services](#). Potential accommodations include, but are not limited to:

- Conducting your consultation in an area with reduced distractions.
- Welcoming service animals into the Writing Center.
- Working with American Sign Language interpreters (the AAAC asks for requests 5 business days in advance using [this form](#). If a request is made with less notice, every effort to arrange services will be made, but the AAAC cannot guarantee service provision on short notice).
- Meeting at height-adjustable tables to accommodate wheelchairs.
- Use of assistive technology during consultations.
- We are also happy to work with you and your Access Specialist to book repeat appointments with the same consultant more than 10 days in advance if you have documentation with the AAAC-SAS.

To let us know about any of these needs, you can call us at 785-864-2399, send us an [email](#), or indicate your requests in your [appointment](#) form.

There are certain details mentioned in the above statement that are not relevant to Trinity as a very small, private institution, such as requests for ‘5 business days in advance’ for ASL tutoring. University of Kansas is a large, public institution that has more access to resources for ASL learners, but this is also due to a significantly higher presence of ASL students that attend their institution. The majority of students that attend Trinity are able-bodied individuals, of which Tennyson O’Donnell, head of the Trinity College Writing Center, recalled that he has only seen one student within the last 10 years that needed the aid of assistive technology in their appointment.¹ The reality of attending such a privileged school is that our representation of disability is very low. We still aim to cater to all students and prepare for any circumstance, but the representation of disability at our own school may differ from another’s.

Also, it is important to note that within the accommodations and accessibility section, there is no mention of mental health or wellness whatsoever. The University of Indiana takes a physical disability focused approach to accessibility, whereas the statement for our own institution should aim to encompass disability and mental wellbeing in its totality.

Following is my proposed Accessibility and Accommodations statement for Trinity College Writing Center:

ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Your Needs and the Trinity Writing Center

As our [mission statement](#) indicates, if you write, you belong here. This means that Writing Associates are committed to working with writers with a wide range of abilities, experiences, and learning styles. Despite any physical, developmental, and/ or learning disability, every student writer will be treated with the same respect, patience, and consideration. Mental illnesses and disorders are included, too, in the way that tutors and tutees are able to work through the challenges that mental illnesses might bring to tutoring sessions. Tutors will work in

¹ Note that this is not a concrete fact or statistic but is rather a from a conversation and is a mere, casually made observation from his time working at the Writing Center

tandem and collaboration with you and are understanding of differences, promoting a wholly inclusive environment for every appointment made.

This being said, if there are any accommodations we can make in order to better facilitate your learning during a consultation or to improve your experience in the Allan K. Smith Writing Center, just let us know. Unless noted otherwise, accommodations do not require documentation from the Disability Resource Center. Potential accommodations include, but are not limited to:

- Welcoming service animals into the Writing Center
- Using a variety of media to communicate with you about your writing
- Using assistive technology during appointments

We aim to foster:

- Open dialogue about mental health concerns and worries
- A sense of inclusion and welcoming
- Academic and personal growth through writing and conversation

You can easily indicate these requests or information in the appointment request forms upon registration. For more information, you can email director Tennyson O'Donnell at tennyson.odonnell@trincoll.edu or visit us at 115 Vernon Street.

CONCLUSION

Writing centers should not be excluded from the necessary ongoing discussion of mental health, and embedded within these discussions must be active dialogue concerning disability and inclusivity. There is more that can be done in order to ensure an overall more inclusive and welcoming environment in our classrooms, in the writing center, and on campus overall, tweaking and improving overall campus culture by making these essential changes. Writing centers, as a largely prevalent counterpart of institutions, should do more to implement these tactics into their ideologies and practice. There is potential to make the Writing Center environment an even more accessible space for all tutors and tutees alike: a highly accomplishable feat with the incorporation of neurodiversity, universal design, and mindfulness into writing center pedagogy. I acknowledge that the implementation of an Accessibility and Accommodations statement to the Trinity College Writing Center website is not the 'end-all'

measure in securing an accessible and all-inclusive space, but it is an impactful step heading in the correct direction.

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