

## Achieving Community Amid COVID-19

Mary Lutze

In January 2020, I sat in my Chicago apartment dining room with Lydia, my roommate and fellow doctoral candidate, and she showed me news story after story of troubling events happening in Wuhan, China. She and her partner were convinced that it was only a matter of time before the Coronavirus—a word still a stranger to our lips—would find its way to the United States. She'd already ordered N-95 masks and Lysol wipes. Lydia had much more foresight and presence of mind concerning the issue, for I was more concerned with my upcoming doctoral defense and the trip home I had scheduled after its completion. My mother had undergone a major surgery, and I had promised to spend a couple of weeks helping her recuperate; I would have the rare experience of downtime after finishing this final step in my degree.

By the end of February, my dissertation defense had passed, but rather than celebrating, I sat in rural Nebraska and watched all hell break loose across our country. A brief trip turned into a four-month shelter-in-place, as my family and I joined the masses in disinfecting groceries, praying for toilet paper to appear on shelves, and wearing medical grade masks even when walking alone outside. With several family members at heightened risk and a lack of understanding how this virus could spread, we opted for an abundance of caution. At that time, Loyola University Chicago—like most universities in America—pivoted fully online for the first time, and being the university's writing center Associate Director, I was tasked with helping to maintain our services and assisting virtually in the training course for a new cohort of hired writing tutors. Around the same time, I was also virtually interviewing for the position of Assistant Professor of English and Writing Center Director at the University of Arkansas Fort Smith (UAFS), a position that eventually became mine. In the fall of 2020 and in the height of the pandemic, I would spearhead the launch of a brand-new campus service: the UAFS Writing Center. But before then, I watched from a screen as the last months of my doctoral experience slipped by, and I watched from a screen as anticlimactic graduation slides announced I had completed a major milestone, and I watched helplessly—like so many others did—as friends and loved ones became victims and statistics of a global pandemic.

How can we ever return to “normal”? There is a new “normal,” if we can call it that, but when we stand on the other side of the wreckage of this pandemic—intimately aware of the loss of family and friends we'll never

see again—life can never be the same. After that first unexpected phone call where I heard the hitched voice of my father relay the news, “*Mary, we’ve lost Chris,*” and experienced the reeling shock I felt at the sudden loss of a brother, I was plunged into the new normal that so many of our students and employees now inhabit. I will always experience moments of panic and dread when receiving phone calls from loved ones, fearing that it will be a phone call like *that one*. I am not alone in this, and the fact of this weighs heavily on me as the director of my university’s writing center. My student tutors and colleagues have experienced their own hardships and the loss of loved ones, and the flexibility granted to me in my grief was the instigator for similar flexibility in my administration of the writing center. I have a team of student and professional tutors that I dearly love and admire, and I recognize that the “hats” we wear are often those of counselors for individuals who are wrestling with their own posttraumatic stress (Ryan and Zimmerelli). In many ways, the pandemic has called upon me and other administrators to bear, “The emotional labor . . . of identifying, understanding, and responding to students’ . . . needs,” and this labor compounds as my tutors themselves often bear the stress and trauma of students they serve and carry those emotional burdens back to me (Clinnin 139). Many tutors carry their own trauma while also attempting to carry the burden of grief for others. We are called upon to reach deep within ourselves and support the peers around us, and there are many days when we can no longer muster anything left of us to give.

Our philosophies, practices, and policies at the UAFS Writing Center have shifted irreversibly because of COVID-19 because there was no other way of moving forward. Our Writing Center was founded in October of 2020, so our practice never had to adjust to pandemic protocols: it began with them. From our opening, we instituted policies and procedures to incorporate social distancing, PPE, utilized technology to avoid physical papers or close proximity, and allowed flexibility for pivots to online training and tutoring. Beyond this, my whole staff—including myself and assistant director, Jeffrey Warndof—were completely new employees at a new place of employment, so I felt compelled to begin forming a community among this team I didn’t know. The primary motive for establishing this community was to bond with my team, despite all of the factors of the pandemic that encouraged distance; over time, the mindset of a team built on community eventually shifted and became a means of providing purposeful care work for our team.

Jeffrey and I are intentional in our leadership, and even friendship, with our student tutors; however, we became even more community-oriented because of the pandemic. We took seriously the call to, “Take better care

of each other and of ourselves *when* (not *if*) something terrible happens,” because we were experiencing the *when* and its aftermath (Micciche xi). What we have learned from our own experience leads me to argue that writing center and program administrators ought to reshape their administrative identities to allow for more aspects of thoughtfulness and caring as well as rethink how communities of care can function as oases amid our anxiety-inducing new normal. Prior to the pandemic, our positions might not have necessitated the support role in a post-traumatic environment that we so often play for our tutors, but this additional aspect of writing center administration has become another of the things we carry—emotional labor that we are called upon to bear in writing program administration and that could join the compendium of “things” outlined in Adams Wooten et al.’s *The Things We Carry*.

In my position as the assistant and later associate writing center director at my previous institution, we kept a cordial administrative distance from our student tutors. We were teachers, bosses, schedule managers, troubleshooters, and often were called upon to correct and redirect tutors when their actions called for it. We were always friendly; however, it was clear to me that we were never friends with our student tutors. There was a clear line between employer and employee. We were available if there was a problem, but we weren’t available in the daily lives of our tutors—we weren’t present during their shifts to simply further a spirit of collaboration, relationship, and teamwork. I now have the privilege of running my own center and of employing my own staff. Because of this, I could encourage my professional and student tutors in building relationship around a common goal. Ultimately, together, my team launched a new student service; together, we fought our way through the pandemic and learned the absolute necessity of flexibility in pedagogy and practice; and together, we discovered that we could have only achieved what we’d achieved by working together.

At UAFS, Jeffrey and I are in the trenches with our students and tutors; we don’t sit behind the closed doors of our offices (which are located in the writing center rather than in a separate building or department). Whenever we get the chance, we make ourselves present to our tutors, and Jeffrey and I have our own ways of showing genuine interest and care for our tutors. From the beginning, Jeffrey has scheduled after-hour appointments with our student tutors, bringing creative works to the writing center to bond with them and indicate his trust in their creative writing expertise. He chooses every day to take his lunch hour in the open lounge of the writing center so that he can strike up friendly conversations with the tutors. He participates in our tutor organized workshops and also takes candid photos throughout each semester, compiling them into a video slideshow with

music that we share at the semester's end. He plays an active role throughout training, and our established ethos with the tutors is one where we encourage unapologetic authenticity. We are ourselves around the tutors, and we give ourselves the permission to let our tutors glimpse who we are as people rather than keeping a distanced professionalism that limits true teambuilding and trust. Likewise, I circulate the writing center and spend extended periods of time in the lounge with the tutors, getting to know the tutors beyond their roles as employees and investing in them as the complex people that they are. I have made a point to get actively involved in the interests and hobbies of Jeffrey and my student tutors: reading their favorite novels, watching their favorite anime series, attending their sporting events, hosting end-of-semester parties at my home, stocking a private "tutor pantry" for them so that they never go hungry, establishing traditions like our once-a-semester trivia games, attending any evening workshops the student tutors plan, and facilitating a game night after hours for the tutors at the writing center, among other activities. I also send out surveys to the tutors each semester to gauge my and Jeffrey's effectiveness as leaders; we value their input and have also adjusted our administration based on their anonymous answers. For instance, one tutor in fall 2022 stated feeling somewhat unsupported during a particularly hectic semester; Jeffrey and I then redoubled our efforts in the spring 2023, making ourselves even more available for friendly communication and practical guidance.

Over the semesters, our intentional care of our tutors has reaped numerous benefits; though some of the tutors were a bit guarded in the first semester, our returning tutors became increasingly comfortable with us, bonding with us in genuine ways. We began to honor the experience of our returning tutors, "shed[ding] the desire for control and embrac[ing] the reality of collective agency" (Bousquet qtd. in Strickland 13). We invited them to participate in the training of new cohorts and developed a mentorship program for newly hired tutors, and the returning tutors' easygoing and good-humored demeanor with us and their mentees helped to break down barriers with new student tutors and further our efforts in community building. However, we also honored our tutors with these opportunities, paying them for their time whenever they participated beyond their normal tutoring hours. In this way, we also showed genuine care and respect for them and never allowed our community ethos to be a source of manipulation for unpaid labor. By trusting the returning tutors in training and administration—such as letting them organize workshops, lead class visits, or play roles in our crowdfunding events—the tutors have unique ownership over our center and its ethos on campus. They are personally invested in the writing center and care about our team beyond simple employment. With

our intentional presence in the Writing Center, Jeffrey and I can more easily counsel and support our student tutors as they so often counsel, teach, support, and guide their peers in communicating ideas well and simply managing the stress of everyday life, in and outside of the classroom.

In both physical space and tutoring practice, we have prioritized creating an environment of welcome, flexibility, and inclusivity—mirroring the community-oriented environment we foster with our team and extending it to include our student clients. We have literally torn down the walls between us; favoring glass walls that create bright and open, airy rooms and avoid the feeling of a dark, enclosed spaces. We have painted our walls with a combination of cheerful and calming colors, depending on the room, and even added a colorful mural in our computer lab to add appeal and enhance the visual environment. Our center is flooded with plants to assist us in establishing an inviting and comforting atmosphere that feels homelike. We also determined that we would do our part in combatting the food insecurity that is common in our area of Arkansas. To that end, from the beginning, we have prioritized buying the supplies we'd need to stock a coffee bar and snack station for individuals utilizing our writing center for study, class, or tutoring. This way, our campus clients and our tutors would not fight the distraction of hunger while attempting to engage in writing center appointments.

Since our opening in 2020, we have chosen to create a writing center that wasn't solely focused on tutoring; to forever eradicate the ethos of a paper mill and to encourage students in the recursive practice of writing, we allocated spaces in our center where students could study freely. We have made space for any student to use the writing center, with or without scheduling an appointment. We fuel their studying and active writing with food and coffee, and we circulate our spaces in a nonintrusive way so that if students have a quick question, all they need is to catch the attention of one of our tutors as they pass by. With the approval of my supervisors, I also began to bring my pup, Nori, to the center with the full intention of certifying her as a therapy animal. She has become somewhat of a fixture in our center, offering support when words aren't enough to calm anxiety or soothe a troubled student. She also played an active role in our university's crowdfunding event—The Day of Giving; in fact, Nori won a prize for the most unique number of donations in her name through her participation in a Puppy Kissing Booth. She even made the local news! Nori is known as the “Writing Center Dog” and is so popular that some students come to the writing center to work *with* her because her presence alone makes the task of studying and writing more palatable.

This rebranding and repurposing of our space to reinforce community and support has become one of the most important changes to our philosophy and practice as a writing center. We have allowed ourselves the flexibility to not be so absorbed with tutoring that we exclude students who may never intend to make appointments with us—there’s always a chance that they may in the future, and that chance becomes all the more likely when they have grown accustomed to our space and bonded with our tutors. Nearly three years into our opening, and now tentatively approaching life on the other side of COVID-19, we put forth effort—more than ever—into maintaining this safe space where so many of our students are choosing to be rather than forced to be.

If I could sum up this reflection with general advice for other writing center directors, it would be to challenge us all to consider the ways in which our intentional connection and carework with our employees and students have become our own means of self-care. In the era of “Zoom University,” we all realized that having countless individuals literally at our fingertips, through our devices, was not synonymous with experiencing true connection and support. Clinnin relates in her chapter “And So I Respond” that, “The emotional labor of supporting students under normal circumstances, let alone during a crisis, requires that the teachers and administrators are similarly supported and cared for” (139). Many of us have experienced so much isolation that we crave genuine connection, and our practices as student services, departments, and university offices now call for us to wear a different kind of hat than we might have otherwise. But in wearing this hat of connection, care, and support, I find myself more supported. If COVID-19 taught me anything, it was to be more vulnerable and to allow myself the freedom to create my own definition of who I should be as an employer and colleague and what the writing center should mean to our campus community. Perhaps it was always okay for supervisors to mingle with the supervised, for writing centers to do a little bit more than tutoring writing. All of us have the unique opportunity to rebrand our physical spaces and ethos on campus to invite connection for the students we’ve been tasked to serve, and that has been our mission at the UAFS Writing Center.

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**Mary Lutze** is assistant professor of English and writing center director at the University of Arkansas—Fort Smith (UAFS). Before earning her doctorate, she was associate director of Loyola University Chicago’s writing center. She has presented and published in several academic areas of interest, including early modern English literature, disability studies, writing center administration, and deaf theatre. Her academic interests and passion for DEI have shaped her directorship and the writing center’s community of welcome. In her downtime, she enjoys relaxing with her husband, Alex, and “dog-ter,” Nori; long calls with friends and family; and tending her numerous plants.

