

Eleanor Faraguna

Professor Tennyson O'Donnell

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Tutors: We Are People Too! Mental Illness and Writing Center Tutors

INTRODUCTION

Currently, millions of college students across America suffer from a variety of mental illnesses. Colleges and universities are becoming more supportive of these students through providing accommodations and garnering an awareness on campus about mental health. Writing centers are following this trend by creating dialogues about mental health, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and other practices to support the student writer. However, there is a noticeable lack of information, research, and conversation about the mental health of the peer tutors. In most of the literature addressing mental health in writing centers, the tutors are assumed to be neutral and not included in the dialogue. When we exclude tutor mental health from our conversations and decisions, we decrease the potential of the writing center to be a supportive and safe space. While the student writer should be the focus, the tutors must be encouraged and supported to make the writing center a more successful resource. In this paper, I will discuss the current literature surrounding mental illness in the writer center and how the scholarship does not reflect the mental health of the tutors. Then, I will examine the direct and indirect messages that tutors receive as a result of being excluded from the dialogue about mental illness. Next, I will consider who has the burden of responsibility for the mental health of writing center students: the college or the writing center. Lastly, I will explain the implications of this research for the writing center.

CURRENT LITERATURE

There is an abundance of literature and research on the numbers of college students who suffer from mental illness. Having a large amount of information about this group is beneficial because in the previous year, it was reported that almost half of college aged students “met the DSM-IV criteria for at least one mental disorder” (Hunt 4). College aged students are a uniquely accessible population to study now that mental illness is at the forefront of psychological research, conversation, and policy decisions. As we gain more knowledge about students who suffer from mental illness, research can become more focused regarding the ways in which mental illness can impact different areas of students’ lives. One area of research that has been expanding its depth and scope is mental health in the writing center. A growing amount of writing center literature focuses on mental health, mindfulness, disabilities and the ways in which the practices of the writing center help or inhibit the success of students who suffer from mental illness. It is common to find journals or articles encouraging writing tutors to focus on the writer, not just their writing, and potentially offer “a tissue, an ear, or a phone number for more in-depth help” (Mills 5). While most articles will emphasize that tutors should not take the place of therapists, or come close to that responsibility, the mental health of the writer is a topic growing in relevance.

Yet despite advances in the literature regarding the mental health of students in the writing center, there are still attitudes and practices that significantly curb the potential of writing centers to be safe spaces for those who struggle with mental illnesses. Most common is the idea that the mental illness of students are “obstacles or shortcomings” to overcome (Rinaldi). The notion that mental health is something to surmount are damaging to the student and provides others with false information that create stigmas. Another practice that can have negative

consequences in the writing center is a “one size fits all” approach to student writers who suffer from mental illnesses. In some manuals, it is suggested that these students “need more specific help than other students” (Hitt) and subsequently prepare tutors for those sessions by “defining or categorizing the problem types” (Lape 2). Here, students who suffer from mental illnesses are first isolated and identified as students who need a different approach and then their illnesses are categorized and general solutions are provided. This is problematic for both the student and the tutor as it presents mental illness as an obstacle to good writing and generalizes about the needs of the students. Mental illness does not necessarily impact the academic performance or writing abilities of students, as some manuals suggest, but it still has the potential to in some cases. While having specific literature or suggestions for sessions with students with mental health concerns is a step in the right direction, the language and practices should remain inclusive. All appointments, regardless of the mental health of the student, should be approached the same; with the belief that all students’ needs are uniquely different.

A final and significant failing of both the current literature and the practices within a writing center is the lack of information and acknowledgement that tutors also suffer from mental illness. Why are the same considerations and practices concerning mental health for the student writers not extended to the tutors? Why is it assumed that tutors are not impacted by mental illness in their roles in the writing center?

TUTOR SPECIFIC LITERATURE

In my research, I only came across one article that addressed the mental health of writing center tutors. This article discussed a 2014 survey conducted by the Michigan Writing Center to investigate the mental health status of their tutors. The survey was given to 127 writing center

tutors, 36% of which had been working at the writing center for one semester; 13% for two semesters; 11% for three semesters; 12% for four semesters; and 28% of which had been working for five or more semesters at the writing center (Degner). The following results were found from the survey:

Fifty-seven percent of respondents admitted to recently having experienced symptoms of one or more of the following mental health concerns or illnesses:

- Depression: 41%
- Anxiety: 36%
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): 15%
- Bipolar disorder: 7%
- Eating disorders: 6%
- Substance abuse: 6%
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): 5%

More important than the breakdown of the mental illnesses experienced by the tutors, the survey found that 36% of the respondents felt their mental health “Slightly” affected their tutoring abilities; 16% reported that their mental health “Moderately” affected their tutoring abilities; and 4% responded that their mental health “Significantly” affected their tutoring abilities (Degner). Additionally, 71% of tutors “never discussed the general topic of mental health concerns or illnesses in regards to students or tutors” (Degner). Clearly, the writing center staff suffers from their share of mental health concerns and those problems have the potential to impact the abilities of the tutor. One respondent even commented that they “thought that [tutees’] ‘problems’ with the writing process were so irrelevant compared to what was on [their] mind”

(Degner). These responses should motivate writing centers to, at the very least, begin to include their own tutors into the dialogue about mental illness because it can impact both the tutor and the student writer during a session. Knowing that one in four college aged students have a “diagnosable mental illness,” in addition to the results of the Michigan survey, illustrating that mental illness in tutors can affect their tutoring abilities, should be an impetus to do more for our tutors (Degner). Despite these findings, there still remains a significant lack of research and scholarship about the mental health of writing center tutors.

Not only is there a absence of information on tutor mental health, but recommended tutoring approaches can unduly silence the emotions and mental health of the tutor during a session. Articles have suggested that tutors should avoid emotions or attitudes like “anger, mistrust, or skepticism” because they can “affect [the writing] process,” and “emotionally charged session” can “threaten to sabotage” the appointment (Lape 2). While it is important for tutors to be aware of their reactions and body language during a session, to say that their emotions can “sabotage the appointment” is a way in which the literature clearly disregards the tutor and their needs. It is common for writing center staff to encourage tutors to remain stoic and neutral during a session and overlook their own emotions. At one of our own all staff meetings, we discussed this idea in length and it was strongly suggested by our head tutors to stay neutral and avoid getting overly-emotional during our appointments. While I agree with this notion in most cases because the sessions should focus on the student writer, I believe this practice can encourage tutors to disregard their own mental health, and it can send damaging messages to the tutors about mental illness in the writing center.

CURRENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS TUTOR MENTAL HEALTH

Given the number of students in college who suffer from mental illness, it is statistically irrefutable that some percentage of writing center tutors suffer from a mental illness. However, as stated previously, the current literature and practices in writing centers do not reflect this reality. The decision to exclude tutor mental health from the dialogues in writing centers could directly or indirectly send one of two messages to the tutors who suffer from mental illness. The first is that tutors somehow never experience any kind of mental illness, which, again, is statistically improbable. The second, and much more common notion, is that mental illness concerns do not fall under the purview of the writing center. While it is true that writing centers should not double as counseling centers, and some students may feel uncomfortable disclosing any mental health concerns to their employers in the writing center, but, a desire for privacy and discretion is not a reason for this issue to be disregarded completely. One article stated simply that “you can’t accommodate everybody,” but why are some students’ potential accommodations not being recognized or even discussed (Hitt)? And who is really responsible for these accommodations and larger dialogues?

THE BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY

I believe that both the college and the writing center share the responsibility of supporting students with mental illnesses. The school as an institution of higher education should be an advocate and work to create supportive resources for the students who suffer from mental illness. Colleges have a responsibility to the lives of their students, which includes their mental health. Many colleges and universities are taking more supportive roles for students who suffer from mental health through counseling centers, specialized events or activities, and providing

accommodations to students. Yet, all institutions still have much more work to do in terms of addressing stigmas that prevent people from fully utilizing resources or having honest dialogue about mental health. One community-based study found that “one in four people who perceived a need for help did not seek services,” many times due to “concerns about what others might think” (Eisenberg 524). It was also found that “perceived public stigma was considerably higher than personal stigma” (Eisenberg 522). These findings place the burden on responsibility on the school to change the culture surrounding mental health. Creating resources is not enough, especially if students are afraid to use them because of the current dialogue surrounding mental health. Fortunately, it was found that “stigma reduction efforts are more likely to increase help-seeking behavior among college students” (Eisenberg 530). This is particularly important because of the extremely high numbers of undiagnosed students who are suffering on college campuses without a proper atmosphere of support. College campuses are uniquely situated to conduct work to reduce stigmas about mental illness among the student body because the “campuses often encompass students’ residences, social networks, and many services” (Eisenberg 523). That being said, changing culture is extremely difficult and takes many small spaces and conversations to begin the work. This is where the writing center takes responsibility. Writer centers already work to be safe spaces on campuses for their writers and it would be relatively simple to start to recognize and respect mental health for all students by “including it in writing center scholarship and dialogue” (Hitt). The writer center has the potential to play an important role in beginning to change assumptions and shift attitudes, especially now that mental illness diagnoses are on the rise (Hitt). While the college or university still has a majority of the responsibility for the support and resources for students who suffer from mental illnesses, the

writing center is a space that has the potential to change the experience of both the writers and the tutors through a few simple changes and practices.

IMPLICATIONS

The most fundamental change that should be implemented in writing centers to address tutor mental health is simply to extend the same practices given to the student writers to the tutors. Student writers do not have to identify themselves as an individual who suffers from a mental illness in order to get support and understanding, so why should it be any different for the tutors? The same kinds of considerations given to the student writers can apply to the tutors and would be easy to implement because these practices are utilized every day in the writing center. Another practice to begin is to simply acknowledge that tutors can and do suffer from mental illnesses and recognize that this could potentially impact the tutoring abilities of the staff. This recommendation does not require the tutors to individually identify themselves as an individual who has a mental illness or require the writing center to become a counseling center. It simply illustrates that the mental health of the tutors is a priority and a responsibility of the writing center and a safe space for students who suffer from mental illness. Additionally, more literature could be included in the trainings, classes, meetings, or whatever is done to prepare the tutors to work in the writing center. Hopefully, creating a larger dialogue about tutor mental health will spur more research and articles to be done and we can gain more information and statistics about the issue. These simple shifts in rhetoric and practice can have significant implications for tutors suffering with mental illnesses and overall attitudes and assumptions about mental health.

CONCLUSION

Currently, one out of four college aged students have a “diagnosable mental illness” and that mental illness can slightly to significantly impact the tutoring abilities of writing center tutors (Degner). These facts should open our eyes to the reality that writing centers need to take a more active and supportive role for not just the student writers, but the tutors. The writing center is a space where attitudes can begin to shift, conversations can start, and impactful change can commence. We must take a more proactive and inclusive position regarding mental illness because we have the space, time, and resources to support students struggling with mental health. I am a student tutor who suffers from mental illness and it has impacted my tutoring abilities at times. I was encouraged by our dialogue about the mental health of the student writers we see, but I was also disappointed that the rhetoric did not extend to me. Yet, I can see the potential of the writing center to be a place that the mental illnesses of the tutors is considered and a space of active inclusion for all who enter.

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