

Service Learning in the Writing Center: Theoretical Connections and Practical Application  
By  
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**Abstract**

In recent years, scholars have begun pushing for a greater connection between academic work and the community outside of academia. Creating a connection can both make work seem more applicable for students and help the university become involved in the surrounding community. Service learning, increasingly popular since the 1990s, is one approach for creating connection between the university and the community. Though service learning occurs in many disciplines, rhetoric and composition scholars have contributed greatly to service learning's scholarship, because in many universities, writing and rhetoric courses are designed to help students become better critical thinkers and better communicators. Little has been written, however, to show possibilities of service learning in writing center work. This thesis makes theoretical connections between service learning theory and writing center theory, showing how many of the tenets of Writing Center work—collaboration, peer relationships, and giving voice to writers among others—fit with some of the main principles of service learning—action and reflection, knowledge creation, empowerment, and reciprocity. Additionally, this thesis describes an outreach program from the University of Kansas to Family Promise of Lawrence, an organization that helps families experiencing homelessness. After presenting the findings of this outreach program, the thesis concludes with suggestions for future writing center programs in the community.

## **Preface**

In recent years, scholars have begun pushing for a greater connection between academic work and community service. Creating a connection can both make work seem more applicable for students and help the university become involved in the surrounding community. Service learning, increasingly popular since the 1990s, is one approach for creating connection between the university and the community. Thomas Deans defines service learning as being “at the heart of a pedagogy of action and reflection, [pedagogy] that centers on dialectic between community outreach and academic inquiry” (2). Rooted in the educational perspectives of both John Dewey and Paulo Freire, service learning views education as a social (Deans 30) and political act (Deans 41) that should encourage democracy and social justice, creating informed citizens that contribute to their communities. Through curriculum aimed at democracy and social justice, universities can make individual students better critical thinkers and problem solvers and also create better citizens, citizens who take responsibility for communal welfare (Herzberg 146). Though service learning occurs in many disciplines, rhetoric and composition scholars have contributed greatly to service learning’s scholarship. In many universities, writing and rhetoric courses are designed to make students better critical thinkers and better communicators. Because of this goal, employing community work to enrich students’ critical thinking and communication skills is a viable and beneficial option.

Service learning scholars argue that it is the university’s responsibility to become involved with, learn about, and improve their communities. Ann Marie Feldman insists that universities become more “engaged in” and commit more seriously to their communities (22). She argues that in order to become engaged, universities must “[make] a commitment as part of [their] core intellectual agenda to a relationship with [their] context that depends on the mutual

creation of knowledge” (2). Service learning in rhetoric and composition courses are one important way universities can become “engaged in” the community; universities and communities can build relationships and create knowledge together by collaborating on writing projects. Creating knowledge and building relationships with the community is so important, Feldman argues, that universities should change their infrastructure by encouraging faculty to consider their scholarship’s impact on public contexts and by reconsidering the evaluation of faculty research for promotion and tenure (2).

Service learning scholar Ellen Cushman agrees that the university has a responsibility to the community, writing that there is a “growing pressure for intellectuals to make knowledge that speaks directly to political issues outside of academe’s safety zones” (Cushman, “Public Intellectual,” 329). This urgency, she believes, comes from both administrators and legislators seeking accountability and from academics who want their work to reach a larger audience (329). While there are a growing number of community initiatives, Cushman argues that academics must expand their understanding of “public” by “combining their research, teaching, and service efforts in order to address social issues important to community members in under-served neighborhoods” (329), rather than focusing on legislators or the upper and middle class (328). In this community work, it is necessary that all stakeholders, both university and community members, have a hand in decision-making; because the university and the community outside academia inhabit the same environment, they each bring different perspectives on community issues (Feldman 24). Rhetoric and composition students and scholars can benefit from working with under-served communities for a number of reasons. These depend on particular contexts and situations; however, some benefits seem to transcend context. First, communication is key in addressing political issues, especially in getting the attention of

administrators and legislators who can help make change. Becoming more effective communicators helps community members become better communicators and learn to use their voices more effectively; improved communication skills and confidence in their own voice can empower community members to achieve their goals. Additionally, by working with community members, students and scholars can not only inform their understanding of writing in different situations, but also become aware of under-served communities and the social and political structures that affect their lives. This consciousness can lead to their working for further change in the community.

When discussing community work, specifically in under-served communities, Paula Mathieu's discussion of "hope" is helpful. Mathieu defines "hope" as "look[ing] critically at one's present condition, assess[ing] what is missing, and then long[ing] for and work[ing] for a not-yet reality, a future anticipated" (19). Hope allows members of the university to avoid troubleshooting or becoming discouraged by the current situation, but instead to make a commitment to their community, combining passion, analysis and action (20). Employing "hope" creates a way for university and community members to work toward creating better conditions. Because writing and communicating collaboratively can empower community members and raise consciousness in scholars and students, service learning in rhetoric and composition courses can help work toward better community conditions.

Many university members agree on the university's involvement in the community and have gravitated toward service learning because of the opportunities it creates for community involvement and student engagement. Instrumental in service learning's success is the curriculum paired with the service. Bruce Herzberg argues that in service learning programs, students need to search beyond personal experiences and analyze the systematic causes behind

inequality. Rather than assuming that service learning will automatically raise questions of social structures, ideology, and social justice, Herzberg argues that instructors must help students become aware of these issues through class discussions, readings, and focused writing assignments (Herzberg 140). For example, in a rhetoric and composition service learning course, classroom discussion may focus on readings that pertain to a particular issue in their community. Later, students may write a paper that connects their course texts to their service experiences. Additionally, many universities employ service learning as part of a multicultural curriculum. Because service learning often puts students in settings where they encounter difference, it inherently raises issues about race, multiculturalism, and social justice (Jay 256). In a multicultural curriculum, instructors may have students complete readings that discuss issues of diversity and then connect those texts with their experiences.

In addition to what happens in classrooms and in faculty research, other members of the campus community also have the potential to use service learning in ways that are instrumental in student learning. One organization on campus important to students' education and writing development is the writing center, which works with students collaboratively to improve their writing and empower them. Though service learning typically happens in conjunction with a course, often with a rhetoric or composition course, as a member of the Writing center community, I believe writing centers show great potential for community connections. The writing center's focus on de-centralizing authority through collaboration could create empowering and reciprocal learning situations for writing consultants and community members.

Surprisingly, little has been written about writing center outreach. This study works to create a connection between service learning theory as discussed in composition studies and writing center theory. While service learning in composition studies typically happens in a

classroom, there are places where service learning theory and writing center theory overlap. It is in these similarities that the possibilities for Writing center work become clear.

Chapter One explores the connections between service learning in composition studies and writing center work. By showing how many of the tenets of writing center work—collaboration, peer relationships, and giving voice to writers among others—fit with some of the main principles of service learning—action and reflection, knowledge creation, empowerment, and reciprocity—this chapter explains the connections between the two bodies of work. Chapter Two and Chapter Three then focus on an outreach program of the University of Kansas Writing Center to Family Promise of Lawrence, an organization that helps families experiencing homelessness. Chapter Two presents the study's research questions, which focus on examining the possible benefits of the program. Chapter Two then discusses the parties involved, program rationale, program logistics, as well as the research methods employed. Finally, Chapter Three presents results and discussion of the findings from this project. By articulating the connections between these bodies of work and offering a sample program, I hope to contribute to the understanding of the connections between service learning theory and writing center theory and to encourage writing center administrators and consultants to discover ways they can connect with the community outside of campus.



## Chapter One: Connecting Service Learning Theory and Writing Center Theory

### *Service Learning in Composition Studies*

Service learning has been defined in a number of ways since its initial development. Thomas Deans, whose service learning definition is most prevalent in existing scholarship, roots his definition in the work of John Dewey, focusing on connecting the community and academia through action and reflection (2). Gregory Jay's definition focuses more on curriculum, stating that service learning is an "education assignment in which students meet the academic learning goals of a course through an experience working on behalf of others" (255). In connecting the community and academia, Rahima Wade's definition focuses more on empowering programs that focus on "working *with* others rather than *for* them" (97). Nicole Amare and Teresa Grettano define service learning even more broadly, noting that students do not necessarily have to provide the service to the community as long as the program allows them, "on a number of levels, to engage the community" (57).

Though typically discussed in terms of these definitions, service learning encompasses a wide-range of types of programs. Deans outlines three different paradigms for community writing in service learning programs—writing for the community, writing about the community, and writing with the community (16). In "writing for" courses, students enter a client relationship and collaborate with community members to create workplace documents (Deans 18). In "writing about" courses, students participate in traditional community service and then draw on those experiences in their essays (Deans 18). Finally, in "writing with" courses, faculty and students collaborate with the community to address local issues.

Like Deans, Elenore Long discusses service learning in terms of different types of programs; Long's types of pedagogies further distinguish types of service learning, especially in

terms of student learning. “Interpretive pedagogies,” where “students take public action” and “venture somewhere new to build a working relationship” (Long 158), and “inquiry-driven pedagogies,” where “students work with intercultural partners to inquire into and deliberate about pressing social problems” (Long 175), both seem to relate to Deans’s “writing with” courses, emphasizing the community’s involvement. Long’s “institutional pedagogies,” which center on students’ futures (163), and “tactical pedagogies,” which “prioritize that students learn to produce and to circulate their own public writing” (170), seem more focused on student learning than Deans’s paradigms. The final category, “performative pedagogies,” seems to bring both student and community learning together, seeking to determine the “relationship between inquiry and performance in daily deliberations over human affairs” (Long 189). While Deans’s and Long’s distinctions do not match completely, they do help us further understand the different possibilities available through service learning.

Like many topics in composition studies, service learning draws from other fields for its theoretical basis, most noticeably education. Though ranging in terms of generality and specificity, most definitions of service learning echo John Dewey’s definition of progressive education, requiring a pairing of action or experience with reflection. His continued presence in service learning literature shows that despite being an early nineteenth-century scholar, Dewey’s ideas are certainly not outdated. Deans organizes Deweyan concepts and service learning around two basic relationships: knowledge to action and the individual to society (30). These, along with other service learning tenets, will be discussed in greater detail below. Critical pedagogue Paulo Freire also contributes to service learning’s theoretical basis. Like Dewey, Freire emphasizes the relationships between action and reflection and self and society. Unlike Dewey, Freire views education as an explicit political act (Deans 41) rather than Dewey’s more implicit preparation

for participation in society; additionally, Freire's theories account for the culture, class, and race of each learner (Deans 40), where Dewey's theories do not. Many service learning scholars cite Freire because issues of culture, class, and race are prevalent in community work. To provide an understanding of service learning, the following sections of this chapter discuss the theoretical principles of action and reflection, the relationship of the individual to society, and the focus on critical reflection before moving to ethical concerns and curricular objectives of implementing service learning.

### **Action and Reflection**

Dewey defines education as “growth through active experimentation and reflective thought” (Deans 31); through action and experiences, knowledge is formed. Dewey's influence on service learning is clear here—community interaction creates different, and arguably a greater number of, opportunities for students to act and experiment with ideas and writing than might be possible in a course that maintains its base in a classroom. Freire focuses on the connection between action and reflection through his concept of “praxis,” a cyclical, ongoing process (Deans 41); this recursive action-reflection results in further inquiry from individuals and further education. Ideally, this consciousness will eventually lead to future social action (Deans 45), continuing the cycle as individuals actually change material conditions (Deans 48). Simply raising awareness without any kind of actual change is not satisfactory. For example, in a service learning course, students' critical consciousness is raised through acting (serving the community) and then reflecting; as they become more aware, they are inspired to continue acting to address issues or problems in their community. Service learning immediately positions students as writers and agents in society, allowing them to act and engage in praxis.

### **Connection Between Individual and Society**

The second relationship Dewey's work addresses that service learning scholars in composition studies focus on, that of the individual to society, indicates the social ends of education and showcases his understanding of democracy as the possibilities of cooperative life, not unchecked power (Deans 34). For Dewey, education necessarily has a social end, creating "good" citizens to serve in a democratic society. Freire also examines the relationship between the individual and society. Through Freire's praxis, individuals gain a better understanding of their position as individuals within society. Freire argues that social action cannot occur without this consciousness, without an individual's understanding of his or her relation to society (Deans 46). Because service learning simultaneously raises students' consciousness and gives them opportunities to act, students have the potential to understand their position as individuals, connect with their communities, and take a step toward becoming active agents of social change (Deans 48).

### **Pragmatism**

Also crucial in understanding the relationship between the individual and the larger society is the social construction of knowledge. Deans explains that Dewey's pragmatism "critiques essentialist notions of truth in favor of a social constructivist approach;" additionally, it "argues for a socially engaged philosophy that deals with the 'problems of man' rather than the 'problems of philosophy'" (29). Through pragmatism, individuals in a society work together to create knowledge and solve problems. Pragmatism plays a role in this maintenance of a democratic society by encouraging individuals to realize and acknowledge their own uncertainty (Flower, "Partners," 101). By recognizing that our explanations and knowledge are essentially hypotheses, though some may have stronger evidence than others, individuals can approach problems with genuine inquiry and can act as equals in creating a solution (Flower, "Partners,"

103). Again, Dewey's influence on service learning is obvious—working with the community in a reciprocal relationship, where both the university and the community approach the problem or issue as equals and both contribute to the problem solving process, allows for a more democratic society.

Dewey's pragmatism, however, does not openly account for cultural difference and injustice. Because of this, Cornel West argues for “prophetic pragmatism,” inquiry that examines the causes of social injustices in the past and organizes ways to alleviate them, while maintaining an awareness of its own shortcomings (Flower, “Partners,” 103). Though service learning is not as radical as West's calls for prophetic pragmatism, service learning scholars' presentation of West's ideas indicate that prophetic pragmatism can be influential when going into communities that are different from students' communities, encouraging students to respect and appreciate all viewpoints and to work to alleviate past and present injustice.

A consideration of interculturality is also necessary in pragmatism and critical reflection, especially in our increasingly diverse society. Intercultural inquiry uses “the differences of race, class, culture, or discourse that are available to [participants] to understand shared questions” (Flower, “Intercultural Inquiry” 186). No longer is advocating inquiry enough in service learning, or education at large; instead, the stakes are raised, and intercultural inquiry is necessary to form “new and mutual, intercultural representation” of problems, meanings, and consequences (Flower, “Intercultural Inquiry” 186). Though intercultural inquiry may result in contradictions and diverse voices, these are necessary for engaging diverse communities (Flower, “Intercultural Inquiry” 185). Additionally, as advocates of critical teaching and service learning have long argued, creating awareness should not be the end goal of intercultural inquiry; instead, we must move from creating awareness to actually dealing with contradictions and

creating negotiated meanings. Through service learning, students gain the opportunity to work with a diverse population; considering pragmatism and interculturality can help students engage with the community and move away from simply becoming aware of issues to dealing with contradictions and creating new meanings.

### **Empowerment and Reciprocity**

Involving diverse voices in action and reflection, considering the relationship between the individual and society, and engaging in pragmatism requires a consideration of ethics. In fact, many scholars use a program's goals or ethics to distinguish between the different types of service learning. When considering ethics, Ellen Cushman argues that there are two types of activism—missionary activism and scholarly activism. Missionary activism introduces certain literate practices to promote an ideology, while scholarly activism seeks to encourage literacy already taking place in a community (Cushman, "Rhetorician," 13). For Cushman, empowerment and reciprocity are key in the distinction between missionary activism and scholarly activism. Cushman defines empowerment as "enabl[ing] someone to achieve a goal by providing resources for them," "facilitat[ing] actions," and "lend[ing] our power or status to forward people's achievement" (14). Cushman argues that community member empowerment can only happen through scholarly activism.

Cushman's discussion of activism also focuses on the necessity of reciprocity in relationships with the community. When engaging in service learning, it may be tempting for members of the university to focus on benefits for the community. However, Cushman argues that for a program to be ethical, members of the community and members of the university must benefit (Cushman, "Rhetorician," 17). When discussing race and service learning, scholar Ann Green promotes reciprocity with "service-in-relationship," where instead of providing a service

for a distant or unnamed community, students participate in service that creates a relationship with community members (278). In order to create “service-in-relationship” opportunities, Green suggests that the “service,” for example photocopying or cleaning at a shelter, must be paired with time for students to engage in conversation with community members (278). What is most important here is that students are actually engaging in conversation with the community. Building this relationship with community members helps create reciprocity by increasing student learning; the personal connection allows students to gain a deeper understanding of the community in which they are working. Also important for reciprocity is doing research “in solidarity with” the service site, rather than research about the service site (Green 293). For example, rather than researching and writing about or for the community, projects should research with them, where service “goes beyond meeting individual needs to empowering others work on their own behalf” (Wade 97). In addition to ensuring that service learning fulfills more than just the university’s goals (Mathieu 117), reciprocity in service learning ensures that both parties bring knowledge to the problem or project and that both parties benefit.

While a distinction between charity (or missionary activism) and scholarly activism like Cushman’s is common in service learning scholarship and many scholars promote moving students along a continuum from charity to advocacy, Keith Morton argues that this is not actually what happens. Instead, Morton states that service learning exists in three paradigms—charity, project development, and social change. Attempting to “move students along” implies that there is a hierarchy in the different types of service learning. Morton, however, believes that there can be “thin” and “thick” versions of each type of service learning; “thin” versions are disempowering and hollow, while “thick” versions are sustaining and revolutionary (Morton 134). Rather than labeling one kind of service learning as better than another, we should

encourage students to work more deeply in their chosen paradigm and to expose students to the creative dissonance between the three forms (Morton 119), thereby expanding students' notions of service.

Cushman's distinction between types of service learning and Morton's desire to eradicate the continuum seem to contradict one another, but the viewpoints can enhance each other. Morton's argument asks that we not consider one type of service learning as superior to other types; there is no continuum to move students along but simply different types of service learning to work more deeply within. This is legitimate, especially regarding pragmatism: believing one approach is "right" could prevent service learning from engaging in genuine inquiry and using the most appropriate type of service learning for a given situation. However, as service learning matures and becomes more prevalent, questions of how to create ethical service learning programs surface. Though we need not view programs on a continuum, if we are to help students enter their chosen mode of service learning more deeply, as Morton suggests, a consideration of ethical concerns is necessary.

Linda Flower constructs an understanding of service learning through a discussion of what effective service learning is not. Like Cushman, she argues that service learning programs cannot be formed by a logic of cultural mission, where volunteers enter the community seeking to change it, nor can they be viewed in light of technical expertise, where the volunteer brings needed skills, knowledge or resources to the problems of the struggling community. Additionally, service learning cannot be rooted solely in compassion and identity; though this can create empathy, this logic does not necessarily move beyond individual consciousness to public action (Flower, "Partners," 96). Flower's definition of service learning as what it is not indicates that when implemented incorrectly, service learning programs can create unsatisfactory



results and sometimes even replicate the social structures that contribute to inequality between the university and community.

In creating empowering and reciprocal service learning situations, it is also necessary that service learning initiatives consider the community and its needs. David Coogan argues that programs must address problems already existing in the community instead of viewing service learning as an opportunity for instructors to project certain problems or issues. Instead, service learning offers the chance to find problems and arguments that already exist and to work together to produce viable alternatives to those problems (Coogan 667). Additionally, in considering the community, service learning cannot take what Mathieu refers to as a “top-down” approach (96). Rather than creating programs that follow university strategies, such as methods of assessment, academic calendars, and the desire for institutionalization, Mathieu explains that ethical service learning plans programs using community feedback (100) and roots the program in the community’s needs (111). Rather than creating a reciprocal situation, not considering the community when designing and implementing the program could result in simply taking university strategies and “colonizing” the service site with them (Mathieu 17).

### ***The Writing Center and Service Learning***

As is clear from the discussion above, service learning requires a consideration of the needs of multiple communities and the members of these communities to be effective for student learning and to be ethical. One site within the university that designs its services to encourage student learning while also meeting the needs of multiple communities is the writing center. Though community outreach is not yet common in writing centers, the connections between writing center work and service learning in composition studies offer promising possibilities. Before outlining these connections, a basic definition of writing centers is necessary. Because

writing centers can serve so many different purposes, they have been defined in a number of ways by different members of the university. This project, however, focuses on how members of the writing center define themselves. Frustrated by colleagues' and scholars' views of writing centers as sites of remedial writing services or supplemental to departmental and institutional curriculum, Stephen North defines writing centers as a merger of two ideas taking root in the 1980s: "that writing is most usefully viewed as a process" and "that writing curricula need to be student-centered" (438). These two basic ideas are still crucial in defining writing centers today. In addition to a process and writer-centered focus, writing centers place great emphasis on community and the collaboration that occurs between peers, in addition to raising consciousness. Through the discussion of ideas and writing, the writing center becomes a site of knowledge creation (Grimm 537).

This section explores the writing center, framing it in terms of service learning principles. By observing writing center principles in their relation to action and reflection, knowledge creation, reciprocal learning, and empowerment, the writing center's appropriateness for community outreach becomes clear. Writing serves a number of functions, many of these necessary for survival and empowerment in today's society—job applications to start or further a career; informative handouts to raise awareness about a specific community problem; creative writing as a form of therapy. Through outreach, the writing center could provide community members with writing resources, resources that could help them gain empowerment by "facilitat[ing] action" and "forward[ing] [their] achievement" (Cushman, "Rhetorician," 14).

The writing center's focus on community is central in its link to service learning. Not only does it have a strong community of its own, but it is also interested in reaching outward, welcoming members from the entire university community. The writing center creates a space

where students can improve their writing and increase their chances of success in the university. Providing this service empowers students to write confidently, improves the university community, and changes material conditions. As Cushman's discussion of the university's commitment to the community and Mathieu's discussion of hope indicate, service learning places great value on improving existing and building new communities, which makes the writing center a perfect site for community work.

### **Action and Reflection**

The writing center's focus on collaboration between students and consultants encourages action paired with reflection, one of the main themes service learning pulls from Dewey's definition of progressive education. Dewey defines education as "growth through active experimentation and reflective thought" (Deans 30). Experimentation occurs as writers and consultants collaborate on a piece of writing. Reflection then occurs after the session when consultants and writers reflect, either informally or formally through questionnaires, about their experiences working together; clearly, this falls under Dewey's definition of education. Similar to Dewey, Freire focuses on action and reflection in his discussion of praxis, a cyclical ongoing process of action, reflection and further action (Deans 41). Ideally, writers' and consultants' action and reflection will result in further action and reflection. In sessions in the writing center, writers and consultants write together and then reflect on their collaboration; these experiences encourage writers to continue collaborating on their writing, either at the writing center or elsewhere, and to reflect after those collaborative efforts.

As the section on service learning in this chapter indicates, definitions of service learning focus on action and reflection when working with the community. Though most writing center work focuses on the university community, and not the community outside of academia, by

actively engaging the community in its action-reflection education, the writing center could create a “dialectic between community outreach and academic inquiry” (Deans 2). Collaboration between community writers and volunteer consultants from the writing center would help both parties learn to act and reflect on that action much like it helps student writers in the university. And after seeing results from their action and reflection, such as improved community conditions or having their voices heard, community writers and volunteer consultants will be encouraged to continue acting.

### **Collaboration, Knowledge Creation, and Reciprocal Learning**

In addition to pairing action and reflection, writers and consultants collaborate to create knowledge. The writing center values community greatly. It obviously values its internal community—consisting of administrative staff and writing consultants—and typically has staff meetings, professional development events, and social events to further develop that community. However, the writing center also works to extend their community outward. Key to community is the writing center’s creation of a comfortable, welcoming environment. Writing centers often have comfortable couches and chairs, posters and artwork, and plants, all intended to help students feel relaxed and welcome in the space. Interestingly enough, a study examining writing center “lore” showed that providing a comfortable space was the only element of lore that was accurate and that was a genuine concern for writers and consultants (Thompson et al. 95). Writing centers advertise on campus and offer class visits to encourage students to feel comfortable in the Writing center before ever setting foot inside. In “Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors,” Muriel Harris argues that students need this unique setting to develop. Because of the welcoming and friendly environment, students feel comfortable participating in the writing center community.

The sense of community and peer interaction between consultants and writers allows knowledge creation to happen in the writing center. Because writing consultants are also students, writers can share their writing and receive feedback from a peer rather than an instructor; for many students, the absence of formal evaluation in the writing center reduces anxiety that can come from writing with an instructor and helps student writers feel comfortable. Because of the unique relationship that exists between writers and peer consultants, a number of things happen in the writing center that do not necessarily happen in the classroom—engaging, honest, and open discussion about ideas; reduced anxiety; and translation of academic language to student language (Harris). Because writing consultants are peers and are not working toward a specific course curriculum or goals a teacher is projecting, they can focus on the students' goals, keeping the consultation student-centered, which ensures that they address genuine problems or issues from the writer's perspective (Coogan 667). And by listening to students and allowing them to help guide the session, writing consultants show that students are genuinely a part of the writing center community, a community where their concerns and goals are valid.

As the focus on community and the interaction between equal peers indicate, the writing center places great emphasis on collaboration. Through the discussion of ideas and writing, the writing center becomes a site of knowledge creation (Grimm 537). Obviously, collaboration is not new to discussions of writing; however, understanding the benefits of collaboration is necessary in discussing how the Writing center could participate in effective community outreach. Nancy Grimm paraphrases Vygotsky to explain collaboration's importance: "the notion that intellect develops more as a result of interactions with others justifies Writing Center practice" (535). When collaborating, consultants and writers work as equals and through their

work together, create knowledge, which positions writing centers well to socially construct knowledge in community outreach.

This connection between collaboration and the relationship between the individual and society is especially relevant to Dewey's pragmatism, which critiques "essentialist notions of truth" and encourages "a social constructivist approach" (Deans 29). Rather than labeling one participant as the knowledge-holder, the Writing Center encourages consultants and writers to acknowledge their own uncertainty when working on a piece of writing, much like pragmatism does (Flower, "Partners," 101). Because consultants and writers are peers, no one participant is more important to the conversation than the other. Instead, they can approach the student's writing and the issues with which it engages with genuine inquiry, and both groups act as equals in creating knowledge or a solution. And, just as collaboration creates a site for students to participate in conversation, it also makes the writing center a prime location for work with the community; through collaboration, community members and writing consultants can better understand and communicate in their communities.

Collaboration and knowledge creation lead to learning situations that are reciprocal, beneficial for both writing consultants and community members. As discussed in the work of many service learning scholars in composition studies, reciprocity is necessary in creating genuine community connections. Programs cannot be viewed as a way for members of the university to "give" knowledge or information to community members; instead, Cushman, among other scholars, indicates that reciprocal learning is absolutely necessary to create ethical programs ("Rhetorician," 17). Bruffee argues that through collaboration, peer tutoring makes learning a two-way street (4), where both consultants and writers learn from their interactions with one another. Writing center practices create an ideal setting for reciprocity in learning—not

only would community members benefit from their work with the writing center, but the writing center staff benefits from its interactions with the community. Because both parties approach the piece of writing with equal authority and knowledge, both parties learn and benefit from knowledge creation.

### **Empowerment**

Working together to create knowledge helps writers become empowered, which is key for effective service learning. Cushman defines empowerment as “enabl[ing] someone to achieve a goal by providing resources for them,” “facilitat[ing] actions,” and “lend[ing] our power or status to forward people’s achievement” (“Rhetorician,” 14). In addition to the empowerment that comes from collaboration, writers also become empowered in the writing center because of other practices specific to the writing center, each of which is further discussed below. First, writing center work is important for writers because consultations are writer-centered and focused on process over product; rather than focusing on the curriculum of a particular course, consultants work with students to address their concerns, letting students become empowered to guide the session.

#### *A Writer-Centered Focus*

The primary responsibility of writing centers is to exist for writers, to work one-on-one with them (Harris 27, North 428). In his monumental article “The Idea of a Writing Center,” Stephen North argues that rather than being defined by other parts of the university, writing centers must define themselves in terms of the writers they serve; teachers cannot use the writing center as a supplement to their courses because it exists for writers (North 440). Rather than beginning with instructor or course expectations of students, writing consultants are trained to begin consultations where students are, engaging in “writer-centered” consultations. Consultants

use the beginning of the consultation time, often termed “agenda-setting,” to determine where students are in the process of writing that particular piece or their understanding of writing as a whole. By taking time to discuss the students’ concerns and goals, consultants ensure that writers establish authority early in the consultation and that they can, as service learning suggests, begin to work “on their own behalf” (Wade 97).

Beginning where the writer is and keeping their concerns in the forefront allows the writer to become empowered, in control of their writing (North 439). Echoing Dewey and Freire’s ideas about the necessity of active education, consultants encourage writers to become active agents in their writing, rather than passive participants who are told how or what to write. Warnock and Warnock’s discussion of liberatory writing centers, grounded in Freire’s liberatory pedagogy, helps shed light on how writing centers encourage students to become active participants. As students become more aware of themselves as writers, they can also develop “consciousness toward the context for that writing, the world they live in, and thus will be able to *happen to*” (Warnock and Warnock 18). Just as Dewey and Freire’s educational theories deal with the relationship of the individual to society, writing center work helps writers become more aware of the context of their writing and their world, allowing them to actively participate instead of simply respond to their environment. Because service learning works to help community members become more active participants in their environments, the writing center’s goal of creating more writers who understand their environment and act within it can create effective community outreach.

Additionally, Warnock and Warnock write that in order for students to become active participants, they need to “revise their attitudes towards themselves as writers and towards writing” (19). One way writing centers do this is by focusing on process over product, which can



help increase student confidence (North 438). Because the writing center focuses on the writer, and not necessarily a particular course curriculum or piece of writing, consultations create better writers, instead of attempting to create a “perfect paper.” By focusing on higher order issues—such as content, thesis, and organization—the student writer ideally comes away from the consultation having learned something they can carry with them into future essays. This focus on process continues the development and empowerment of the writer by not only improving specific writing skills, but by also building confidence in student writers.

Through an awareness of their own sense of authority and responsibility, students can “feel confident enough about themselves that they listen to others and evaluate what they learn, transforming some of what they hear into their own purposes, revising their own views in light of the new learning, rejecting what they do not value or believe might have value for them in the future” (Warnock & Warnock 20). The writing center helps student writers view themselves as active participants in the conversation; once they view themselves in this way, they will be more comfortable and confident, and therefore more likely to act. In much the same way that students benefit from increased confidence, if writing centers practice community outreach, they can help community members act and then reflect on those actions, becoming more aware of themselves as active participants in their conversations and contexts.

Viewing themselves as active participants is crucial for empowerment. Students, and writers in general, hear a number of competing voices from a variety of people and places throughout the course of their lives. The writing center can act as an open, safe place where writers can “converse with, question and rework the conflicting, often unsettling, always potentially creative other voices that populate their words” (Welch 81). The writing center is necessary for students to engage in this conversation because student writers may not have a

place where they can negotiate and actively engage with the competing voices that make up the audience for which they write. Community members, especially marginalized community members who may not have a space where they feel they can engage these voices, would also benefit from having a space to negotiate and actively engage with the voices and issues in their environment.

### *Consultant Training*

What seems to give consultants and administrators the potential to help empower others is their knowledge of the writing process and how to tutor it; knowing how to empower others is crucial to effective service learning. Writing center consultants and administrators are not only skilled and successful writers, but they are trained to work with writers, to help writers say what they want to say, to empower writers. Through professional development opportunities—like tutor training courses, staff meetings, and conferences—and actual tutoring experiences in the writing center, consultants learn how to work successfully with writers to improve their writing and help them give voice to their thoughts and opinions. Being able to communicate, whether this involves writers becoming aware of their own voices for the first time or honing skills, is empowerment. Marginalized groups are often described as “voiceless;” they are rarely encouraged to communicate about their disempowerment, which only perpetuates marginalization. With the help of writing consultants, marginalized community members could become better equipped and confident in their ability to speak for themselves, which makes writing centers promising sites for service learning.

### *Conclusion*

Though not inclusive, this chapter outlines connections between service learning and writing center theory and some benefits writing centers and community members may

experience from interactions with one another. Other connections and benefits may be context specific, and because of this, providing a complete list is impossible. Each writing center and community will have its own specific strengths, skills, and problems. What is crucial to note, though, is the potential for empowerment and reciprocity inherent in the relationship between writing centers and the community. It is clear that both parties, and therefore the community as a whole, can benefit from writing center involvement in the community. Chapters Two and Three discuss a pilot outreach program implemented at the University of Kansas Writing Center. Chapter Two will discuss the research questions, methods, and program logistics, while Chapter Three presents the findings from this study.

## **Chapter Two: KU Writing Center at Family Promise Design and Implementation**

### ***Background and Context***

As Chapter One explains, Writing Centers are promising sites for service learning. In order to begin exploring the connections between service learning theory and writing center theory, I implemented an outreach program from the University of Kansas Writing Center to Family Promise of Lawrence, an organization that aids families experiencing homelessness. In addition to exploring the practical implications of these theoretical connections, this outreach program also served as a pilot project for the KU Writing Center, exploring if and how a partnership between the KU Writing Center and Family Promise of Lawrence might be a viable option. This program offered job-related and school-related writing assistance to Family Promise guests. The KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence's goals, research methods, and implementation are discussed further below.

While designing this program, I drew on examples from other writing centers working in the community, in addition to scholarship about service learning in composition. Though it was difficult to find information about similar programs, I did find a few programs to serve as guides. The first writing center-operated community literacy program I read about was a program in Lincoln, Nebraska that sought to create a "Writing Center without walls" (Roadacker and Siebler). Lincoln has a large refugee population, and two English Language Learners (ELL) scholars saw the potential for an ELL project connected to a community garden. Because many of the refugees taking ELL courses in Lincoln are women, this program used principles from ecofeminism to teach ELL courses in conjunction with Lincoln's community gardens. Through this, participants were empowered through gaining improved English skills and providing food for themselves and their families. Additionally, participants built community across cultures.

Another program that pairs writing center work and service learning is the Community Writing Assistance Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In place since 1999, this program is staffed entirely by graduate students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center. The CWA meets in public libraries in Madison and is open to all members of the community and works with all types of writing (Doggart, Tedrowe, and Vieira 72). A similar program exists at The Institute of Writing Studies at St. John's University and Bread and Life. Bread and Life is a nonprofit organization that offers food and other assistance to impoverished communities in Brooklyn. Though much of the information available on the website was about future plans, I learned that they plan to partner with Bread and Life by offering two writing assistance programs—one will offer development of writing skills and the second will help people learn to balance their inner and outer lives through writing (St. John's University Institute of Writing Studies).

The Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center's Program "DiverseCity" does something similar to the programs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Institute of Writing Studies at St. John's in that they offer writing help to the community. However, in addition to offering writing assistance, they also publish community members' writing to give the community a voice and to help the community bridge differences and foreground discourse practices. Using these programs as models helped me develop an outreach program through the KU Writing Center. Additionally, knowledge of previous research helped me understand what research areas may benefit from expansion.

### **The Writing Center at the University of Kansas and Service Learning**

In addition to understanding other writing center outreach programs, because this would be a pilot program for the Writing Center at the University of Kansas, I considered the KU

Writing Center's past and current involvement with service learning. The KU Writing Center works primarily with undergraduate and graduate students. Though it is open to anyone and does see community members on occasion, its primary focus is on the student population. The KU Writing Center's mission statement addresses a number of issues pertinent to students, including providing "qualified writing consultants who support the academic mission of the University," creating "an environment...that is accessible, comfortable, and productive" for writers, helping writers "understand and practice writing-to-learn for writing in all subjects now and...in the future," and supporting writer's growth ("KU Writing Center Website"). The KU Writing Center is currently staffed with three administrative positions, approximately thirty undergraduate and graduate consultants, and office assistants. In addition to seven different locations in libraries, dormitories, and at KU's satellite location Edwards Campus in Overland Park, KS, the KU Writing Center also offers online consultations for students.

A widely used resource on campus, during the 2010-2011 academic year, the Writing Center saw an increase in users from all class levels, freshmen to graduate students. Additionally, the capacity usage (the percentage of available appointments actually used) increased to almost 75% during the 2010-2011 academic year. During the most recent semester, Fall 2011, the Writing Center had 3,573 total face-to-face consultations and completed 603 online consultations (KU Writing Center, "Annual Report").

Though most of the KU Writing Center's work happens on campus between peer consultants and undergraduate or graduate student writers, I learned from the director that the Writing Center has participated in service learning in the past and continues to do so. The most established outreach program occurs in conjunction with the training course that all potential

writing consultants are required to take before being hired as consultants at the Writing Center—LA&S/ENGL400.

Students in LA&S/ENGL 400 can choose to take the course for service learning credit, which contributes to official certification in service learning from the KU Office of Service Learning. After reading and discussing Writing Center theory and best practices, students in LA&S/ENGL 400 participate in an internship, where they spend a certain number of hours consulting. In addition to completing these hours in the Writing Center on campus, students also have the option of tutoring writing at a nearby middle school or high school. While this option exists for students training to be writing consultants, no service learning option is available for current writing consultants. Understanding the KU Writing Center's involvement with service learning helped me to construct a program that involved current writing consultants, while also extending previous service learning scholarship.

### ***Research Questions***

#### **Questions and Goals**

Before moving into a discussion of the research design and methods, an understanding of the program's research questions and goals is necessary. My guiding research questions for the KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence were as follows:

- 1) What connections exist between service learning scholarship and writing center scholarship? How can a writing center outreach program clarify and enrich these connections?
- 2) How can a writing center outreach program enrich understanding of writing for consultants and writers?

3) How can tutors and writers benefit both professionally and personally from their interactions with one another?

In answering these research questions, I sought to achieve a number of goals. First, on a theoretical level, I hoped to explore further the connection between service learning scholarship and writing centers. On a practical level, I hoped to establish initial relationships between the KU Writing Center and Family Promise of Lawrence, and between writing consultants and members of the wider Lawrence community. I also hoped to provide job-related writing help for adults at Family Promise and school-related writing help for their children. Through working with writing consultants, writers would not only improve their chances on the job market, but that in the long term, they would benefit from developing a better understanding of writing, specifically understanding nuances of different rhetorical situations and why an awareness of those nuances is important. For consultants, working with a wider variety of writers would increase their awareness of the world around them. Finally, I hoped this project could measure new understandings of writing and explore other benefits experienced by both parties involved.

### ***Research Design and Methods***

#### **Timeline**

The KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence pilot program began shortly after the start of the Fall 2011 semester in mid-September. The program continued through both the Fall 2011, Winter Break, and Spring 2012 semesters, though I stopped collecting data at the end of February. At this time, no concrete plans have been set for the program's continuation; however, Family Promise administrators, the Writing Center director, and I are currently discussing the possibility of the partnership continuing in the future. Suggestions for future



outreach programs, both at the KU Writing Center and other writing centers, will be discussed in the final chapter.

### **Participants in the Study**

Though we considered a number of populations with which the KU Writing Center could work when designing this pilot program, we decided to focus on Lawrence's homeless population. Lawrence has an alarmingly high rate of homelessness; the January 2011 census showed that 226 individuals in Douglas County were experiencing homelessness (Lawrence Community Shelter). Though I did not know specific numbers when initially planning the program, I knew from personal experience that it was widespread. A primary concern in service learning scholarship is that the service addresses a genuine need and is helpful for that particular community, so by working with Lawrence's homeless population, a large population with very real needs, the program could address a genuine need.

After choosing a population with which to work, I contacted the KU Center for Service Learning to find an organization with which to partner. As a large research institution, the University of Kansas already has a number of community connections, so I hoped to learn about already existing partnerships. From that source, I received contact information for organizations that work with Lawrence's homeless population. Finding an organization willing to partner with the Writing Center went smoothly, as the first organization I contacted—Family Promise of Lawrence—was excited about the program. Though the program was early in the planning stages, the director, Kari<sup>i</sup>, and community coordinator, Sarah, agreed to a partnership, and we spent the summer emailing and meeting to develop the program.

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<sup>i</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout Chapters Two and Three to maintain participant anonymity.

Part of a nation-wide program, Family Promise of Lawrence defines their organization as “a non-profit, interfaith hospitality network providing temporary assistance, hospitality and case management for families with children experiencing homelessness.” Additionally, they write that the organization recognizes that “poverty is a multifaceted problem that requires a multifaceted response. [The] network brings the faith community together to help [the] community’s families regain housing, independence and dignity in a time of need” (Lawrence Family Promise). Though Family Promise has existed nation-wide since 1986, the Lawrence chapter is still relatively new and opened in November 2008.

Though Family Promise programs operate slightly differently at chapters across the nation, Family Promise of Lawrence operates in the following way. The staff consists of a director and a community coordinator, and is big enough to help three or four families, or a maximum of fourteen people, at one time. Area religious congregations of all denominations and faiths volunteer to host Family Promise guests. For one week, volunteers from these congregations provide breakfast and an evening meal and evening hosts who stay the night with the families at the congregations. Most important for creating a space that is a home for families, congregations partition off a room for each family, a room that only that family is allowed to enter, a room that belongs to that family and becomes their space. After one week, the families move to the next congregation.

The organization also has a day house that is open for the families when the host congregation is closed during the day. The house remains unmarked, with no sign indicating that this home is any different from any other home on the block. Here, families have all the amenities they would have in their home—shower and bathroom facilities, washer and dryer, kitchen, computers with internet access, and telephones. Additionally, Family Promise seeks to

give a “multifaceted response;” the Family Promise director works as each adult’s case worker, aiding them in their search for jobs and appropriate housing, among other things. Obviously, being without a home cannot be ideal; however, Family Promise works to create a comfortable, safe space where families can be empowered and get back on their own.

Because it is an in-between place for families, Family Promise often sees guests communicating in a number of different ways, such as job-related writing, housing applications, and even homework. However, as a small organization with a small staff, Family Promise cannot always offer guests writing services. Though guests can receive writing help at some community resources in Lawrence, such as at Job Corps, offering the service at Family Promise itself makes it more convenient for guests and makes it more likely that they will be able to receive the help they need.

After securing an organization with which to work, I met with the Writing Center director again to determine the Writing Center’s role in the program. Because of the positive outcomes of service learning in LA&S/ENGL 400 for future writing consultants and the potential she saw in this program, the Writing Center director was excited to officially back the outreach program as a pilot program for the Writing Center. While the director offered the option of making my program part of the LA&S/ENGL 400 class, I wanted this program to be an option for current consultants since no option currently existed for them. Though two consultants in addition to myself participated in the program, because it was not in conjunction with a course, consultants could not receive service learning credit for participation, making their work strictly volunteer.

### **Research Methods**

As a program designed to examine benefits for writers and writing consultants and to measure their learning, I chose to collect qualitative research. In order to do this, I developed

multiple questionnaires and received approval to conduct this research from the University of Kansas Human Subjects in Research Committee. To measure learning and initial experiences of Family Promise guests, I administered a questionnaire<sup>ii</sup> for Family Promise guests and children who might receive homework help to complete immediately after the session. In addition to the informal reports after each volunteer session, in order to measure consultant learning over the course of the program, I developed a set of interview questions<sup>iii</sup> for writing consultants to complete at the end of the program. Additionally, near the end of the program, I completed an interview<sup>iv</sup> with Family Promise's community coordinator. Through questionnaires and interviews, I hoped to use the participants' own words to express their experiences and learning.

Additionally, as the program implementer, I kept a writing log of my experiences with Family Promise to document work with guests and the program's development. The descriptive data I collected as a participant-observer is perhaps most beneficial for this study. James Spradley writes that participant-observers have two purposes "to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (qtd. in Moss 158). Moss also shows that participant observation allows researchers to see "how the members make meaning and explain and interpret social actions in their own communities" (157). While my participant-observer research cannot be generalized or make broader claims, using this methodology allowed me to enter and participate in the culture and to interact with and observe Family Promise guests and administrators.

### **Implementation of KU Writing Center at Family Promise**

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<sup>ii</sup> See Appendix 1 for Family Promise guest questionnaire

<sup>iii</sup> See Appendix 2 for consultant interview questions

<sup>iv</sup> See Appendix 3 for interview questions with community coordinator

Because it is a nonprofit organization with a small staff, Family Promise of Lawrence is open to members of the larger community participating in the program or offering support. More specifically, because the organization sees itself as a way to address the “multifaceted” problem of poverty, the director and community coordinator welcome any resources individuals from the community can offer. In addition to increasing the staff’s stress, it allows the organization to work within its limited budget and to ensure that guests get the best available resources.

Because this program was an outreach of the Writing Center, it could offer Family Promise guests writing resources and assistance. When I first met with the Family Promise director and community coordinator, I proposed offering job-related writing help, such as job applications, resumes, or cover letters, to Family Promise participants. They were enthusiastic about this idea and believed that a job-related writing service would fit in perfectly with Family Promise’s goal of helping parents regain independence and stability. The director was visibly relieved and commented that she had a number of guests who asked for help with writing, but that because she had so many other responsibilities, she often found it difficult to provide sufficient help. Additionally, if a family had children in school, we also offered writing or English-related homework help. Though obviously different than job-related writing, we learned from Family Promise administrators that school-aged children often needed homework help. By helping with their homework, we would not only help children learn, but we would also increase the number of people we could work with at Family Promise.

Initially, I had also considered offering help with creative writing or a writing-as-therapy program. While the staff saw this as a possibility, they suggested that the program start with job-related writing and possibly implement a writing-as-therapy program later. Because Family Promise guests may be uncomfortable sharing personal information early on with writing

consultants, they suggested that establishing a presence at Family Promise and building relationships first would be more effective. Because Family Promise has the resources to help about fourteen people at a time and because families typically stay about two or three months, we did not expect the program to help a large number of writers; instead, we expected the program would work with writers multiple times, building relationships with them.

The program was open to all writing consultants; I sought to recruit at least five or six volunteers so that volunteering would not be a burden to already busy students. However, because the Family Promise staff explained the unique situations of their guests and the importance of sensitivity to these situations, I hoped that experienced tutors would volunteer. After explaining the program to the entire Writing Center staff, four experienced graduate writing consultants eagerly volunteered.

Family Promise requires all volunteers who have face time with guests to participate in a training session. Most of the volunteers who attend these sessions are members of the congregations that host the families. These training sessions prepare volunteers for their work with guests, helping them better understand how the organization operates, the population's unique situations, and expectations for volunteers. I completed this volunteer training over the summer to get a better sense of how the organization operated and its guiding principles. Additionally, this would allow the program to begin with the start of the fall semester. Though this volunteer training did not influence the design of the program, because the Family Promise administrators had already aided me in that, it did influence the way I interacted with the guests and encouraged consultant and program adaptability when piloting this program.

When the fall semester began, the KU Writing Center at Family Promise held sessions two times a week, once in the afternoon at the day house and once in the evening at the host

congregation. One writing consultant would volunteer for a two-hour shift, essentially holding “office hours” where guests could drop in for writing help. We offered two different times in an attempt to accommodate the most guests. We hoped that after the Writing Center had established a presence at Family Promise, Family Promise guests would remember our hours and feel comfortable bringing their writing to us.

### **Additional Considerations and Complications with Design and Implementation**

Though the connections between service learning and writing center work and the program’s goals were clear, there were complications to consider when designing the program. First, considering curriculum is necessary. One of the most obvious differences between service learning in composition studies and the writing center is the relationship of students to their work and writing consultants to theirs. Student responsibility in the classroom is clear—they are expected to explore, question, and learn course curriculum. However, because writing consultants’ primary responsibility is to act as writing tutors, their work is not designed around a specific course curriculum and therefore, their learning objectives are less direct. Many service learning scholars argue that this curriculum is necessary for a successful service learning program. For example, rather than expecting that the service learning experience itself will automatically raise questions of social structures, Herzberg argues that instructors must create a curriculum that causes students to understand “the social nature of experience and to accept the idea of cultural injustice” (145). Without analyzing the systematic causes behind inequality, service learning risks being only charity or well-meaning volunteerism (Flower, “Partners,” 96) rather than social change and education (Herzberg 139).

Though not necessarily offering specific courses or curriculum, writing centers do create a space where consultants learn. Many writing centers offer some form of “traditional” education

for consultants, such as training courses, regular staff meetings, or attendance at conferences. However, most consultant learning and growth comes from their experience in the writing center, learning about materials and material development, objectives, learning styles, procedures, and people while also learning about themselves as writers (Kinkead 4). Though working to provide a service to other students, writing consultants learn through their tutoring experiences. Just as instructors pair a specific curriculum with service, writing center administrators or program creators could hold staff development meetings that included readings, discussion, and writing on the issues and inequalities within their community; this would help give consultants a greater framework with which to understand their work with the community. I accounted for not having this framework in a number of ways. First, I sought out experienced tutors because they may be more open and prepared to recognize the structures and systems that affect Family Promise guests' employment and living situations. I also hoped the Family Promise volunteer training would give volunteers additional insight into the guests' situations and structures contributing to homelessness in Lawrence. Finally, because reflection is key in service learning, I chose to have tutors do informal reports of their experiences during sessions and to participate in an interview at the end of the program to encourage reflection on their experiences.

Another complication that arises when connecting service learning in composition studies and writing center theory is the "peer" aspect of peer tutoring. Because community outreach, unlike working with student writers, opens the writing center's services up to a variety of people, it is likely that consultants would work with writers who are not peers. This could be a result of differences in age or life experiences, among many other things. However, this often happens in service learning in composition, as part of the goal is to expose students to different people and



situations. Association with the university can also create feelings of difference, anxiety or distrust from community members, whereas students typically trust and connect with peer consultants. However, I hoped that the fact that our volunteer consultants were students, and not as established in the university as administrators or faculty, would create feelings of trust. Additionally, I hoped the peer nature of consultations would help create a sense of equality.

Compensation and evaluation are also more complicated in writing center outreach than in a course. With regards to compensation, writing consultants are typically paid as student employees. While students receive academic credit (and sometimes specific service learning certification) for participating in a service learning course, this is different than monetary compensation. Monetary compensation could affect consultant experiences with service learning. Though the KU Writing Center was officially supporting this project, it would not offer consultants monetary compensation, making their work strictly volunteer. Additionally, evaluation may be more complicated in writing center outreach than in a course. Students enrolled in a service learning course are evaluated for the work they complete and turn in. However, evaluating consultant learning may create an additional time investment for consultants and administrators in addition to whatever evaluation consultants already undergo. For this particular program, I chose to have consultants report their experiences to me informally after sessions and formally in an interview after the program ended. I hoped that these two types of reports would encourage consultants to reflect on their experiences with Family Promise guests.

Finally, development of an outreach program could create complications because of writing center structure. As part of a course, service learning is designed and directed by the instructor, one individual who is invested and in charge of the program. If a program is a

consultant initiative, it may be difficult for all consultants to create program goals the entire writing center supports. Though possible, it would take negotiation and delegation of responsibilities. Additionally, consultants leave the writing center when they graduate; if motivation is not there to continue, then programs could disappear once the founding consultants leave. The fluid nature of writing center staff and the decentralization of authority means that writing centers may need to work diligently in making outreach happen: in addition to collaborating with the community, they will also need to collaborate within their group to create and agree on clear goals and plans for program implementation.

### ***Potential Benefits of KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence***

Though I considered a number of possible complications, I also expected benefits for consultants and community members from this pilot program. As Chapter One indicates, writing centers should be involved in community outreach for a number of reasons; connecting those reasons to this particular outreach program makes them more concrete. For Family Promise, the program aids the organization in achieving its goal of helping families experiencing homelessness get back on their feet by providing job-related and other professional writing assistance. As previously stated, guests at Family Promise work with a number of different kinds of writing, but Family Promise is not staffed to provide guests with sufficient help. The KU Writing Center, however, is well staffed with writing consultants and resources and can use its resources to help Family Promise guests gain a better understanding of writing. Complementary resources abound on campus for students, but community members typically have fewer academic or professional services available to them. Because writing serves a number of functions, many of them necessary for survival, Family Promise guests can gain practical writing and self-presentation skills.

In addition to helping guests gain writing and self-presentation skills, service learning pairs action and reflection to create knowledge and engage critical consciousness. Through action (both discussing writing and actually writing) and reflection after the session has ended on the part of the writer and the writing consultant, the writing center promotes education for writers, consultants, and administrators. In engaging critical consciousness about writing, writers and writing consultants can also become conscious of other issues in the community surrounding them. In this particular program, Family Promise guests brought in non-academic writing that directly affected their livelihood and living situations (like job or housing applications). By working together on these pieces of writing that directly address immediate needs, Family Promise guests and writing consultants could become conscious of issues affecting the Lawrence community.

In addition to creating consciousness, learning writing strategies improves community members' abilities to speak for themselves, which is a form of empowerment, as communication skills are necessary for survival. By teaching specific strategies for professional writing, the KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence helped community members achieve professional goals and facilitated action by helping them learn to write for themselves. Through collaboration with writing consultants, who are not only skilled and successful writers but also trained to work with writers and help them use their voices, Family Promise guests had the opportunity to become empowered.

Additionally, Family Promise guests gain empowerment by working with the university. Cushman explains that empowerment involves "lend[ing] our power or status" ("Rhetorician," 14). Initially, thinking of writing centers as places with power or status may be surprising. Though providing students with an invaluable service, the writing center is not highly respected

at all universities or by all members of the university and are often housed in poor locations and receive a small budget. Despite the writing center's sometimes less than respected position in academia, consultants and administrators do have power and status because they are skilled at writing and tutoring writing. Additionally, it can be argued that having any involvement or association, even if it is with a less respected unit of the university, is enough to empower community members.

In addition to the benefits for the community, I believed the KU Writing Center would also benefit from community outreach. On a larger scale, outreach creates a link between the university and the community. Because of this link, writing centers can obtain multiple benefits. First, having this connection with another community, one outside of the university, can help the KU Writing Center gain further merit within the university system. Through a connection with the community, the KU Writing Centers could do a number of things to add to university assessment: provide a needed service to community members, show the necessity of their services on a larger scale, and increase consultant learning. Additionally, this connection with the community provides KU administrators and consultants with options for writing center, literacy, or writing research. Universities often strive to increase their interaction with the community, and writing center outreach could help the University of Kansas do that.

For writing consultants, the program creates an opportunity to work with a wider variety of writers, improving their ability to understand diverse perspectives. Writing consultants and administrators already interact with a diverse population of the university community, including undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty from different disciplines and backgrounds. In addition to different types of writers, KU writing consultants often get to work with a variety of projects, constantly changing topics and types of writing as the writer changes. Working with the

community outside of the university could increase the already impressive writer population with which consultants work. From speaking with the staff at Family Promise, it was apparent that many of their guests had experienced strikingly different situations than writing consultants. Working with a population whose background differs from theirs could challenge students to consider diverse perspectives and situations. Additionally, much of Family Promise guests' work focuses on writers' immediate needs, such as jobs or housing, and could help consultants better understand writing's implications outside of academia.

Now that an understanding of the KU Writing Center at Family Promise's goals, research methods, and program design have been established, the final chapter, Chapter Three, will add to the understanding of the connection between service learning and writing center work by discussing the findings of this program and providing insight into whether the benefits discussed above were realized through the program. Relying on questionnaires from Family Promise guests, an interview with the Family Promise community coordinator, interviews with volunteer consultants, and narratives and description from my own participant-observation, Chapter Three will discuss the program successes and difficulties, ending with recommendations and with ideas for further research.

### **Chapter Three: Findings and Discussion**

This chapter discusses what we can learn about writing center outreach in the community from the KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence initiative. The KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence was in operation from September 2011 to January 2012. During the program's five months at Family Promise, consultant volunteers and I spent approximately 25 hours interacting with and observing Family Promise guests, in addition to the approximately 10 hours planning the program with the Family Promise director and community coordinator. While we worked with seven adults and two children, we only collected questionnaire responses from two adults because of the time it took to receive university approval to conduct research. Though I had considered conducting interviews with guests, during my interactions with those that did complete a questionnaire, it became clear that being asked to fill out a questionnaire produced stress; because of this, I did not want to contribute further stress by adding a formal interview. Additionally, in some situations, I did not feel like my relationship with guests was strong enough to ask them to fill out the questionnaire. While some guests were open and friendly, others were closed off; in these situations, asking them to complete the questionnaire seemed inappropriate.

Though I was unable to receive a large number of responses from Family Promise guests, I did interview the community coordinator, Sarah; she was leaving the organization and agreed to talk with me about the program. In addition to myself, two other graduate consultants from the KU Writing Center—Julie and Regan—volunteered, though their participation occurred primarily at the beginning of the program. In addition to informal reports after each volunteer experience, I conducted interviews with them after the program ended. This chapter discusses these observations, questionnaires, and interviews in further detail. Because this study presents

responses from a small number of participants and is primarily observation-based, it cannot be used to make broad claims about writing center outreach; however, the amount of time spent interacting with and observing Family Promise gave me an understanding of the organization and offers important insight to the field.

As Chapter Two discusses, this program's original questions centered around examining the theoretical and practical connections between service learning and writing center work, exploring how a writing center outreach program can enrich understanding of writing for consultants and writers, and considering other ways tutors and writers can benefit from their interactions with one another. While this study addresses the second and third goal, it is most helpful in dealing with the first goal—examining the connections between service learning scholarship and writing center scholarship. In addressing that goal, this study not only examines the connections between service learning scholarship and writing center scholarship but also discusses practical applications for implementing a successful writing center outreach program.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the program's successes in implementing service learning theory. The chapter will then discuss the ways the program could have been more successful. Finally, this chapter will end with suggestions for writing center outreach for both the KU Writing Center and other writing centers and questions for further consideration and research.

### ***KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence Program Successes***

#### *Need for Program Adaptability*

In discussing empowerment and reciprocity, service learning scholars insist that outreach programs are appropriate for and adaptable to the community with which they work, meeting community members on their own terms (Coogan 667). This program was successful in terms of

adaptability to the Family Promise organization as a whole and to guests in particular. First, I collaborated with the Family Promise director and community coordinator throughout the program's planning. When we first met in June 2011, they were enthusiastic because they believed the program fit with the organization's goal of helping families get back on their own. After that initial meeting, the administrators and I worked together to further refine the project. For example, we discussed possible services the program could offer guests. Though I had considered offering creative writing help or a writing-as-therapy type program, the administrators suggested that assistance with professional writing and homework might be most appropriate until the guests and volunteers knew each other better.

In addition to making decisions about program services, the administrators and I also worked together to develop other program logistics. For example, they recommended I keep the number of volunteers small because in the past, they had large volunteer groups that were simply too big for their organization and the number of people it served. Additionally, I planned to recruit more experienced consultants because they may be more capable of understanding the difficult situations guests had experienced and cultivating their own awareness; the administrators agreed that this would be beneficial for their guests.

We also collaborated to implement a schedule convenient for guests. The administrators explained that guests often have complicated schedules and encouraged having Writing Center hours multiple times a week, as that would make it more likely guests could attend. Because I knew they had a better understanding of guests' lives than I did, I appreciated and followed their advice. By staying in contact with Family Promise administrators throughout the planning process, we were able to adapt the program during the developmental stages to be most helpful for guests.



To better understand the organization's needs, I attended Family Promise's volunteer training early in the planning stages of the program. As mentioned in Chapter Two, this training is a requirement for any volunteer who has face-to-face interaction with Family Promise guests. The training session covered a number of topics that were helpful to me as a volunteer, such as the history of the organization, the background of the guests, and what to expect in interactions. Though the training did not immediately affect program design or implementation, it did influence interactions with guests and encouraged consultant and program flexibility.

Once implemented, the program maintained adaptability, going through multiple revisions during our five months at Family Promise of Lawrence. After a little over four weeks of holding walk-in hours twice a week, the program volunteers and I had only worked with one guest. Because of this, we changed the program in an attempt to make it more useful for guests. First, the community coordinator and I considered the times the Writing Center services were offered. Perhaps the hours we had chosen were not convenient for guests. Rather than offering the program at times chosen by volunteers, the community coordinator and I thought it best to allow Family Promise guests to choose times that were convenient for them.

The community coordinator and I also discussed whether or not Family Promise guests had an accurate understanding of the program. Though they knew the program existed, we were unsure of whether or not they understood the different types of professional writing the program could help with and why writing with someone could be beneficial. By explaining the program as "writing help" or "job-related writing help," I hoped guests would see it as a project applicable to them.

In order to make the program more convenient for guests and to have the opportunity to explain the program myself, we implemented a format where I would offer workshops to a large

group that explained the program and offered introductory help with resumes. Then, after attending the workshop and hearing about the program, guests could make appointments to work with consultant volunteers. This would ensure that consultant volunteers would not show up for a shift with nothing to do, while also ensuring the program would fit more easily into guests' schedules since they would be the ones making the appointments. Additionally, instead of having the community coordinator explain the program, I hoped that if I explained the program, I could present a more accurate picture of the program. Finally, by meeting with guests in person instead of hearing about it from a third person, I hoped the program would become less intimidating and more welcoming.

Changing the format may have also helped keep guests from being overwhelmed with services and information. The community coordinator gave guests a brief overview of the program's writing services during their orientation to Family Promise. However, during this orientation, guests also learned about a number of other services available to them; it was possible that it was simply too much information and too many resources to take in at once. By talking one-on-one, I hoped guests would individualize the service from others and remember it later.

We attempted the workshop format three times, and though the reasons behind this will be discussed later in the "Difficulties and Complications" section of this chapter, the program's set-up changed for a third time in November. Because there was typically a small group in attendance at workshops, I adapted the program on the spot by giving the "workshop" to individuals; I was pleasantly surprised by how well this worked. The first time I adapted the program to this format was when only two guests attended the workshop. I had worked with one of the guests, Sandra, a number of times, and she waited and listened as I explained the program

in greater detail and went over the resume workshop with a new guest, Ryan. Though I had envisioned the workshop as something I would present to a larger group, much in the same way we conduct workshops on campus, the one-on-one meeting worked better than I expected. Ryan followed along on the handout I had made to accompany the presentation<sup>v</sup> and asked questions. Whereas in a group setting, the information would have been given as a presentation to which guests would listen and then ask questions at the end, this one-on-one setting allowed us to have a conversation about the material. Because of that, I believe that, in addition to understanding the material better, we were also able to build a better working relationship. Because of the success of this one-on-one meeting, I stopped envisioning the workshop as something only done in a group and if only one guest attended, I took the opportunity to meet with guests one-on-one.

#### *Need for Adaptability of Volunteer Expectations*

In addition to serving as a model for an adaptable program, the KU Writing Center at Family Promise of Lawrence also serves as an example of adaptable volunteers, specifically regarding their expectations. This adaptability was crucial in that it created a program that was empowering and reciprocal. When this program first began, we did not expect that guests would attend every session we offered. However, we did expect that we would have guests at most shifts, and that as a whole, we would have a great deal of interaction with guests, much like the interactions we have with students in the KU Writing Center.

This expectation was disrupted early on. Though we expected initial interactions to be less about writing and more about getting to know the Family Promise guests, we interacted little with the adults. During our first visit, the community coordinator introduced us to the guests, but we did not spend time getting to know one another. One of the women had two young sons, and

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<sup>v</sup> See Appendix 4 for resume handout

we watched them so she could have a break. While we were happy to give her time to herself, it was not what we had expected to do. The next few visits went much the same way, especially during the evenings at the congregations. Though we met the families and introduced ourselves, they were often busy. On one occasion, a middle school girl had Pre-Algebra homework, and it was clear her parents did not have time to help her. Instead of getting to know the family or discussing the program, I spent the evening helping her with her algebra homework. Another time, I spent my time at the Day House making a resume handout for Family Promise to keep after my program ended<sup>vi</sup>. While doing this ensured that Family Promise had a way to help guests even if the Writing Center was not there, we had expected to work one-on-one with guests rather than alone on a handout.

In addition to adapting to not interacting with Family Promise guests very much, we also had to be flexible to changing plans at the last minute. Though I was asked three times to give a workshop to a group of Family Promise guests, groups of guests never actually attended. Instead, I typically had to change and rearrange my presentation or plan to meet the needs of the one or two guests who had attended. Though we can only speculate, possible explanations of guests' reluctance to take advantage of this opportunity will be discussed in the "Difficulties and Complications" section of this chapter. However, what is most important to note is that during this program, volunteers had to learn to remain adaptable because we rarely did what we expected to do.

### *Benefits of Collaboration*

In addition to adaptability, this program was also successful in terms of serving as a model of successful collaboration between university members and members of the community,

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<sup>vi</sup> Same as handout shown in Appendix 4

which is necessary for action and reflection (Deans 30) and knowledge creation through pragmatism (Deans 41). First, as the “Need for Program Adaptability” section indicates, I collaborated with the Family Promise administrators to develop the program and continued to collaborate with them as we evaluated its effectiveness. The administrators offered knowledge of the organization, its history with volunteer groups, and the guests that were a part of the organization, while I offered knowledge about writing and tutoring writing.

Additionally, we carried the collaborative nature of writing center work into our meetings. Much like we use “agenda-setting” at the beginning of an appointment in the writing center, we began sessions by asking guests about the jobs for which they wanted to apply, their past work experience, and their writing experience. Starting the conference with a discussion of their experiences and concerns was beneficial for a number of reasons. First, it allowed Family Promise guests to help set a plan for our meeting; because our writing affected their future, we wanted to ensure they got the help they needed from our meetings.

Collaboration also gave guests the opportunity to share their knowledge; obviously they are better experts on their past experiences and the jobs for which they are applying than we were. For example, Molly, the first woman I worked with at Family Promise, explained the skills she had obtained from each job and also delivered clear explanations of why using certain professional references would be more appropriate than others. This also happened with the woman I spent the most time working with—Sandra. Though I suggested highlighting past experience and skills that were most appropriate and gave ideas for clear and uniform formatting, she contributed crucial information. Because she had done jobs similar to the ones for which she was applying, she had a better understanding of the responsibilities those jobs would require. At times, she openly disagreed with me, stating that a skill I suggested including on her resume was

not appropriate for that particular job; her disagreement was encouraging because I realized she felt comfortable contributing to the writing we were doing together. Though we provided models of resumes and other professional writing, Family Promise guests provided the content and experience that helped us create more successful resumes and applications. Because both parties contributed information about their areas of expertise, both parties acted in knowledge creation.

Crucial to collaboration were the relationships we built with some of the Family Promise guests. The work we did with one guest, Sandra, is a particularly good example of this. During the first few weeks of the program, one of the volunteer writing consultants, Julie, became friends with Sandra. As they got to know one another, Julie and Sandra discussed Sandra's past experiences with writing and the new job for which she wanted to apply. Each time they talked, Julie encouraged her to bring materials so they could start working. Though they never actually worked together on Sandra's writing, these initial conversations were instrumental in Sandra's participation in the program later. Their conversations helped Sandra feel cared about and comfortable receiving help with her writing.

A few weeks later, when Sandra was ready to work on her resume, I was volunteering. During our first meeting, she was personable and fun. Not only was she dedicated to her self-reported goal of "updat[ing] her resume," but she also seemed interested in getting to know one another. We met multiple times to finish her resume, and she often worked on it on her own, adding information, making changes, and having me look over those changes later. Each time we ended a session, we made a plan for what she could do before we met the next time. Because we worked together a number of times, we got to know one another and felt comfortable sharing and critiquing ideas in order to develop knowledge.

Because of these relationships, the program created an environment where guests felt comfortable asking questions and making comments. At the beginning of our meetings, I encouraged guests to interrupt me with questions, ask for further explanation, or add information as we worked. Most guests took advantage of this, stopping me a number of times. I also asked questions about the information they told me as we worked. Working in this way allowed us to have a conversation about the work we were doing rather than me passing along knowledge to them, just as collaboration in service learning allows both parties to create knowledge together. Though we worked together to create knowledge, formal reflection was difficult to obtain from both Family Promise guests and consultant volunteers, which made it difficult to measure the “action-reflection” cycle accurately. Specific suggestions for this will be discussed later in this chapter, but requiring more formal reflection after collaboration would have created a better understanding of what guests and volunteer consultants learned from their collaboration.

#### *Reciprocal Learning and Empowerment*

Finally, this program was successful in terms of adhering to service learning theory because it created a reciprocal situation where both parties learned and benefited (Cushman, “Rhetorician,” 17). First, guests learned about both higher order writing concerns (such as idea development, creating a focused main point, and organization) and lower order concerns (like formatting and style). One guest surveyed seemed to come away from the conference with a better understanding of self-presentation, writing in her response that the consultant “explained various use of skill” and “how to make your experiences stand out for the particular job you want.” From this self-report, it seems clear that this guest gained important self-presentation skills and learned to consider audience while writing. These skills were important in empowering guests. In the interview I conducted with the community coordinator, she noted the program’s

potential for empowerment, stating that guests gained the “psychological benefit” of “feel[ing] more prepared and qualified” for jobs. Additionally, she saw the long-term benefit of equipping guests with specific skills for when they were no longer at Family Promise.

While guests benefitted in skills related to higher order concerns like critical thinking and self-presentation, as a whole, guest questionnaires indicate learning in basic writing skills. For example, Sandra also stated that after working with the Writing Center, her resume was in “the style in which it is now expected to look like,” which I interpret as learning to write in a style appropriate for her audience. Another guest’s questionnaire focused on computer skills, commenting that the session helped him learn to “use tool bar” and to transfer “resumes from one spot to another.” The community coordinator noted guests’ “lack of computer skills” as a limitation of the program so while obtaining this skill may seem trivial, in reality, it is something many guests needed. These practical skills created, as the community coordinator noted, the “tangible implications of giving [guests] a better shot at applications.” Though a small number of guests formally responded about their experiences, it is clear that working with a volunteer consultant improved their understanding of writing and created better resumes for the job market.

Not only did Family Promise guests benefit from their work with consultants, but consultant volunteers benefitted from work with Family Promise as well. First, consultants were able to work with different writers and types of writing; whereas work in the KU Writing Center typically consists of working with students on academic writing, working with Family Promise allowed consultants to work with adults on professional writing that immediately affected their job prospects. Consultants also had the opportunity to become aware of different situations existing in the community. By working with guests experiencing homelessness, consultants learned about living situations and larger issues affecting Lawrence. For example, guests often



discussed the lengths they had to go to receive help from local assistance programs and the structure of those programs. Without working with these guests one-on-one, I would not have understood the issues they face daily. One volunteer consultant, Julie, commented on her new understanding of community issues, stating that she “didn’t realize how many people [were] homeless but not necessarily counted in the homeless population—people who stay in their cars or sleep on friends’ couches.”

Finally, as discussed earlier in this section, the guests’ complex lives often affected work sessions, and because of this, volunteer consultants learned to maintain adaptability. Julie also commented on this, explaining that it was different from work in the Writing Center, where “writers are usually there on their own accord.” Julie explained that often, parents were not there, and if they were, “not many parents chose to talk to [her] about writing...instead, [she] sat back and played with the kids.” Plans changed frequently at Family Promise, and the type of work we did was rarely what we expected to do when showing up. Though this was problematic for volunteer consultants because they were not doing what they expected to do, learning to be adaptable is beneficial for work in all arenas.

### **Difficulties and Complications**

#### *Writing Center Involvement*

Though this program exhibits a number of connections between service learning theory and writing center theory, in addition to benefits for consultants and writers, it also provides examples of difficulties that can occur in writing center outreach. This section discusses those difficulties. The first difficulty deals with writing center involvement. In addition to meeting with Family Promise administrators early in the planning stages, I also worked closely with the director of the KU Writing Center. After discussing the Writing Center’s past experiences with

community outreach and the possibilities for this particular pilot program, she gave me freedom to design the program as I saw appropriate. After I'd finalized program ideas with the Family Promise administrators, I received permission to begin meeting with guests with official KU Writing Center support.

While the director had given me official support from the Writing Center, finding consultants who could commit to the program was difficult. Four graduate students volunteered, and while we developed a schedule relatively easily, it was difficult for all of the volunteers to make the mandatory training required before working at Family Promise. This difficulty can be attributed to a number of factors. First, the training sessions were often scheduled at the last minute. Though Family Promise held one or two training sessions a month, they typically scheduled them the week of the training, sometimes not notifying me of a training session until the day before. The volunteers for the program were all busy graduate students, so changing their schedules at the last minute was usually impossible. Second, since I had designed this program, I was willing to make sacrifices or rearrange my schedule to accommodate guests or the organization; my volunteers could not necessarily do the same. Though they were invested in volunteering, they were not as invested as I was as the planner. Finally, I made no formal requirement to make attending the training a priority. Whereas in a course students would be required to attend mandatory training sessions, this program was strictly voluntary. As the program leader, I did not insist that volunteers attend training because I knew they were busy, and I did not want to be demanding. However, because Family Promise required this training and only two consultant volunteers completed training, the program put more of a time burden on the two volunteers that were helping and myself than we had originally anticipated. Having more consultants able to volunteer at Family Promise would have lightened individual work loads.

*Family Promise Guest Interest*

Additionally, it was difficult to tell if guests were interested in the program; because I had not anticipated this being an issue, I did not include questions in the questionnaire that addressed it. Though the Family Promise staff viewed the program as beneficial for the organization as a whole and for individual guests in particular, it was difficult to see if the guests found it beneficial. For the first four weeks, the volunteers and I only helped one visitor. Though guests were polite and friendly, they were reluctant to work with us. After low guest attendance, the Family Promise administrators began making writing workshops mandatory because they felt guests weren't fulfilling their commitment to Family Promise. Had they consulted me, I would have discouraged them from doing this, as part of the benefit of writing center work is that both parties want to be involved in collaboration. People, especially adults, rarely respond well to being forced to do anything; however, they did not consult me. When I showed up for this "mandatory" workshop, it was clear that two of the three guests did not want to be there. As the director tried to coax them to work with me, one of the women commented that she knew how to do resumes because she had gone to college too. Though she said it to the director, I overheard it, and it upset me; I did not view myself as superior and had tried to keep from coming off that way. Eventually, the woman joined us, but because I knew she did not want to be there, I was nervous and uncomfortable. While we worked together, I had the opportunity to explain the program to them in detail, but I did not do it. Instead, I rushed through the workshop in an attempt to take less of their time.

Though this is an extreme example, from the small number of attendees over the course of the program, it is difficult to gauge guests' interest in the program. Though Family Promise administrators were enthusiastic about the program and saw it fitting in well with the

organization's goals, few guests took advantage of the service. Additionally, though I also believed the program to be beneficial, forcing the program on guests made me uncomfortable because I found it difficult to navigate how to be helpful while not getting in the way of guests' responsibilities and lives.

### *Family Promise Guest Learning*

In addition to determining whether or not guests were interested in the program, gauging their learning was difficult since I was unable to obtain much formal evaluation of learning. The two guests who filled out the questionnaire confirmed that writing sessions met their goals because they had the opportunity to update and improve their resumes and indicated learning about higher order and lower order concerns. Guests not surveyed always seemed grateful and appreciative of the help. However, because we worked with a small number of guests and only received feedback from two of them, it is difficult to know how successful the program was in helping people learn.

### *Communication*

Perhaps the greatest difficulty the program met was communication, which became problematic on a number of levels; as is implied by service learning's focus on collaborative work with communities (Wade 97) and reciprocity of learning (Cushman, "Rhetorician," 17; Flowers, "Partners" 103; and Deans 29), ineffective communication creates a number of problems in community work. The first difficulty was the promotion of the program by Family Promise. In addition to a flyer I had made to display at the Day House<sup>vii</sup>, the community coordinator committed to promoting the program to guests. As volunteer consultants began going to Family Promise regularly, it became clear that guests were unsure of what our purpose

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<sup>vii</sup> See Appendix 5 for flyer

was. When I greeted guests they asked if I was there for “resume help” or “homework help.” Another time, one of the women asked if I was there to give help with “literature homework;” the emphasis on “literature” again made it seem as though she viewed it as something not applicable to her. Though they were polite, the way guests talked about the program made it sound as if the service was something other people would use, rather than something they needed. Though the program offered resume help, I was uncomfortable marketing it as only that. If Family Promise guests hadn’t written resumes before, and I learned later that many of them hadn’t, I worried that using an unfamiliar term like “resume” could intimidate them and make them reluctant to receive help. Because of this, my vision for promoting the program included making it open to all types of job-related writing. By using the words “professional” or “job,” I hoped it would not only seem more familiar and welcoming, but also seem more relatable to their lives and needs. Though I discussed this with the community coordinator, there still seemed to be challenges with communication, as her focus was always on resume help.

In addition to problems regarding program promotion, miscommunication between guests and volunteers was an issue. First, once we moved to an appointment system, we experienced difficulty in terms of scheduling. My contact information was unclear—I used my student email account from the University of Kansas to communicate with the Family Promise directors, but also had an email account specifically for the Writing Center program at Family Promise for guests to use to communicate with consultant volunteers. This made it difficult for guests to contact me. Other times, guests would use the community coordinator as a go-between; because she had so many other responsibilities, messages were often lost. In one particular situation, one of the guests, Sandra, expected me to come to the congregation to work with her but I never received the message, and therefore, did not show up. In another example, I got confused about

which congregation the families were staying at, and because of this, I did not attend my scheduled meeting with Sandra. Though I knew that Sandra did not blame me, it made the program appear inconsistent.

Miscommunication was also prevalent because of my expectations regarding timely and consistent communication. After meeting guests in person, I let them contact me, but Family Promise guests were not as quick to email or respond as colleagues and professors are. Guests typically committed to emailing me within the week but often contacted me much later. One guest, Ryan, expressed interest in the program but said he wanted a week to gather his materials and prepare. However, he waited three weeks. By this point, I had assumed that he was not going to contact me and had stopped checking the Family Promise email account daily. When I did not respond to his first email, he sent another and then another, each one increasingly frantic. When I responded a few days later, he asked me to call him. In this particular context, I was not entirely comfortable using my personal phone, but did anyway, and though I called and left a message, he never returned the call.

A final example of miscommunication occurred in regards to definitions, most specifically in the understanding of a “workshop.” As mentioned in the “Adaptability of Volunteer Expectations” section of this chapter, during my time working with Family Promise, the directors asked me to give multiple workshops. However, each time I came to present the group workshop, there was never a group, but often just one adult there. Though I defined “workshop” as a presentation for a group followed by time for questions and one-on-one help, the director seemed to view it as a time to work individually with whoever showed up. Despite describing these “workshops” to me as something that would involve a group of guests, the Family Promise staff seemed to expect me to change plans immediately.

In one specific instance, the new director debated with me about how I should run the program. Though there were three guests there—the largest group I'd had in attendance yet—the director insisted that I work individually with one couple and then work individually with the guest I had already worked with a number of times. I tried to explain that I had planned something for a group, but the director cut me off and insisted that I give each guest individual time. This frustrated me because I had spent time planning a workshop for the group and would not be able to deliver it. In hindsight, I should have been more forward with the director because since there was a group, it would have been more beneficial and time-saving for guests and myself to deliver the workshop as planned. Though adaptability was important to the program, I should have negotiated the differences between how I defined concepts or ideas and the definitions of Family Promise guests and administrators.

Though there are a number of factors involved, much of this miscommunication can be attributed to the newness of Family Promise as an organization. During an exit interview with the community coordinator Sarah, I learned that Family Promise is a much newer organization than I had previously known. She explained that the Lawrence chapter has only existed for three years, so the Family Promise staff is still learning how the operation runs and how to best communicate. This communication becomes even more complicated when introducing an outside member, like the KU Writing Center, into the equation. Additionally, the organization experienced multiple staff changes during the outreach program. First, in the middle of the fall semester, Family Promise hired a new director. Though she was enthusiastic about the program, she was not as familiar with the program as the director I worked with while developing the program. In addition to a director change, the community coordinator left Family Promise three months later at the beginning of January. Unfortunately, I was never able to make contact with

the new community coordinator. Though I can only speculate, had these staff changes not happened, I believe that the KU Writing Center and Family Promise may have experienced fewer communication problems.

### ***Recommendations for Implementation of Writing Center Outreach Programs***

This program indicates a number of suggestions for future writing center outreach programs. This section will first offer suggestions specific to the KU Writing Center and Lawrence Family Promise before moving to suggestions for writing center outreach programs in general. First, if researchers were to move beyond the pilot study and embark on a second year at Lawrence Family Promise, KU writing consultants and administrators, the Family Promise administrators, and Family Promise guests should all meet to discuss program goals and services. Having an open discussion will ensure that the needs of all stakeholders are considered, and may result in a greater number of Family Promise guests using the service.

The second set of recommendations for the KU Writing Center and Lawrence Family Promise deals with data collection. Rather than asking Family Promise guests to fill out a questionnaire, I recommend asking guests to assess their work with the writing consultant in an interview format, where they answer questions verbally; because writing responses on the questionnaire often created stress for guests, allowing them to explain their experiences orally may create less stress and let them better express their experiences. Additionally, when guests leave Family Promise, I recommend doing exit interviews to measure their learning over time working with consultants. To better measure consultant learning, consultant volunteers should be asked to keep a log after each visit. My findings from my own log were beneficial to this study, and formal logs of more participant-observers would create a greater understanding of what consultant volunteers experienced and learned throughout their time with the program. Finally, in



addition to these formal logs, consultant volunteers should be required to do more formal reflection on their experiences, which will allow the data to more formally measure the learning that happens through action paired with reflection.

In addition to suggesting recommendations for the continuation of the KU Writing Center at Lawrence Family Promise, this program offers general recommendations for writing center outreach programs. First, is to find a larger organization with which to do community outreach. Though small organizations can work, larger community organizations offer a number of possibilities. First, a larger organization ensures that there is enough work for volunteer consultants. Because Family Promise only had the resources to help a total of fourteen people at a time, there was often nothing for volunteer consultants to do. Additionally, if program developers hope to do research, a larger organization would provide a greater sample size that would allow them to come to more generalizable conclusions about the communities with which they work.

Another suggestion is to have more involvement from the writing center as a whole in program design and implementation. Though this program received support from the KU Writing Center, outreach programs would benefit from greater writing center involvement. First, the KU Writing Center lent its name to the outreach program, indicating its interest in and support of the program. The Writing Center saw this program as a way to make an initial connection with Family Promise and to test if a partnership there, or at a similar institution, would be an option in the future. Additionally, I received feedback about the program from the Writing Center director during the early planning stages and throughout the program's implementation. Finally, consultants volunteered at Family Promise, gave feedback about their

volunteer experiences, and were consulted when changing to the program's goals and implementation.

Additionally, for much of the program, from the end of October to the program's conclusion in January, I was the only volunteer at Family Promise. The program's change to an appointment system meant that the program was at Family Promise less frequently and that consultations were typically scheduled at the last minute, often on the day of the consultation. The two consultant volunteers were graduate students, and because of this, could not change their schedules last minute, so I only schedule appointments with guests that I could attend. Additionally, because we were at Family Promise less frequently, having a large number of volunteers was not as necessary as when we had committed to holding walk-in hours twice a week. The volunteer consultants and I discussed these changes and decided that because of the changes to program implementation, their decreased involvement was appropriate. Outreach programs that are a writing center director or group initiative can be more collaborative than this program was. Rather than building a program from the generative idea of one consultant, if a program comes from a director or group of consultants, goals and implementation can be set more collaboratively.

Perhaps the most important benefit from greater writing center involvement is that it would allow curriculum to be paired with the outreach program, which is a crucial element for many service learning scholars. Though the informal and formal reflection was designed to help volunteer consultants learn about structures contributing to Family Promise guests' situations, there was no formal curriculum paired with the service. Directors could plan staff meetings and professional development around readings, discussions, and essays that create awareness of the issues existing in the community, in both pre-service and in-service training. Offering a specific

curriculum will help consultants better understand and reflect on inequality and the structure behind that inequality.

My third suggestion is to seek strong, effective communication between the Writing center and the organization and its members. As discussed in the “Difficulties and Complications” section, my program experienced a number of problems caused by simple miscommunication. Though it may seem obvious, for a program to be successful, community members and volunteers need a clear, direct way to communicate. Additionally, though I maintained communication with Family Promise administrators throughout the program development and implementation, the program would have benefitted from more direct communication with the guests themselves. Staying in direct contact with the community members themselves, as opposed to communicating mostly with Family Promise administrators, would ensure that the outreach program was meeting community members’ actual needs.

Perhaps the most important suggestion this program offers is to make a long-term commitment. Because the initial idea for this program was envisioned as a part of my Master’s thesis, I began developing it the summer before my last year. Though the program was planned closely with Family Promise administrators, it was difficult to gain a full understanding of the organization in a few months; a long-term commitment would allow program developers a greater understanding of the community organization with which they are working. Though the program started with the semester and ran for approximately five months, it took multiple revisions to get the program to a spot where we felt it was most helpful for Family Promise guests; by the time we got the program structure “right,” my time with the program was almost over. While this or similar programs could continue at the KU Writing Center in subsequent years, I knew my time with the program was limited. However, if a writing center director or

group of consultants could make a longer time commitment to the program, they would have more time to work out program complications and benefit more from those revisions. While this program can serve as a roadmap for future outreach program at the KU Writing Center and other writing centers, programs implemented over a longer period of time would be able to build a stronger foundation and there would be a greater chance of program success.

### ***Areas for Further Research***

Though this program was helpful in exploring connections between service learning theory and practice and writing center theory and practice, in providing ideas for writing center outreach program implementation, and in examining the benefits for volunteer consultants and community members, there are a number of things it could not examine. This chapter ends with a discussion of areas for further research.

First, studying the benefits experienced by consultant volunteers and community writers more closely is important for understanding writing center outreach. Though this program attempted to do that and achieved some success, a more in-depth study is necessary to truly understand these benefits. As mentioned earlier, working with a larger number of community members would not only provide volunteers with ample work, but would allow researchers more individuals to study when determining benefits. Not only would obtaining responses from a larger sample be helpful, but gathering responses over a longer period of time would also be beneficial. Ideally, consultants and community writers could complete questionnaires after each session and then participate in an exit interview at the end of their work with the outreach program. Doing this would gauge writer and consultant learning over a number of sessions and provide a greater understanding of overall learning, as opposed to simply examining what happened in one session. Using a specific curriculum, whether for credit or as a part of staff

development meetings, would also help measure consultant learning more clearly. If writing center outreach programs employed a specific curriculum, they could use formal writing and reflection to measure volunteer consultant learning.

In addition to better measuring the benefits and learning experienced by volunteer consultants and community members, studying how to create effective communication between Writing center programs and the community would benefit scholarship. As mentioned throughout this chapter, one of the main difficulties this program experienced was miscommunication. If the university and the community are to create successful partnerships, it is necessary that they understand one another. Being on the same page is necessary in understanding program potential, goals, and expectations. However, because university and community members come from different experiences and have different goals, communication can be difficult. Not only would developing more effective communication benefit writing center outreach work, but service learning work in general, as scholars and instructors could improve their communication with the communities with which they are a part.

Finally, researching avenues for community access is a potential research area for writing center outreach programs. Though relying on campus and community resources is helpful in making initial connections with community *organizations*, it does not necessarily mean connection with community *members*. Though I maintained contact with the community organization early on, much of this program's contact was with the program administrators and not with community members themselves. While Family Promise administrators thought the program was meeting community member needs, guests' lack of involvement in the program indicates that it could have been more applicable to their lives and could have better met their actual needs. Doing research on how members of the university can gain access to community

members themselves will help program developers ensure they are meeting actual community needs.

### ***Conclusion***

Despite difficulties and limitations, this study establishes a foundation for Writing center outreach work. Though unable to fully address all research questions, it does provide groundwork and suggestions for future study. Specifically, it links Writing center theory to service learning theory, and through qualitative research, explores the practical implications of some of those theoretical connections. Though helping create a substantial foundation, service learning scholarship and writing center scholarship would both benefit from programs that include a larger number of participants and measure a greater number of interactions between those participants. This would create a greater understanding of the complications of writing center outreach, as well as the learning that occurs there and the benefits to both parties.

Writing center outreach has the potential to create many of the same potential benefits as service learning outreach in composition studies. Through work with the community, writing consultants can become better critical thinkers and problem solvers, helping them to become active citizens who can work for change in the future. Most importantly, writing center outreach allows writing centers to become “engaged in” the community, helping them build relationships and promote empowerment in the community. Through collaboration and communication with the community, writing center outreach can help promote change and contribute to improved life for the entire community. Because writing centers already promote critical thinking and social justice by empowering student writers, more actively pursuing social change outside of academia is legitimate and merits further consideration.

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**Appendix 1: Family Promise guest questionnaire****Family Promise Guest Questionnaire**

Date/Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (please use the same pseudonym you've been using in all our Writing Center sessions)

What were your goals for today? Were they met?

What did the consultant do that helped you accomplish those goals?

What did you learn from today's session?

**Appendix 2: Questions for consultant interviews**

- 1) Describe your experience working with Family Promise guests.
- 2) Describe what you learned throughout the course of the semester.
- 3) Did you find yourself employing different tutoring strategies/practices while working with Family Promise guests? If so, how?
- 4) In a similar vein, did you find your tutoring of students (ie writing center work on campus) changing because of your work at Family Promise? If so, how?
- 5) What challenges did you encounter during this project?
- 6) What do you think will carry over from this experience into your work with students at the writing center?

**Appendix 3:** Questions for interview with Family Promise community coordinator

- 1) What was the most helpful/beneficial aspect of the KU Writing Center at Family Promise?
- 2) How did you see Family Promise guests growing, changing, or being affected by the program?
- 3) What were the limitations of the program?

## Appendix 4: Resume Handout for Lawrence Family Promise

### Resume

KU Writing Center at Lawrence Family Promise (adapted from OWL at Purdue online Writing Lab)

#### *What is a resume?*

-Summarizes **education, employment history, and experiences** that are relevant to **your qualifications** for a particular job.

-Gives a **snapshot** of you and the kind of employee you are (about **one page** long).

-Is **user-centered or audience centered**: should be easy for your reader (ie the user) to understand.

-Is **persuasive**--you want to convince them that you are the best person for the job.

-Uses **the same format** throughout the document.

-Is made up of four sections:

- 1) Contact
- 2) Education
- 3) Experience
- 4) Activities/honors/awards
- 5) References

#### *1) Contact Section*

-Includes: full name, permanent address, phone number, email address.

-Is **up-to-date and accurate**. Mistyping a phone number could keep potential employers from calling you.

-Is **clear and easy to read**.

-To help make the contact section easily readable, consider:

- 1) Make your name in a slightly larger font size, center it, or boldface it to make it stand out.
- 2) Use a graphic element (like a horizontal line) to help section off your contact information.

Contact example:

#### **Jane Doe**

100 Maine St  
Lawrence, KS 66044  
555-555-5555  
doe.jane@gmail.com

#### *2) Education Section*

-Highlights your **relevant schooling and training**.

-Includes schools you have attended (universities or colleges, professional or technical school, high school), locations of schools, dates of graduation, degree(s) earned, and grade point average

-Can: 1) persuades employers that your educational background will **help you do your job more effectively**, provide **evidence of your qualifications**, and highlights **areas of expertise**.

-To help make your resume appropriate for your audience, consider:

- 1) Including only most relevant educational content--based on the job you're applying for or your career goals, you might choose to omit certain kinds of information
- 2) Listing **most recent schooling or training first**
- 3) Emphasizing the information through the organization--like your contact section, you want this to be **clear and easy for people to read** and should draw their attention to the **most important aspects** of your education section.

-Education example:

Lawrence High School, Lawrence, KS  
August 2002-May 2005  
Grade Point Average: 11.57/12

#### *3) Experience Section*

-Includes **work experience, professional experience, volunteer work, and other relevant experience**.

- Normally includes **these elements**: company or organization and location, position title, your supervisor's name, dates of employment/involvement, descriptions of responsibilities and duties
- Convinces employers **your experiences match their mission and goals** and that your experiences will help you fulfill the job requirements effectively
- Provides **evidence of your qualifications**
- Makes you **stand out** and shows what makes you **unique**

To make this appropriate for your audience and the job, consider:

- Customizing the headings** to go along with the job you're applying for. For example, if the job ad calls for someone with customer service experience, you might title the heading "Customer Service Associate."
- Listing **most recent jobs** first.

Job experience example:

**Office Worker**, Truman State University Writing Center, Kathy Bulen Aug. 2008-May 2009

- Work with Writing Center secretary and all paperwork related to Writing Center
- File conference information, electronically and physically

#### *4) Activities and Awards Section*

- Highlights **relevant activities** you've been involved in or **relevant awards** you've received.
- Includes **work-related awards, community service positions, and leadership positions**
- Helps you **customize your resume** for specific positions, **provide evidence of qualifications, demonstrate that your work has been recognized as high quality**, provide evidence that you are a **well-rounded person, stand out, and reflects your values and commitment.**

Activities and awards example:

Community Involvement:

**Boy Scouts of America Assistant Scoutmaster**, 2005-present

Awards:

**Employee of the Month**, Dillon's Store #789, August 2010

See sample resumes below

**Kara Bollinger**

100 Maine Street  
Lawrence, KS 66044  
(xxx)xxx-xxxx  
xxxx@gmail.com

**Education**

**University of Kansas**, Lawrence, KS, Expected graduation May 2012  
-Master's in Rhetoric and Composition  
-Current GPA: 4.0

**Truman State University**, Kirksville, MO, May 2009  
-Bachelor of Arts in English, Minor in Spanish  
-Current GPA: 4.0

**Work Experience**

**Writing Consultant**, University of Kansas Writing Center, John Smith, Jan. 2010-Present  
-Conduct conferences with both undergraduate and graduate students with varying backgrounds  
-Respond to writing submitted digitally through online consultations

**Graduate Teaching Assistant**, University of Kansas, Jane Smith, Aug. 2009-Present  
-Teach two composition courses each semester  
-Prepare and conduct lessons that adhere to goals of KU's Freshman-Sophomore Writing Program  
-Hold office hours to consult with students about individual writing projects and the course as a whole

**Writing Consultant**, Truman State University Writing Center, Dan Smith, Aug. 2007-May 2009  
-Conduct conferences with a diverse population of students with diverse writing  
-Study pedagogies of tutoring and writing center theories and incorporate these into conferences

**Campus & Community Involvement**

**Student Association of Graduate Studies**, University of Kansas (August 2009- Present)  
**The Lawrence Community Garden Project**, Lawrence, KS (March 2010-Present)

**Awards, Presentations, & Publication**

-Creative non-fiction pieces published in *Midwestern Gothic* (Oct 2011) and *Prick of the Spindle* (June 2011)  
-Presented research at Northeast Writing Center Association Conference (March 2011)  
-Awarded Midwest Writing Center Association Travel Grant (Oct 2011)

**References**

Dan Smith. Professor of English at the University of Kansas. (xxx).xxx.xxxx. dansmith@ku.edu  
James Smith. Colleague at the University of Kansas. (xxx)xxx.xxxx. jamessmieth@ku.edu



**Kara Bollinger**  
 100 Maine Street  
 Lawrence, KS 66044  
 (xxx)xxx-xxxx  
 xxxx@gmail.com

### Education

**University of Kansas**, Lawrence, KS, Expected graduation May 2012  
 -Master's in Rhetoric and Composition

**Truman State University**, Kirksville, MO, May 2009  
 -Bachelor of Arts in English, Minor in Spanish

### Work Experience

**Graduate Teaching Assistant**, University of Kansas, Jane Smith, (xxx) xxx-xxxx, Aug. 2009-Present  
 -Teach two composition courses each semester  
 -Work with students individually  
 -Assign and calculate grades for individual projects and the entire semester

**Waitress**, Pancake City, Kirksville, MO Mark Smith, (xxx) xxx-xxxx, May 2009-August 2009  
 -Serve meals to customers  
 -Keep restaurant clean and orderly  
 -Create a welcoming, friendly atmosphere for customers

**Office Worker**, Truman State University Writing Center, Kirksville, MO, Dan Smith (xxx) xxx-xxxx , Aug. 2008-May 2009  
 -Greet students as they enter the Writing Center  
 -File information, electronically and physically

**Inventory Assistant**, Proctor & Gamble, Cape Girardeau, MO, Samantha Smith (xxx) xxx-xxxx, May 2007-August 2007  
 -Record inventory of all products located in the Proctor and Gamble storeroom  
 -Clean shelving units and floors of storeroom  
 -Escort Proctor & Gamble employees through the storeroom and provide customer service

### Community Involvement and Awards

**Volunteer**, Lawrence Family Promise, Lawrence, KS (August 2011-Present)  
**Volunteer**, The Lawrence Community Garden Project, Lawrence, KS (March 2010-Present)  
**Employee of the Month**, Pancake City, Kirksville, MO (June 2009)

### References

Dan Smith. Professor of English at the University of Kansas. (xxx).xxx.xxxx. dansmith@ku.edu  
 James Smith. Colleague at the University of Kansas. (xxx)xxx.xxxx. jamessmith@ku.edu

# The KU Writing Center at Lawrence Family Promise

**Twice a week, KU Writing Center consultants will be visiting Lawrence Family Promise to provide feedback and writing help for employment-related writing (resumes, job applications, cover letters, etc); other kinds of formal or professional writing; and writing-related homework. The Writing Center hopes to create a space at Family Promise where writers can feel comfortable sharing their ideas, get feedback, and ultimately, create pieces of writing that help writers achieve their goals.**

**Times and locations:**

**Every Tuesday from 7-9 pm at the Congregation**

**Every Thursday from 2-4 pm at the Family Promise Day House**



**If you have questions, please contact Samantha at Family Promise or Kara at [writingcenteratfamilypromise@gmail.com](mailto:writingcenteratfamilypromise@gmail.com). We look forward to writing with you.**