

# Stephanie Sheffield WC Interview

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, writing, center, students, class, grad student, consultants, undergrad, teaching, good, happening, faculty, point, work, big, terms, writers, undergraduate, talked, question

## SPEAKERS

Patrick O'Grady, Stephanie Sheffield

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**S** Stephanie Sheffield 00:00  
Jotted some things down. Yeah. Okay.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 00:05  
And then we don't have to sort of, like answer every single question, obviously.

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 00:10  
Sure.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 00:11  
But um, yeah. So I guess the- we'll start off with the kind of the context questions like when you started working at the center, who is in who's in charge? And then you talked a little bit there at the pre-recording about, like, where, where you worked on campus, but-

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 00:29  
Sure. Well- do you know how long I worked at the Writing Center? Do you have any? Do you have that information?

**P** Patrick O'Grady 00:35  
Oh, you said eight years?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 00:37

Yeah, I was there for- yeah, I was I was I. So I was gonna say I went through, I think, five different leadership changes. There were there were a lot of different- the leadership team was very different. But I started in Fall of 2000 as a graduate writing consultant. I believe that the director at the time was Patty Stock and the associate director was Janet Swenson. I think pretty soon after that, I mean, I know I know, the people in charge were Patty and Janet. At some point, not long after that, they they went to co-directorship of the Writing Center, and I don't remember if- I'm pretty sure that Patti was was still the director when I started. But again, this was 21 years ago, so I'm not entirely sure. But- so that was- it was Patty stock, and Janet Swenson. And I was hired on as I was technically a Graduate Writing consultant, but I was Janet's assistant for a little while there helping with outreach, and then I left in, I think, May of 2008. And when I left, I was the assistant director and had been for two years, but assistant not associate, I did not have my degree. In that in between then and I don't know when these things happened. But um, so it was Patti and Janet, they were co directors, then Patty left and Janet brought in Dave Sheridan as Associate Director. And then Janet and Dave were co-directors. And then Janet became a dean. And Dave was the director. And I was the assistant director. Because at that point, I'd been there for six years, and I had the institutional memory. They hired me on a staff, and then Dave went to the residential college. And they hired in Trixie, who I'm sure you know,

P

Patrick O'Grady 02:38

Yes, yes.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 02:39

Yes. And I was her assistant director for a while until Diana Baldwin was hired in a permanent position. Assistant director's a temporary position, it's not intended to be permanent. And Diana Baldwin was hired in as Associate Director, and that was the point that I left. Um, so that was- when I was there I did just about everything. I was never an undergraduate, so I can't claim that, but over the course of that eight years, I- like I said, I was Janet's assistant, I helped with outreach, particularly with the Red Cedar Writing Project and also management of the Writing Center. I was a supervisor of the the consulting that was happening. I did the scheduling for the main center and all the satellites. I also consulted, I worked with Graduate Writing groups. I did presentations. I'm trying to think- I managed a couple of the satellites, just was in charge of, you know, advertising and running them and like actually being on site and running those, particularly SASS, Student Athlete Support Services. I'm trying to think of- I think I wrote this down somewhere what all the things I did, that was probably that was the- that was the main thing. Oh, and I taught I taught English 391, which was the I forget what it was called when I started teaching it, but I changed the name to "Writing, Writing Centers and Writing Center Theory." Eventually, but that was- that was something else that I took over, I think probably in about 2004. It had been taught by Janet Swenson, and we co-taught it for a semester and then I took over and taught it every spring, I believe, until I left.

P

Patrick O'Grady 04:30

And that's the undergraduate like the required course for undergrad.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 04:35

Yeah, it was- it was the the training course. I don't know what it's called now, it's probably under a different heading. But yeah, it was it was the- this is what- this is what you're going to be doing here and also, here's a decent theoretical underpinning of what it means to work with writers in this particular way.

P

Patrick O'Grady 04:54

Awesome, awesome. Yeah, I think it's- now it's 395 or something like that. I'm not an undergraduate either. So I didn't take it.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 05:01

Yeah, it was like "Special Topics in Writing". It was one of the the standing alternatives that was a special topics course. But yeah, no, it was. It was a fun class. I enjoyed that a lot.

P

Patrick O'Grady 05:10

Yeah, yeah. No, I've definitely heard great things about- from the, from the undergraduate consultants about sort of how- just how transformative it was and like I- we do sort of like weekly, kind of, or, well, bi-weekly now, I guess where speakers will come in and give talks and it's been- which I guess would be something really difficult to do in non-COVID season. And then we've had these people come in every sort of other week and like, speak about disability access-

S

Stephanie Sheffield 05:39

Ah, man. That's awesome.

P

Patrick O'Grady 05:41

-and all the all these other kinds of things that like, I know- I'd never really thought I mean, it's been sort of like pedagogically transformative for me, because like, as a TA at MSU, they like shove you in a in a room for like eight hours and tell you not to do anything illegal.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 05:55

Don't they just- yeah, yeah. I remember that orientation. Like, "don't date the undergrads." Thanks. Wasn't planning to? Gross. [Laughter] Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 06:06

And, and so as a- as a TA, I work as a TA as well and it's been really sort of, it's been really awesome. Just like stuff that I never even thought of in the classroom. So-

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Stephanie Sheffield 06:16

Yeah, well, this is one of the things that I used to- when I would make- you know, like, when I had to staff, the the receptionist desk, and like, answer calls and make appointments for people, people would always request working with a grad student. And I would always almost like- and they'd reject, like, there wasn't a grad student available, because they thought the grad student was going to be the better consultant. And I would always say, like, you understand- undergrads who work here went through a class. They took- they took an entire semester, understanding what this practice is. Grad students had a summer orientation. And probably a bachelor's, right? Like the undergraduates in terms of their work here are better prepared at this point. Like, and, and people, you know, sometimes they would believe me, and then they would have a session with an undergrad be like, "Oh, yeah, this was awesome." Like, I know, this, like I, I came here as a grad student. I, you know- but yeah, no, it was- it was- yeah, it's a- it's a great class. It's also just a great- I can't speak to the community now. In terms of the community, the time- you know, overall, like, you know, kind of the the average, with a fairly small standard deviation, was really positive. It was a really nice place to work. The people who didn't fit into that community didn't stay. Like they just- they found somewhere else they wanted to work. So it was yeah, no, it was nice to find that.

P

Patrick O'Grady 07:41

Yeah, no. I mean, that's, that's one of the things that I really love about working here is like, there is actually a really great community and like grad school can be so cutthroat.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 07:49

Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 07:50

And it's- I feel like it's just getting worse and worse as like, you know, the job market has ceased to be a market at all, because there's like, there's nothing available.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 08:00

Right. Right. Yeah, no, for sure. Supportive was one thing it definitely always was.

P

Patrick O'Grady 08:06

 Patrick O'Grady 08:00

Yeah, yeah. So I guess we can- you talked about a lot of the kind of services that you worked with, which is great. So when you think of the the history of the Writing Center, is there any sort of major things that that come to mind? And sort of- and how do you fit into that kind of historical trajectory?

 Stephanie Sheffield 08:26

Oh, I don't- oh wow, I don't know. That was the one question in the list that you gave me that I didn't have a good answer. I think of the Writing Center's, history- I don't think I have a good answer to that. I don't- I don't really have I mean- I was- you know- I like- I was there for milestones I think? Like when we stopped, like, when we moved from doing everything on paper to doing a lot of things digitally. That was- that was a big thing. But in terms of like, historical impact. I don't know. I mean, it most of the things that I- that I tried, like I tried to get and I think I did get the Student Athlete Support Services' satellite back on track and doing good work, but I don't think it exists anymore. So I'm sure you know, it, like think things like that, like the the I can't think of... Yeah, I don't I mean, I think probably the, in terms of my role in that history, the biggest contribution I had was I trained several years worth of undergraduate writing consultants, and many of whom I believe were doing- I mean I can't speak to all of them. I didn't observe all of them, but they were all really good at their jobs. Like I think they did- They did fantastic work. So I have- I have a lot of pride in that. [Cross talk].

 Patrick O'Grady 09:48

You mentioned milestones. Like I mean, the transition from paper to digital is a big milestone, obviously, were there any other sort of major milestones that you observed while you were there?

 Stephanie Sheffield 09:59

Um. When we stopped doing, when we started doing like reflections online that was- stopped filing all those, I'm trying to think of what else we- I mean that we did- we did some asynchronous sessions, we did some remote sessions. And I feel like that was something that we struggled with offering- whether or not we were going to do that and thinking about just like, in terms of our approach like pedagogically and in terms of our approach to our work, were we okay with asynchronous sessions? Were we okay with the writer not being physically in the space with us? Um, I don't know, we were we were tiptoeing into that a lot. I'm trying to think of, I mean, I think the library satellite, I think it's, I don't remember when it started. I don't remember if it was- if it was going, when, when I when I started there, but it came into its own a little bit more while I was there, which was nice. The Civil Environmental Engineering Writing Center satellite was born and died while I was there, because that was basically the the, the baby of one particular undergraduate who, who spearheaded that and made it happen and then when he graduated, it ended. I'm trying to think of other (things) that mean, there was the Business Communication Center satellite, that I don't know if it exists anymore, but that definitely started up while I was there. So there- and I think we piloted having some locations, some temporary locations in dorms during finals week and stuff. So there were things things

like that, trying to expand services, reach more people. Yeah, I'm trying to think of other milestones, I am sure. Yeah, no, I can't think of anything else. Right. Now. If something comes up, I'll either-

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Patrick O'Grady 12:01

Yeah, yeah. So maybe do you want to talk a little bit about your your own growth, at the Writing Center, like how you changed, how the world changed around you, and how the Writing Center might have helped you process all that?

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Stephanie Sheffield 12:15

Wow, um, well, I definitely made lifelong friendships there. My two closest friends who I still work with, actually- we all work in the same department. at U of M- I met at the Writing Center, one was a grad student, and one was an undergrad and then became a grad student, and an employee at the Writing Center. So definitely, the Writing Center gave me that. Hired good people. And I got some friends out of that. And, you know, other friends too. Professionally- so, it definitely I couldn't, I would not be able to pinpoint a particular moment, or or experience that did this. But I definitely left there with a specific approach to teaching writing and working with writers that I mean, just the, that is not consistent in people that like that I encounter like the people that other people in my department and my current department. And I know that like I've talked to my friends who are also writing center alums, and and we've just like, yeah, it's a writing center thing. If you come out of a writing center, you have this, this is a non-scientific, very small sample size. But we think that we all have a focus in teaching writing on audience and in- and kind of a preference for working with individual writers and with this kind of much less directive, "Let's figure out your way" of approaching the situation and answering this question rather than me telling you this is the right way. And that is that is something that other people who teach some of the same classes that I have taught, they'll come in and say, Okay, this is the right way to write a memo. This is the right way to write a lab report. This is the right and you know, we'll say and I'll go in and be like, I wish I wish it were that easy, but who are you writing to? What do they expect? And that definitely comes from working with students in classes, who had a different faculty member who was grading them and my just awareness that okay, this person in first teaching first year writing expects this, this person teaching first year it expects this. They say they're teaching the same thing. But what they're really- but they're not in, they're not articulating, you need to figure out what your audience expects, because then that, you know, what is what is right, is what the audience wants in this moment in this context. And I and I took that out of definitely my writing center work. And it's, I mean, I think I'm a better writing teacher for it. I also had the ability, have the ability to read writing that is outside of my area of expertise- highly technical, highly scientific, I mean, I work with engineering students now. And they're writing about engineering work that I could not go into a lab and reproduce. But I can tell them whether or not what they're writing makes sense. And so it's, it's part partly experience in reading the technical and scientific and, you know, just non-my area of expertise worked from the Writing Center. And, and learning a lot from that just like kind of learning the, you know, like shallow depth of a lot of different topics, and then being able to take that and extrapolate. But also, it's figuring out what the logic of an argument, even if you don't understand the subject, is and being able to respond to that logic. And that's, that's an incredibly useful skill. I took that, to I was a scientific editor for a while, directly after I left the Writing Center, I worked for the government for a few years. And as a scientific editor, and

that was, that was what I was doing. There's like, I don't understand the work that they're doing in terms of like, you know, survey methodology, writ large, like, I don't understand, like, that's not my area, but I can tell you whether or not it makes sense, right? Because whether or not it makes sense, is my area. And-

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Patrick O'Grady 16:08

Right.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 16:08

working in the Writing Center for that long definitely gave me that.

P

Patrick O'Grady 16:12

Yeah, I've actually, you know, we were talking earlier about how like, you get a sort of sense of all the things that you don't know, from the Writing Center, and that's definitely something that I've realized, like, wow, there's so much stuff that I don't know. And, and, you know, it's- the Writing Center has definitely contributed to that. I mean, you work with everybody, you know?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 16:33

No- and well- I feel like that was one of the good indicators. It was never an official indicator. But I felt like that was a good indicator of who was going to be happy as a consultant is the people who were just genuinely interested in all of the topics that were coming to them. And you know, people who, there were some people who would come and they would be like, I just, I only want to work with students who are writing about this thing. I was like, that's, that's not the right attitude, like, I don't think you're going to be happy, because you're going to try to force them all into writing that one thing the way you expect it to be written. And if you could be interested in all the stories that people are telling you, if can be interested in all the subjects, they're they're writing about it, it's just it's gonna be a much more satisfying experience and more valuable for you.

P

Patrick O'Grady 17:13

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So do you have a favorite story of yours in the Writing Center?

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Stephanie Sheffield 17:20

Oh, wow. I don't think I have a good story. I thought when I saw that question in the list, I had- two things popped into mind. And one of them is not a story- but every or not one particular point in time- but I think it was during finals week, we'd always rent a popcorn popper. Like a big like, Do they still do that? You wouldn't know. You wouldn't know. Sorry. Yes. During COVID?

Are they having lonely popcorn by themselves? Yeah, no, we would get like a, you know, on a cart, like on one of those grey, hard plastic carts, but it would be like a popcorn machine that's like this big, you know, with the hot oil and the thing that spins around, and then you have like a big glass box full of popcorn. And we would open the doors and prop them open. And we would start popping popcorn and people would like come from that would be on like the first floor of Bessie and they would wander up because it would follow the smell of fresh popped popcorn. That was a lot of fun. I always looked forward to being able to do that every year because I was like, I want to do it. I want to open up- I wanna- I want to put the popcorn in. That was that was super fun and definitely got burned. Like definitely got hot oil burns, because we weren't as careful as we should have been. But that was- I just remember, that is a fond memory that I have. The only other story I could think of, and I'm sure there are- I mean was there for eight years. There was a million things. I just can't think of anything. But was I know there was one time we really needed- but we wanted to paint one of the conference rooms. Have you ever been in the physical space?

P

Patrick O'Grady 18:56

Never been in the physical space unfortunately.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 18:57

No? Okay. So there were there were off of that main room, there were- I have no idea. I'm assuming they're still there. But there were two kind of smaller rooms. And one of them was the computer one was kind of like a little computer lab with the tech room. And one of them was a conference room and they switched, which was which but one of them was just in really bad shape. The paint was peeling and everything and there was no budget to paint it because doing anything through physical plant is really as much more expensive, which it makes it makes sense why why that is but it'd be like, like, thousands of dollars to paint this small room. And so the powers that be were like we can't do it. But what we can do is buy a couple gallons of paint and give some people permission to come in over the weekend and you know, whatever happens happens. So we like, like, stealthily painting a conference room, which was just like Yeah, all right. I like this. This is This is fun. I'm like, you know, how can we decorate? But yeah, that's the only thing I mean you. You know, I had so many good conversations with the people that I worked with. And like, but I can't remember, I just remember kind of the good feelings of like, having somebody, you know, knowing that a grad student I've been working with for over a year was finally turning in their dissertation or something, you know, something like that. But I can't, I don't have a good story about that. But that happened so many times- and there's somebody coming back and, and saying that they got a good grade on this paper that they, you know, that they were really worried about, or things like that happened alot. But.

P

Patrick O'Grady 19:56

Yeah, that's awesome. So you were there from 2000 through '08? Right. Yeah. Pretty tumultuous time in the world.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 20:41



Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 20:43

So how did the Writing Center affect that in any way or help you process that?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 20:48

So how we process, uh particularly for 911, I was at the Writing Center, when we became aware that something was happening, I was at my desk, I was a supervisor at that point. So I had a desk that was mine, and a computer that was mine. And I was there, and I was watching, like on, on the computer as everything was happening and kind of like processing and figuring it out. And I don't really I mean, everybody, you know, people, like, people were showing up for work, and clients were coming in. And everybody was kind of just in a really weird space. And I know, at some point, there was a, like, a little fairly small TV that we had, and a cable drop for some reason in- in the- in the main center. And so we- somebody put- you know, found it and pulled it out and set it up in like the main space and turned it on to the news. And it was just on. And people were kind of like crowded around it or just like watching it, it was just- it was kind of like this. And we're still consulting, it wasn't very crowded, but we were still working with people. And and I remember, one of the other grad students, we had it, we just had it on. And I remember one of the other grad students at some point, I think this was, I think this was the same day, showed up for work and like basically said, we should turn this off, like this, this is not- this is potentially traumatic. And this should be a place where people don't have to be faced with that, given the work that we're doing. This should be this should be a place where- and they were absolutely right. And I was really grateful. I mean, because in that moment, like none of us were- none of us were thinking in that way. Like we were all kind of thinking in just like what's going on, we want to know what's going on. And there was, you know, thankfully, one of our colleagues was like, who had had a history of trauma and understood what would be better in the long run, you know, if we could create a space where- that we weren't, you know, just a place where people could be away from that. And also, this is not contributing to our work like this is not, it's not good. And so that was- that was then- what we tried to do- tried to be, you know, a place where we weren't going to be focused on that- it wasn't going to be kind of, you know, all the TVs were on and stuff. Um, I remember that I remember that very much, because that was kind of my first, honestly, my first like, awareness of the impact of that kind of ever-present imagery- that it could happen. And just like how it wasn't just information. It was- it was, you know, trauma, and it could, it could actually hurt someone to have that. To have them walk into the center, and be faced with that. And that was- that was a really, that was a useful- was a useful realization for me. I'm trying to think if there was, I know, I had conversations with students, students of color and international students who worked in the Writing Center, or who were our clients, who did not come into work that week, who were worried for their safety or worried for their family, you know, just worried about just the, the world and whether or not they were safe in it. But I don't remember any kind of, like, larger I know, we were- we were, you know, support- as supportive as we could be without training and just you know, like- you know, you're- you're safe here. We'll help you you know, what- what do you need kind of things but in terms of kind of a larger policy, I'm not aware of, of anything that was going on, like formally, but I did know that we definitely wanted after that point we wanted or I mean even before that point, but we were trying to be actively a place where people knew they could come.

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Patrick O'Grady 22:35

Right.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 25:05

Yeah. So yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 25:09

Yeah, definitely. The final sort of question in this section is like how the center was perceived by, like faculty in the community at large or sort of the larger field? Do you have a sense of that?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 25:25

A little bit. I mean, so I believe- my perception of how faculty thought of us would be, either they were just really supportive, and they told other students- just come- just go to the Writing Center. Or they were sort of supportive, but they were annoyed when the writing got turned in and wasn't perfect. And we would get like, you know, well, they said, they went to the Writing Center and it's not perfect, like, yeah. Correct. And, um- and so that was- there was always that kind of disconnect between like, you didn't- you didn't fix it? Like, no, not our job.

P

Patrick O'Grady 25:25

Yeah, exactly.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 25:26

Yeah. So there was- there was kind of that, but there were just- there were- a lot of faculty were very supportive, who understood what we were doing. And and were fine with that. I would say, staff, I, you know- you know, I'm not really aware of that. But community and larger field, I mean, the student body, I- we always had more demand than we could fill. I mean, there were, you know, the Writing Center was really popular with people who came like, if there were very few people, I think, who and we did this, we ran these numbers once, there were very few people who came one time and didn't come back, so like, you know, for an appointment. So I think, you know, that lends itself to a positive, positive interpretation. I would say, the larger field, I feel like we were a decently respected voice like we, we presented at conferences, people had heard of us heard of the writing site and the MSU Writing Center, mostly because of its size, like the staff and- and the different- and the satellites and the the offerings that we were able to give like they had heard of that. We would, you know, a lot of places that we would we would talk to or collaborate with or meet at conferences, they were coming from

much smaller locations. And we were very fortunate in that way. And the university, I think, looked at us as a place as a non-degree granting academic unit that they could cut. Whenever possible. You're not bringing in tuition dollars, we would like you to be smaller now. Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 27:52

Yeah, that- the neoliberal University is alive and well. So I just- on the question of size, do you remember about how big the Writing Center was?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 28:05

That's a really good question. Uh, no, although, I wonder- I have that- I don't, I don't remember. I would say, I wonder if like, because I I just, I just found that I could find it some- some time, might I, I found a hard drive or an external hard drive that had some files on it from like, 2006. That had some some work files on it. And I was like, Oh, my God, this is like my scheduling, like how I do the scheduling kind of write up that I made, and it probably would say how many, but I would say probably 30 or so undergraduates, and maybe a dozen grad students. That feels about right, that- that might be small. We had a decent sized staff. I mean, you know, there were for our, like, in the main Writing Center for like, heaviest scheduled hours, like, or the heaviest staffed hours, there could be, like 12 people working, you know, undergrads and grads at any particular time. There was a pretty- it was a pretty decent sized staff.

P

Patrick O'Grady 29:25

Yeah, I know, just from our like, our Google Drive 115 people have access to it. And I'm not sure if they all are currently working at the Writing Center, but I know we've got a like, on our like Friday staff meetings, there'll be like 60-65 people there. So yeah, it's pretty it's a pretty sizable-

S

Stephanie Sheffield 29:47

Yeah, I mean, it was big. It was- we could you know what, yeah, I feel like because I'm thinking of a Christmas party. Now, when we would do. Or sorry, holiday party- wasn't a Christmas party explicitly, not a Christmas party. We would do like white elephant gift exchange and, and everybody who was in attendance was in the main center. And that room was full. So there were- there were a lot of us there and because not everybody would come to the party. Yeah, there were a lot of us. I wish, I wish I knew. But yeah, there was, there was a bunch of people. It was big.

P

Patrick O'Grady 30:17

Yeah. Yeah. Alright, so I guess you're in- for the next question- you're in a sort of like, perfect position to answer since you taught the undergraduate course. Do you want to talk maybe a little bit about the the pedagogy of the Writing Center, and the kind of key values that it that it had at the time?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 30:33

So yeah, sure, um, the way it was explained to me and I came to internalize and hopefully contribute to, was that our goal was to meet students where they are, and where-and where, and when we could be most useful. It's probably a better- so- and that was both like physically, like trying trying to be in the locations where we would be needed. So like, you know, in the library in Student Athletes Support Services, in the dorms in, you know, in Bessie at hours- that would be, but also figuring out like, also, like pedagogically, so to start from an assumption of like a non-directive practice, but to realize that our goal was to find like the places where we could provide the right- like the right question or the right suggestion, or the right correction, or the right resource that would help the writer to figure out to understand the tools they already had and implement them. So like, it was a- it was a tightrope walk, right, like it was- and this was one of the reasons why it was- it was such a difficult thing, the class was such a difficult transition for the students who would come into the class, to 391 and believe that because they were good writers, they would automatically be good consultants. And I have to say, like, actually, it might, it might be a hindrance, because if you are, if you are so skilled, and if your identity is so "I'm a good writer" and looking at someone else's writing, it is really hard to not to see the difference between what you would do, and how to help them figure out what they will do. Right? And so figuring in like that, that moment of- that moment of intervention and coming again, from a non-directive place, like coming again, from the like, I'm not going to tell you, in most situations, I'm not going to start out by just telling you the answer. My goal is not to get this over faster. My goal is to figure out where you know, where I can be most useful with the understanding that helping someone answer the questions they already know the answers to, and just helping them realize they already know the answers is more useful than telling them the answer again.

P

Patrick O'Grady 33:01

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, we talked a lot about writer agency in the center. Is that something that was part of the practice at the time?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 33:11

Not in that way, and not, I don't think using that term, but it's a good description of, of what we were trying to do. Like to, for a lot of reasons, I mean, part of it was- was to protect the writings- like we to protect our practice and our existence, we needed to not tell writers to do things that their faculty their teachers would not want them to do. So like helping figure out like, interrogating the assignment was a big thing. Like, okay, let's try to figure out what it is they're looking for by looking at the assignment and think about what they've told you. And then just, you know, that, that kind of thing. But that is a way of giving writers agency and it's also a way of demonstrating the importance of audience and understanding what your audience is expecting. And that was a big part of what we were doing. The other thing that was important to me, when I started teaching the class was helping students have, the future consultants, have empathy for, for non-native speakers of English, for English language learners, and the- because that was something that we had to push back against, or that I had to push back against this tendency to like to focus on just lower order concerns, to focus on like punctuation and articles and things like that. And, and because there was this assumption like,

Okay, well, the English is wrong. So I'm going to fix the English. It's like, no, that's that- you know, there's no reason to do it, like you can explain some- explain some rules and give some examples and that's probably very useful. This person has learned English as a foreign language. They have a better understanding of the structure of this language than I do as a native speaker. They could definitely have a more knowledgeable conversation about why it does what it does and why it fails to do what it's supposed to do, then I could, but that we- you know, figuring out a way to instill that empathy and respect for someone who is writing a college level paper in a language that they've probably only, like, fairly recently, in terms of the the- in terms of language acquisition, have learned, right? Like, it's not something I could do. I would be- you know- so that was, that was one of my goals for the class, because we had, there were a lot of students who were not writing in their native language, or they were not writing in their home language for sure, like, not the one that they spoke most, by preference and most comfortably. And so I wanted to make sure that the students who came to that class understood that you know, that they were going to be working with people who were doing an incredibly hard thing. And were doing it amazingly well, even before our intervention. And that also- that there were potentially different ways to help someone who has learned- who was writing in a language they have learned as a foreign language, rather than, you know, someone who is a native English speaker. Yeah. So that was one of- that was one of my goals for the class. Yeah, I think if there was other stuff that we- I know, we wanted to- we wanted to, like empower students to find answers. So we, you know, it was a, a- it was something that was said a lot that, you know, it's not, it's not important to know all the answers, you just need to know where to find them. So we wanted consultants to model looking things up. We said like, we don't want you to pretend that you know it, like definitely don't pretend that you know. But also, like, don't be so sure that you know, like, it's okay to look things- we have this whole shelf of reference materials, like it's okay. If you're not quite sure, you know what that kind of clause is called or something you don't have to pretend that you know it, you can just go look it up. And modeling doing that going to a resource and finding the answer is good for a lot of reasons. Giving people that permission to to not- I mean imposter syndrome is real, right? Everybody, you know, nobody wants to, to admit sometimes that they don't know something. Oh, sorry about that. Didn't turn my phone off. Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 34:59

Yeah. So yeah, I mean, that's sort of an interesting, like form of vulnerability in a lot of ways. Like, and it's something that, you know, as you say, right, it's not something that comes naturally in the academy, or is certainly not a behavior that's encouraged in the rest of the academy.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 37:57

Right? Yeah. Well, and I feel like I was, I had a fortunate experience that I did most of my graduate- most of my PhD and rhetoric and writing at a point where, you know, the faculty I was interacting with, for the most part, did not expect that- were like, you don't like, we don't need to be pompous about any of this, like we are, we are trying to figure out how, you know, like, how to teach writing and how rhetoric works. Let's not- let's not also be annoying to be around. And that was really nice. Like, it was- it was really nice to be like, okay, you know, yeah- let's- we don't have to- we're in this together. Which was a, which was a really nice thing, too. Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 38:43

Yeah, it's incredible. Yeah. So the next question is sort of like I- and we've sort of already talked about some of the tensions that existed but any kind of like- any sorts of tensions that existed either within the center itself or between the center and sort of other aspects of the university or just in general?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 39:07

There was always the budgeting thing I know that there were a couple of points and I knew about some of this because of my proximity to a part of the the administration at one point but earlier than that, I worked with the director pretty closely to help with things so I heard about these things, but I know that there were points where we needed to cut- there were just over-like drastic cuts and they're always kind of the threat of cuts. Because we didn't bring money in, we were always- I was always like pulling numbers and doing counts of like our usage and like, you know okay here are all the appointment slots we offered. Here are all the appointment slots that were full and I was doing this for like paper, like we you know, like binders of, of appointment books, and like flipping through them and counting them and like before it was all digital. And, so there was always this pressure, we need to have numbers to show our impact. And that was, that was tense. You know, because, you know, I was on assistantship, you know, and you know, I felt like- and all of us were- in the undergrads were on hourly. And, you know, people were counting on that money. I know I was. And there were points when I, like, I went and got like, an additional assistantship and other like teaching- teaching first year writing, because the Writing Center, like just because I could, because that was available to me and the Writing Center needed, you know, to maintain other people and I had this other opportunity, so like, I went down. I would say, other like individual tensions- labor practices weren't the best. This was something that I was also there- speaking of milestones, related milestones when the GEU came into being. And yeah, and I was our, the Writing Centers' steward in the the initial, like, "we're trying to make a union" conversations, and then the Writing Center consultants got negotiated out of the bargaining unit, which was a super bummer. I was- I was just I was, was angry, because they didn't tell me. I'm like, I'm, wait, I'm a steward. Wait. A call? I could have gotten a call. But- so there was a- there, I'm trying to- try to use my words carefully. Because- not because none of these people can hurt me. But because I'm trying, I'm trying to be I'm trying to be fair, because my perceptions at the time were like, what- were that things were that mostly okay. But looking back on it. I think it is the- it is the role of administration. And this would have been in the the Patty Stock, Janet Swanson era, to make sure that if you have people who are working for you for X amount of time, that- that the work you're giving them can take place in that amount of time. And I think the expectations were not reasonable, there was a lot, there was a lot of, you know, of using, like enthusiasm to encourage people to go over, you know, like, and so this is one of the bad sides potentially, of having such a supportive community is that you don't always notice when someone's asking you to do more than you really should.

P

Patrick O'Grady 42:54

Right.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 42:55

And so now looking back on it, like, Oh, yeah, that wasn't okay. Like, that's, you know, that's- that was, you know, I was- I was working more than I was getting paid for and that, you know- and that is not, that is not okay. But- so that- that is- that is a valuable lesson. It's a good- it's a good lesson to have. But, yeah. Some of this was happening before, before the union existed, as well. So.

P

Patrick O'Grady 43:26

Yeah, yeah. Well, I'm definitely glad you guys formed the union. I'm actually a steward for the history department. So-

S

Stephanie Sheffield 43:32

Hey, great! Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 43:34

I'm really thankful for the groundwork that you all laid. Yeah, I mean, we're- we're still going strong. We're-

S

Stephanie Sheffield 43:42

Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 43:44

You know, we're- and membership is struggling a little bit, like our membership numbers are struggling a little bit right now with COVID.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 43:49

Because of the Michigan law. COVID, but also the making it voluntary to pay dues? Yeah. Yeah. Our- my- I'm a current union member. I'm a lecturer at U of M. So the Lecturer Employees Union. It's the same thing here. It's- it's- it's hard. But hopefully, it- it's definitely better. And I think, you know, I think that given you know, if when everything comes back to normal- that I mean, everything is better with the Union, the grad student, you know, in particular, conditions there are much better I think with it.

P

Patrick O'Grady 44:24

Oh, yeah. No doubt about it. Yeah. I mean, we're, so we still are not technically paid a living

Oh, yeah. No doubt about it. Yeah. I mean, we're, so we still are not technically paid a living wage. But we are within nine months employee employment at like, at the level one. We're at 87% of a living wage.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 44:39

It's better than it was.

P

Patrick O'Grady 44:40

Better than it was.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 44:41

Climbing- climbing the ladder. Yeah, no, I know. It's just- it's yeah. Yeah, it's very important. And, yeah, I'm glad it happened there. I'm glad it exists here. For me and for the grad students, thankfully, at U of M. Yeah, it's- are the Graduate Writing consultants in the Writing Center, are they part of the bargaining unit yet? Or are they excluded still? Man!

P

Patrick O'Grady 45:08

They're excluded still. Yes, so- they are, and then- and then RA's are still excluded. But.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 45:18

Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 45:18

The good thing about RA's is that, and this I don't think is the case for the consultants, but our RA's go off of our contract, more or less. So they get similar wages, and they get the same health care program.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 45:33

Yeah, I think that's the same thing for the consultants as well. I mean, I think that it's, it's just, it's a bummer that the language was written in that particular way. And I have speculation about why it was, but I have no real information. But just- I remember it being defined as, like, graduate, graduate employees whose primary duty is teaching. And there was this long conversation about "What is consulting? Is it teaching? Well, it's not research." So you know, like, like, it's not, but it's not- it's explicitly not teaching. So yeah, I wish- I wish they were, I wish they were part of the Union. I mean, I think they get all the benefits of it, because you



really can't get anyone to work for you if you don't have the same like- it's- it the salaries the same, and all the health insurance and all those benefits. But you should be. They should have a voice.

P

Patrick O'Grady 46:27

Yeah. For sure. Yeah. Yeah. But uh, no, I'm definitely I'm, it's definitely great to be in the presence of someone who's like-

S

Stephanie Sheffield 46:36

Oh, well, now. I can't, I cannot- I cannot take credit. I- it was not my idea. I was on board as soon as, my parents are public school teachers, so- or were they retired. So they're big fans of- of unions and union protection. And I have a nice photograph of my father being arrested on the picket line when he was like picketing with me. And you know, like- like, okay. So big fan, but I was not one of the primary organizers. But I definitely, I definitely wanted to help because it was something that, you know, was very important work. And I'm glad it's still going through. Yeah, yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 47:12

So on- maybe as sort of- less sort of related. Do you remember any of this sort of, like, how, like, interdisciplinary consultants were? Like, where were most people from? Or on campus?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 47:26

Yeah, it was, it was honestly, mostly from the liberal arts. It was- so I know, most of the people who could get credit for taking the consultant course, were in, you know, in English. And most people who were interested in taking the class were interested in writing, and they're, you know, so there was, there wasn't a very wide- wide spread there. I mean, we had, you know, some for some foreign languages, you know, some, like people from modern languages. But it was all in like, it was all in the- very rarely in the science side of things. We tried to recruit, I mean, there, you know, we would, we would try to, you know, ask faculty- I know- the directors would ask faculty to recommend students, we would try to recruit from them. But it's a hard sell. If we say, you know, you're an undergrad, please take this class. Like, well, I can't, like, it doesn't count towards my degrees. So, you know, and some people did, but for the most part, it was it was a pretty hard sell. Grad students, my understanding of the deal there was that there were- there were agreements with a number of departments, or programs to provide a certain percentage of grad students, you know, like, some of the grad students slots at the Writing Center were funded by these programs. And so we had to take a certain number of their students, and there was, from rhetoric and writing, and I think, from the English department. And what was the, what was the American? Like, I remember- it doesn't exist anymore. There were a couple of programs that would, we would get students- get grad students from there. And then other people were recruited. Just you know, they would you know, that we would encounter them. But it was it was not a very diverse group. It was not a very diverse group, ethnically, culturally or in terms of the programs they were in. It was mostly white. I would say

probably 60-40 women to men. And the most people were in some, like liberal arts program, I think. Yeah, we, yeah. It was- there was always kind of this- this early- not, not always, but there was often this push to or awareness of the- of the value of like, it would be better if our consultant staff better reflected the demographics of the university in terms of the things that are being studied in terms of- certainly ethnically, and just, you know- and culturally. And I don't really know, what was- what was being attempted to make that happen. I know it was not profoundly successful, unfortunately, at the time.

P

Patrick O'Grady 50:35

Right. Yeah. So, you've talked a lot about this, the undergraduate course, which I think is wonderful. Is there- so I mean, there is a full question about it here, about sort of- about the design of this course. Yeah, I guess I'll just open it up to you. If you want to say anything more about the class itself.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 51:00

Ah, let me think. Let me look at the notes that I jotted down. Um, yeah, I think I covered it- just that we wanted, um, that the undergrads that we hired mostly came from that class unless they had like, a lot of experience somewhere else, which was really rare. I think we had somebody who came from the Lansing Community College Writing Center and had experience working there. And so they just kind of walked right in, because that was run by a former GWC. But for the class, um, yeah, I, yeah, I think I covered it, just that it was important. You know, it was important to- that- they needed to value the expertise of the writers they were working with, they weren't there to be, you know, say sage on the stage. They were there to be- someone who could help that person. Figure out their answer to that question, you know, to figure out their way of responding to the assignment, which was a hard thing. And that being- it was not enough to be a good writer. Because almost everybody in that class just self-identified as a good writer. And I actually had- actually had an assignment that I created, I think, my second semester teaching it, which would have been my second year teaching, because it was only in the spring, that was just like, fully intended to fuck with them. And it was- I called it, I called it a Manchester essay. And introduced it as, "Okay, we're gonna let you know, we've been talking about genre, we're gonna learn this, this particular genre, I'm gonna ask you to write in it." And I just made up- and I like, I think I sold it, I think I sold it like to the first group. The next, the next one's coming through, probably- somebody had spoiled it for them. But it was just these completely arbitrary rules, like, you could only use words of three syllables or less, or two syllables or less. If you wanted a word that was more than two syllables, that had to be on the odd page in the dictionary. And you had, you'd only use the dictionary that was closest to you. Like it just had, you know- they could- you could either write about, I forget what it was, it was like a complex like, like a complex topic, like an interesting topic, like, like, probably something about politics, or ducks. And like the end, everybody chose to write about ducks, they had to write an essay, because it's, you know, ducks is a one syllable word, and it's a lot easier to make it work. But it was just- I had all of these rules. And then we had a, we had like a debriefing conversation after they had that, you know, I gave them a timed writing. And after they had that, we had a conversation about like, okay, you realize why I'm asking you to do this, like I just, I just asked you to, to try to adhere to this form that makes no sense to you that has seemingly arbitrary rules. How easy was it for you to do your best work in this in this situation? Right? Like, how easy was it for you to sound the way you're used to sounding when

you're writing? And, you know, you know, if I'd let you talk to me about this topic, do you think you would have been more impressive, like, and so we were able to have a really cool- really cool conversations about that. It was a really nice way of like, that empathy building that we were talking about before. But yeah, that was- it was a fun, it was a fun class. But yeah, and I got to kind of be responsive to the things that we saw, like, you know, if we had, like, new things coming up, that we noticed over the course of a year, then I could build that into the class or we could focus more on, you know, like new media stuff, like how do you, you know, what if we're- because that was something that was coming up. In the time that I was there, more people doing things that incorporated, I mean, at the time, images, ooh images, but you know, like to see like, eventually videos and things and we eventually had resources to do that. And so how do we, how do we use- how do we give feedback on that? What does it mean to take like an audience-centered, non-directive approach at helping someone who has to make a movie for their first year writing class. You know, it was pretty cool.

P

Patrick O'Grady 55:08

Yeah. That sounds awesome. All right. So, by the way, we are at at two o'clock and I want to be respectful of your time.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 55:19

I'm good.

P

Patrick O'Grady 55:20

Okay, good. Yeah.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 55:21

No classes on Fridays for me.

P

Patrick O'Grady 55:24

That's good. Yeah. I was teaching this morning. But uh, yeah. And my students have a paper deadline today, actually. But I've been pretty lax with, like, giving extensions and stuff because-

S

Stephanie Sheffield 55:37

Oh, yeah, no, time has no meaning during COVID. I've told all of my students, no- extension? Absolutely granted, just tell me you need it. Tell me when you want to turn it in. I want to read your best work that you're capable of. Like, and I've told them all, you know they're like, "Alright, can I have? Can I have an extra couple hours on this assignment?" Like, okay, the last night, the last moment I can accept work is the last day of classes. Pick a date and time before

that, and tell me when you'll have this stuff. I don't particularly care just like, tell me. You can. You can have, you know, they'll say can I have until midnight, like you could have until Tuesday, I don't care how much time you need. They're all struggling, you know, to get things done. It's like, no, I don't, I have to read it regardless, please let it be the best possible version-

**P** Patrick O'Grady 56:23  
Exactly.

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 56:24  
Of what it is you're capable of. Yeah.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 56:25  
It just seems like a lot of students are just so like, they just seem so cut off from their social world.

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 56:33  
Oh, yeah.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 56:34  
Like, it's, it's just so like, all of the- we forget how like all of those little conversations that people have as they're leaving class, like, "Do you want to meet in the library after this?"

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 56:44  
Yes!

**P** Patrick O'Grady 56:45  
Stuff like that, and how important that is.

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 56:47  
This is one of the things that, so at the beginning of last semester. So with students who had- who had gone through like, a few weeks of or like a month of online, you know, already and were starting up in fall, I asked them in- most of my classes are co-taught with engineering faculty, with like, engineers, but this is the class that I teach solo. And I asked them like, Okay,

what, what can I do? Like what, you know, you've got a little bit of an understanding now of how- of what's hard about this? Is there anything that you can think of now that I could do to make this class go more smoothly? You know, what can, you know, what can I do from my, from my side? And one of the students said, "Can you send us a weekly reminder of what's going on in class this week? And like, you know, what's due, what we're doing what, you know, what's, what's happening?" And I had this moment where my initial reaction was, no, I'm not gonna send you like- c'mon now. And then I realized, "Oh, God, I really wish somebody would do that to me. Like, would just send me a weekly just like, here's what you need to do this week, Stephanie, like, this is what's happening. Because none of those time markers exist, like none of the things, none of the cues that I have for like, what day it is. But also, one of the things that the students said in that moment was, assignments, in particular are so hard to keep track of, because you're used to like, you get to class. And somebody's like, "Hey, you finished that thing that's due Thursday yet?" And they're like, "Oh, I haven't started yet." But then they have time and how reliant they are on just those input, or hearing people talking about an assignment when you're in a big lecture, like hearing people talking about and be like, Oh, that's right. I should start that. Right. And so many of them, many more of them are missing assignments. Because of that. Like yeah, I hadn't even- I hadn't even thought of how valuable just that casual interaction in terms of keeping you on track. And remembering what's going on in the class is. Yeah, no, I, yeah. You gotta be yeah, I have. I have colleagues who are not being understanding in the same way. And like, I don't know how you live with yourself, you're a bad person, and you should feel bad. That is not okay.

P

Patrick O'Grady 58:54

Yeah, and at the end of the day, like, I have no desire to read someone's like, terrible work or work that isn't their best.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 59:03

Right? Well, it's not representative of like, yeah, like, being able to do your best work during a pandemic is not one of the outcomes of my like, my, my class, like, I'm not expecting everybody to deal with, with, like, global pandemic, as part of like, you don't need to show me that your your approach to writing is robust to that. I'm okay with it not being that, you know, like the best thing you'd be capable of in a normal semester. So everybody gets some grace, right? Like, I don't like- I don't need to see this because normally keeping track of things, you know, and and being able to respond to an assignment, as I've written it, and, you know, give me as the audience what I'm expecting, what I have told you, I'm expecting is part of what is part of one of the, you know, one of the learning outcomes of my courses, like I want them to be able to interrogate the assignment, ask me questions they need answered and deliver what I've said I want. Right and, but like, you know, being able to do all of that and keep track of things when you can't go outside and you can't see anybody and you're worried about your family? No, no, it's that we've- we've gone past what I'm expecting my class to measure. It's like, no, everybody, everybody gets some grace. This is- yeah. Do they have no meaning- everybody's allowed to- I mean, I'm always okay with people asking me questions. But I've I told them, like, if you're stressing out about whether or not what you've written is good enough, just send it to me and say, "Hey, is this good enough?" And I'll tell you, and if the answer is no, I'll give you two more weeks to work on. Like, don't don't spend time stressing about it, send it to me and ask me and that's not normally something I would offer.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:00:39

Right? Yeah. But it has been such a kind of, I don't know it's, like, especially that first semester, I think a lot of students were just like, we're just completely blindsided by the whole thing. And it was Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think now people are sort of starting to get used to it. But now we're on this sort of part where they're just so bored with it.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:01:04

Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. No, I know. And I've had I actually had, because of the structure of my class actually had the last official class meeting with one of my classes yesterday, and one of the students and as I was going around to their groups in breakout rooms, and, you know, debriefing the assignment that we just finished and giving them kind of my, hey, you know, take care of yourselves, I hope, you know, you do well, one of them, like gave me a direct message in zoom and said that this was his last class at at U of M. I was like, oh man. Like, you know, and I celebrated him in the message and, you know, congratulated him and stuff, but just like that is so- that is so hard. And I know, like, a lot of my students are fourth year, are graduating and I'm just like, Ah, man, just, it's so- yeah, there are students who like did their entire final year of college, in their dorm or at home, and it's just yeah, yeah, I feel bad for them. I don't understand not feeling bad for them. And like, I just I have, there's some people I just want to shake, like, come on. Come on.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:02:12

I remember, like I've got. So I've been here for four years now. And so like, my very first group of students that I ever worked with are starting to graduate. And like, they're like, some of them were, that I kept in touch with were like applying to graduate school. And then like, the grad programs said actually, we're not gonna- we're not admitting students this year. So wait till next year, and stuff like that. And then like, they're going into a, you know, an even worse job market then like, I mean, I graduated college in 2013. And I thought I was going into a terrible job market, you know.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:02:47

Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:02:47

And I just can't even like, conceive of what students are facing down right now.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:02:53

These are history students?

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:02:56

Well, so we teach, I TA for the kind of big general classes that are required for everyone. So we call them Integrative Arts and Humanities. I don't know if that was there before, but- so those are still around. And like, my class this semester has 400 students, and I'm one of 6 TA's. So it's just like, industrial education. But yeah, and it's just so- it's just so difficult for them. And like, I feel like MSU has enough money to throw around that like, we don't have to do it this way. But.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:03:32

Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:03:33

You know.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:03:34

Yeah. No, I agree. Yeah, it's hard.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:03:42

Yeah, it's definitely a tough time for for so many. I just wish like, I don't know, it was just sort of like- I think it's, you know, especially in this sort of like academic spaces, it's it's pretty commonplace to sort of down punch at undergrads is like. Oh, god, they're so dumb. They're so like, bothersome, especially at like a research university where like, people think it's like, teaching is this kind of secondary job or something.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:04:14

Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:04:16

And.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:04:17

Yeah, that's, that's one of the things I really like about U of M is that there is- there are a lot of lecturers and lecturers are, in a lot of cases, permanent, non-tenure stream faculty. So we're teaching faculty and there isn't kind of that-

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:04:34

Good.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:04:35

That- well, there are professors. There- there are professors who, who see, you know, having to teach classes as standing between them and their real job, which is research and grants and stuff, right. But lecturers don't have that where we're just, you know, our job is teaching, there are still lecturers who hate the students. That's, that's an issue that they need to deal with in terms of how they're spending their- their very valuable one life that they get. But I remember, I remember some classes that I took in the English language and lit program for my masters and that- just I was- I just remember sitting in those classes like, why are you doing this? Just look at the professor who obviously hated us, hated being there, did not want- I was just like why? What is it? Like? Why- there has to be- there has to be something else you could be doing with your time. Yeah, no, it's I don't understand it. That is one of the things to like, just bring it back to the Writing Center. It is really hard. Like, we were colleagues, grad students and undergrads in that space were colleagues. Right? And like it was there was no, I'm not gonna say there was no division, there were sometimes divisions, but those people didn't stick around. Because if you couldn't get on board with the idea that no, you're you know, you might be asked to mentor an undergrad, but an undergrad also might be asked to mentor you, depending on like, what it is you need to learn, right, like so it, you know, if you couldn't get on board with that perspective, you weren't going to be comfortable in the Writing Center for a lot of reasons. And that was, that was I think, a very valuable because it was just there. These are adults. These are adults, like you shouldn't date them. But you know- thank you orientation- that's the one thing I learned- um, but yeah, but these are, these are adults, there's no real, like, you don't have to, you know, you can exist in the world as a valuable individual without crapping on other people. Who are in some way, according to you less than right. And I think that was- that was really cool to have that. That united front in that way.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:06:37

Right. Yeah. And that's, I mean, at least from my experience, that's still here.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:06:51

That's good.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:06:52

That, you know, like, I mean, we have to go through a sort of like, observation period, and, or like a period where we go around and observe people. And like, I remember I mean, I only observed undergraduates in their consultations.



**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:07:06  
Yeah.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 1:07:07  
And I was like, Man, this is incredible. Like, you know,

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:07:12  
Yeah.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 1:07:12  
Like, I wish I was like this in undergrad.

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:07:16  
Yeah. No, it's yeah, it's, it's great. It's great. I remember, I remember doing that. I'm glad they're still doing that. And I can't imagine like, Trixie is fantastic. I mean, I, you know, I only worked with her for a short amount of time, but I was really impressed. And I can't imagine that she would have. I felt like when I left, she's gonna maintain all the stuff that's working, and she's gonna shake the Etch A Sketch and anything that's not working, she's gonna- she's gonna figure out a new way to do it. So I'm not surprised that the culture is as good or better. That's wonderful.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 1:07:46  
Yeah, yeah. No, it's been- it's been a really incredible experience. I mean, I think everybody knows that grad school is kind of a pressure cooker. But you know, it's been-

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:07:58  
It's hot garbage.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 1:08:01  
But it's, it's always just like, you know, it's like, I don't think I've ever been anywhere else where I look forward to going to meetings. But like, you see people and like, they're, you know, like, the meetings are actually some like, it's not like meeting about scheduling another meeting.

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:08:17

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:08:17  
Right. Yes.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 1:08:18  
It's constructive and something nice, you know, yeah.

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:08:21  
You found- you found a good place- you found a good place to land. Yeah, the Writing Center is a- it's a sweet gig. At least it was when I was there. I mean, I- you know, there- there was- it wasn't perfect, but it was yeah, it was a really nice place to work for sure.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 1:08:36  
Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And I guess to sort of like, bring it back to some of the questions here- one of the things that really fascinated me when when I came here is that there's this there's, we have this handbook, and most places, they have a handbook. And it's like, here are your rights and responsibilities and other stuff, but we have this like, beautiful ornate handbook now that has like, or like, it's got, like links to resources, and it's kind of like a living document with like- you know, people are always adding to it and like always updating it and stuff like that. So I was wondering if there was something like that, like a handbook or a sort of guide book like that when you were there.

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:09:21  
Not- I feel like we started to build something like that with the wiki. Um, but wikis became popular while I worked there. But I don't remember. So when I started, I got a copy of the Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors. That was not a- you know, that was just a, like a theory, a theory thing. I don't think we had- I don't think that existed. When I worked there, it was more, here are some articles. Like you're going to read the idea of a writing center and revisiting the idea of a writing center and you're going to read kind of these fundamental texts, but not- I want to see it. I want to see that handbook now. Yeah, I don't think we had something like that.

**P** Patrick O'Grady 1:10:04  
Yeah. So can you tell me maybe more about this wiki, then?

**S** Stephanie Sheffield 1:10:09  
I know we were trying to have- what did we have on it? We started one. And I think we had resources, we were trying to create like- it as a, as an external facing resource that we could create. Man, I can't remember what kind of things we were putting- I remember, I remember there was a session that I was helping run for people to teach people what the wiki was and

how not to break it. Like how not to accidentally break it, because we didn't have like, robust undo at the time. But I don't really remember what the goals were for it other than to have a way of kind of capturing all the different expertise that we seem to have. We had, you know, just like people who were doing different things, and having a way to, like create resources that we could then put out to, to the community if we needed to. Yeah, no, I don't I don't remember much more about it. Sorry. I wish I did.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:11:10

That's okay. Yeah.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:11:11

I hadn't thought about it until we were talking like I hadn't even remembered it.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:11:15

Yeah. So you mentioned that there were like some sort of central texts that people read as part of like a training process or the onboarding process, I suppose.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:11:25

There were a couple of them. And they're all in my office on campus, which I haven't- I've been to like three times in the past year and a half. But I should have looked at the picture- I took a picture of my bookshelves I should have looked it up. I know that the Bedford St. Martin's guide for Writing Center Tutors was one of them. And there was a white book with I believe blue lettering- The Allen and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring? That feels right. That feels right, I have- I still have the books, and they're on my shelf with all the other stuff that I accumulated. But, um, yeah, it was- I think there were these these books that were kind of like, here, you should read this. Like here, here's going to be- and we always had like a, like a grammar mechanics and syntax handbook, like a tabbed- wasn't the same one every year, but we had, like, you know, something that we could kind of become familiar with and then if we needed to look something up- everybody got one of those, or at least at some point, we got those. Um, yeah, but these were more like, I'm trying to remember it. Some of them were like, was like a mix of practical tips and somewhat foundational theory, some writing on writing centers, and it's kind of reference points that the people would have like Steven North and, and things like that. I don't really remember using it that much, honestly, I'm sure I read them. But it was more my learning what we were doing and figuring out what's going on was really more working with writers and observing people in the center and that sort of thing. I don't remember like having to use that information in a direct way.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:13:13

Interesting. Okay. Yeah. So I think we- so you already mentioned about sort of the general like funding question about how there were some tensions and difficulties around there. So I guess we can probably move on to this final set of questions. So now that like you've moved on

we can probably move on to this final set of questions. So now that like you, you've moved on, you've been away from the Center for quite some time. Is there any advice you'd provide to yourself? Now, if you could go back and tell yourself something?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:13:41

Um, I mean, on the whole, I'm happy about the experience. I think it was very valuable, and I got a lot of value out of it. I would say, you know, track your work hours a little bit better. Because I was on a three quarter time assistantship for a lot of that and just, you know, keep track, keep track and object a little bit more. I think, probably I- yeah, no, I um, yeah. No, I think that's probably about it. I think it was, it was a pretty positive experience. I mean, there are things that I wish we would have been more on top of. Like, I feel like we could have done better outreach to different communities in terms of being a safe space for marginalized groups. I think we could have been more explicitly that. Um, but that is looking back on it. And you know, my you know, from my perspective, as, at the time a 20 year old, you know, straight cisgendered woman- white woman, I was not as aware of that need as I should have been. So, you know, I wish going back, we- there were definitely opportunities. The Writing Center could have been a much more valuable place in that way. And I suspect is- is more of that now. But other than that, I think and the, the, you know, don't light yourself on fire to keep other people warm kind of advice, which I definitely did. And it is, it is not good, especially as a graduate student where mental health is already just a very thin thread. Yeah, no, I think- I think that would be all I would go for there. Yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:15:43

Yeah. I mean, yeah, it's, I find like, this is always a difficult question to answer, because a lot of this stuff, I would have rather figured out the hard way. You know, it did me a lot of good to figure out stuff the hard way. Right, I probably wouldn't want to go back and shortcut.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:16:01

Like, I'm happy where I landed, right. So I don't want to you know, it's the, you don't want to go back in time and change things and accidentally mess up the path. Right? But, but I feel like, I feel like they're, you know, given the resources we had, given the space and the contact with the different, you know, areas of the university. I feel like we could have, we could have done more in those in you know, in some ways, but that would probably be the only thing that I would think.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:16:33

So, I mean, you've shared so much like really awesome stuff already. Is there anything else maybe that you'd love to talk about?

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:16:40

I'm gonna go back and look at my notes. I'm gonna see if there's anything that we didn't cover.

Mmm hmm. Um, I think -okay, did we? Yeah, we talked about that, uh, let me see. I'm just I'm- I'm scanning. I'm scanning all of the bullets that I added to the- I don't think we talked about- I know, the outreach- I know we were involved with- we did the resource fair, the AOP resource fair every year. But we also were trying to help DeWitt High School, start a writing center at their high school, and I went out and met with- met with somebody there. And we met with a lot of students there and like, helped talk to them about that. And we- it was an attempt to try to kind of like, get a pipeline, almost from DeWitt, but also to help them do that. And we had faculty interest. I don't know if they- what came of that, but that was something that should be recorded. It should be- should be noted. Because it was, I don't know, it felt really good to have, like, there was a high school who like, and a high school teacher was like, I want my students doing this. At you know, in high school, I want them to understand like this, this approach is really valuable. And I want them to have this kind of broader understanding like, Yeah, man, that would be- I would have loved that if I'd had that in high school- would have been really helpful. Um, I think that's everything. That's everything I yeah.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:18:27

Well. I mean, thank you so much for your, I mean, first of all, for like, like recalling all of this stuff, but also for like your contribution.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:18:37

Thanks!

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:18:38

Like, you know, the Writing Center is like a great place because like people like you work there.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:18:43

That's very sweet.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:18:43

And made it and made it the place it is. So.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:18:46

We have no way of knowing that. It could have been much worse. [Laughter] It could have been- if I hadn't been there, it could have been much better. We have- we have no way of knowing.



P Patrick O'Grady 1:18:56  
That is true.

S Stephanie Sheffield 1:18:57  
I can tell you that one of my closest friends now who I met at the Writing Center when she first met me, she was scared of me. So I have a feeling that I might have inadvertently terrorized some of the consultants there. Who have you- have you already talked to? Have you talked to any-

P Patrick O'Grady 1:19:16  
We have a list.

S Stephanie Sheffield 1:19:17  
A lot of people?

P Patrick O'Grady 1:19:18  
Yes, so we, I don't know if we've spoken to a lot of people, but we've definitely got a pretty large list. Let me see.

S Stephanie Sheffield 1:19:31  
Can I check it for some names? Because I have a couple people that I thought would be pretty good sources for you of information, you're not likely to get other places.

P Patrick O'Grady 1:19:42  
Yeah, let me- I can pull up the list of people here that we're going to be- Yes. So I can, I'm not sure if I'm, I'm actually not the owner of the document even-

S Stephanie Sheffield 1:20:07  
Oh! You don't need to share it with me. That's okay.

P Patrick O'Grady 1:20:10  
Um, so we have about 45 people on this list that we're gonna get into. So, yeah,

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:20:21

I was gonna check, I was gonna check. Do you have Kathy Fleck on that list? Fleck F-L-E-C-K?

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:20:39

No, we don't.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:20:40

Okay. So Kathy was a grad student when I started and I think she was assistant director early on. She was there when I started, she's one of the only people that I can think of who wasn't in administration who was employed at the Writing Center when I started. So some of the earlier stuff, she would probably be a really good source for from a from a grad student perspective. I'm pretty sure she lives in Puerto Rico now, I just googled her name. And I think- I mean, this is, you know, this is her email address. I have not had contact with her in forever. She and I are not friends. But I have, you know, like she was- she was great. And I think she would be able to tell you some stuff. And also, let me see if I can find so that the, the undergrad who ran the the CEE WC Writing Center while he was there, his name was Chris Evans. Not that Chris Evans. But he- do you have him on your list?

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:21:48

Nope.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:21:49

Okay, let me see if I can find him. When I remembered his name, I googled him and he was on LinkedIn. He's I think, actually, you could probably- if you decide you want to talk to him, I think you could find him he is linked to the MSU Writing Center on LinkedIn. So you can probably find him that way. But he, like, created and sustained and worked at the engineering satellite. That was was- it was really popular, but it wasn't sustainable. He was- he was an engineering undergrad consultant. So talking to someone about how he was recruited and why he was there. That might be an interesting thing to add to this. Let me see. Oh, wait, I might have found him. Um, did I find him? I found him. Okay, hold on. I can send you- I can send you his LinkedIn profile. I don't have his email address. And the other people that like- that I can put you in contact with if you're interested are the the two people that I work with currently. And also Mike McCloud. Is Mike McCloud on your list?

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:23:09

Let me check here real quick. No, we don't have Mike McCloud either.



S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:23:19

Okay, what about, can I check a couple other names then I'll just send you all their contact information. Pavlov, Amy Pavlov, it's either going to be PAVLOV or PAWLOW depending on how old the information is.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:23:36

No.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:23:38

And then Robin. First name is Robin. Her surname now is Fowler at the time- it could have been Roots or Pulford. But okay, I'm going to give you- I'm going to get their info you know, if you decide you want different, different perspectives, I know. So all of them were Graduate Writing consultants at different points. I believe Robin was also an undergraduate writing consultant for like her last year of her, of her undergrad. That Roots are there is Robin Fowler, and that's her name and then Amy Pavlov was a Graduate Writing consultant for a few years. And they would have different perspectives for sure on that, and then Mike McLeod I know was brought in, was recruited and brought in specifically because he had coding experience- he was brought in to help get the Writing Center online, basically. So he would probably have an interesting perspective on that.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:25:03

Yeah.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:25:04

These last three people are people I'm still friends with, so I have- I have told all of them that I was doing this and asked them if they would be okay with my passing along their contact information. So all of- none of them are going to be surprised. Kathy Fleck, and Chris Evans will not remember me- will probably be shocked, but I'm sure would have useful information.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:25:31

Thank you so much.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:25:32

No problem.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:25:33



Yeah. Incredible. Yeah. None of them are on the list. So awesome. Okay, awesome. I think we can wrap up. So I mean, thank you so much for coming in and sharing today.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:25:47

It was my pleasure!

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:25:48

It's- yeah, it was, I mean, so revelatory for how, how the Center came to be so-

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:25:54

Oh awesome!

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:25:55

Yeah.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:25:56

Well, thank you. I really enjoyed it. It was nice to think back on on some of that.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:25:59

Yeah. Yeah. So I think the next steps will be- I've got to put the transcripts and stuff through this program called Otter AI. I'm not really sure how it works- what it does. [Laughter] I know it's gonna- and then I have to go through and sort of like, edit the transcript and whatever, you know, and then I'll send that to you with the IRB consent form. And then whatever, if there's stuff that you don't want in there, if there's stuff that you think afterwards that you'd like to have added in. That's, that's completely within your- within your right to do so.

S

Stephanie Sheffield 1:26:31

Okay. All right. That sounds great.

P

Patrick O'Grady 1:26:32

So I'll be in touch and thank you again so much.



Stephanie Sheffield 1:26:35

It was my pleasure. All right. Bye.



Patrick O'Grady 1:26:37

Bye.