

EDUCATIONAL COMORBIDITY: HOW HEALTH CRISES LIKE THE COVID-19  
PANDEMIC AFFECT WRITING CENTERS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my committee and to my dear friends Aaron, Kate, Alyssa, and Zach. I wouldn't have come this far without any of you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my friends, my found family members, and my committee that made this research possible as well as being a constant source of inspiration and learning. Thank you.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

For more than a year, educators and those who navigate educational spaces have been at the mercy of a pandemic that has altered the pedagogical landscape of college campuses and the services that they offer. Classes and services utilized by faculty and students were forced to go from in-person to almost completely online for a full year before universities decided to hold face-to-face courses again. During the pandemic, plexiglass windows, sanitizer dispensers, and face masks became regular fixtures in this environment. While I have worked as a writing consultant, I have witnessed significant changes in both this academic environment and the individuals that occupy it as a result of the pandemic and the changes made in response to it.

My interest in this topic is both academic and personal. The current pandemic is an event that has taken nearly everyone by surprise. This is especially true within institutional settings like schools. Part of the reason for this is that on average, a pandemic only occurs once or so in a century. This gap in time between pandemics illustrates that people react in ways that are different as well as the same. The body of knowledge regarding pandemics in our time is small, and conducting research on the current pandemic can, hopefully, produce a body of research that can aid those who have to endure a pandemic after us. Students, teachers, and all others involved in the education system, have seen a drastic change in how education is administered. From the switch to all online instruction to hybrid instruction to complete in person courses, the landscape of the school systems have been forced to change many times over the past two years due to risk of infection. Clearly, school systems of all levels were not even remotely prepared for the pandemic, and the constant changes to how courses are instructed as well as how



students navigate academic spaces during a health crisis illustrate the need for research and preparation for the future. While it may not be possible to perfectly prepare for another pandemic, conducting meaningful research on how students experience educational spaces like classrooms and writing centers are very likely to prepare students and educators who come after us.

Additionally, many scholars are only able to study pandemics after they have occurred. By studying the pandemic while it takes place, valuable data that may only be available during the event is obtainable. Once an event occurs, especially one that takes place over a long period of time, those who experience the event are likely to have different reactions (or at least observable ones) than they are when reflecting upon the event in hindsight. The saying goes that hindsight is 20/20, but what gets lost during the time between an individual's reflection and how they thought and felt during the event? While individuals reflect upon events, emotions and thoughts that they had during the event can change or be forgotten. Investigating how people feel during an event rather than how they *remember* feeling during an event can be two different--things. It is worthwhile to conduct research during the current pandemic because what could be a more effective primary source than narratives and research created during a health crisis while it happens? Also, those who work in academic spaces are somehow both praised as heroes as well as being devalued and put at risk.

Throughout the pandemic, school systems that were already infected with a myriad of problems displayed an additional symptom: negative treatment of teachers and staff. Teachers and student workers are thanked for their service while also being significantly underpaid and placed in situations that are hazardous to their health. This is

especially true of writing center staff, another infected appendage that I will examine and illuminate further in the autoethnography chapter. While treatment of educators and student workers was already a contentious pre-pandemic topic, the issue has been worsened to the point that there is a teacher shortage and writing center staff are paid very little while having to work for an institution that does not provide easy access to healthcare (health insurance is offered to enrolled students, though at exorbitant rates).

Part of my interest in the pandemic is also very personal. My closest friends were put into dire situations once the pandemic began. A very good friend of mine had been waiting for surgery to have a life-threatening lesion in his brain removed and had to delay the surgery for months. Once he was able to receive the operation, all precautions had to be taken to keep him from becoming infected. Other friends experienced the loss of family members due to Covid-19. In the first year of the pandemic, the total number of people my friends had lost as a whole was 12. Bearing witness to the suffering of close friends as well as the precautions some of them had to take due to health conditions created a strange fascination within me regarding the plague. What really perplexed me, however, was how some were completely disregarding safety measures and putting others at risk. Another event that acted as a catalyst for my research were the people that I had met while working at the writing center. Many of us were uncomfortable with being back in person. At this point, my mind had been focused on studying the pandemic from an academic standpoint, but now I had another layer - I wanted to do something that protected the new friends that I had made. I wanted to address issues with student workers in this space, especially given that the things we had been told, compared with the reality of the pandemic, were contradictory and there was a very real sense that they

were putting us all in harm's way. In short, I wanted to study how the pandemic affected the space, but I also wanted to do it for them, for individuals that are called upon to teach or work in academia that are arbitrarily praised one moment and abused the next. With some illnesses, other underlying health problems surface. During a time of adversity brought about by a virus, the writing center and academia as a whole had become infected, and there were comorbidities that worsened because of it.

### **Literature Review**

It is, admittedly, difficult to find specific information pertaining to how a global pandemic affects a writing center, as few studies on this topic have yet to be conducted. There is, however, a wealth of scholarship on the medical and behavioral aspects of the pandemic as well as on the work of writing centers themselves, including the spatial design of writing centers and the working relationships among writing consultants and student writers.

#### ***Writing Centers Amidst a Pandemic***

This area of research is very new, and there are few articles written on the subject. In their article “Navigating and Adapting Writing Centers Through a Pandemic: Justifying Our Work in New Contexts,” Russell Mayo et al. conducted a study that examined the ways that writing centers adapted during the pandemic. The writing center directors that participated in this research had just come into their positions when the pandemic had just begun, and in this article they explore the changes brought about by the pandemic as well as how the use of technology has affected their writing centers and consultants. Another recently published article regarding writing consultants was written by Jessica Clements et al. and concerns the well-being of consultants during the

pandemic. While Mayo et al. focus on the adaptations made by writing centers, Clements et al. research the experiences of writing consultants. The video essay titled “When Support Systems Need Support: Constructing Paths to Consultant Wellness During Covid-19”, Clements et al. focus on the well-being of the consultants in the face of the health crisis and indicate that there needs to be more focus on the experience of writing consultants during the pandemic. Clements et al. also expose several issues, such as adapting to new technologies and the emotional labor that accompanies its use.

Working from home has been one of the largest shifts since the pandemic began. Alex Claman et al. explore this topic in their article “Sheltering in Place, Working in Space: Reflections on an Online Writing Center at Home” by stating that “the notion that they are taking appointments from the comfort of their own home ignores the way that bringing the many spheres of life into their lodgings disrupts the constancy that they wish for when occupying their home.” This move to utilize Zoom during the pandemic has affected the ways that we perceive the spaces of home, work, and school: they all become compressed into the same space. Claman et al. also explore the effect on the wellbeing of the consultants, noting that “any discussion of solitude and openness is now (doubly) grimly ironic in light of the ongoing mental and physical effects of prolonged separation and isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic” (Claman et al.).

Writing centers also conduct writing programs on campus. These activities are vital to some students, and some colleges run programs that cater specifically to graduate students. In the study “Food for Thought: A Graduate Writing Program”, Adrian R. Salgado and Xuan Jiang address the issues with such writing programs, namely the isolation that can come with graduate school and how this affects retention rates, and

implement a method to improve the success rates of these programs (Salgado and Jiang). This study was conducted in the midst of the current pandemic, resulting in the second part of this study being completely moved to an online format. Issues of the isolating nature of graduate course work are explored, and the use of online formats caused by the pandemic resulted in lower retention rates for the program (Salgado and Jiang). The isolation and emotional impact of graduate school is already detrimental in the absence of a health crisis. Additionally, writing centers are spaces for collaborative learning and are sometimes likened to clinical areas like doctor's offices and hospitals. In this sense, student writers visit writing centers in the hopes of having their paper diagnosed and then treated while working collaboratively with writing consultants. Kenneth Bruffee touches on the history of collaborative pedagogies in his article "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" as having their roots trace back to a study conducted by M.L.J. Abercrombie in which she studied collaboration among medical students for a decade (636). Though many attempt to claim that writing centers should not be like medical spaces, the pandemic has further strengthened the notion that collaborative spaces like writing centers are very much like medical spaces.

Ultimately, a successful program was created in which the writing consultants were able to meet with the graduate students virtually and give them the support they needed. The added difficulty with a pandemic, however, is present in this study, and adds an additional layer of difficulty for graduate students who need more support.

### ***Writing Centers as Welcoming Places***

Studies conducted in writing centers tend to focus on everything from perceptions of building location to problems stemming from logistical issues such as budgeting.

Some of these studies use an approach that reads the spaces of writing centers as a “text” and employ techniques reminiscent of postmodern geographies to examine people and objects in writing centers. Jackie-Grutsch McKinney’s piece “Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces” undertakes the task of examining how writing centers are structured and furnished discusses how the people that navigate these areas are affected. McKinney observes that writing centers are almost ubiquitously designed as comforting environments that are structured in order to put writers at ease. This is worth noting, as the pandemic has changed many of these spaces by implementing distancing, plexiglass, and other safety precautions that warp this impression of a comforting environment into one in which harm may be done to one’s health. McKinney’s investigation of how these spaces affect the perceptions and behaviors of writers and consultants in writing centers is very similar to what I intend to do with my research on the pandemic’s alteration of educational space and experiences in that space.

Jacob Craig makes similar observations, though his article focuses more on items and study spaces rather than writing centers that students associate with the writing process. Craig argues in his article “Affective Materialities” that items such as notebooks and desks as well as spaces that the writer organizes or prefers to study in affect a writer’s growth. The observations Craig makes can be attributed to the study of pandemic spaces, as “new” normal fixtures in writing environments are masks and sanitizer, which may become preferred materials in writing studies when around other people. Fecho et al., in a similar fashion to Craig, argue that large issues pertaining to such growth happen within the learning environment on a day-to-day basis. The environment and texts used

with the K-12 students in this study mirror the space of the writing center. The difference, however, is that rather than the literal texts that the students study and collaborate on being the factor for change, the “text” in the writing center is the space itself as well as the people within it. This perception of writing studies applies well to this study, as the relationship between consultant and writer is a transactional experience akin to that of a teacher and student.

Christine Hamel-Brown et al. also study writing center spaces in their article “Activist Mapping: (Re)framing Narratives About Writing Center Space” in which they explore harmful narratives and language centered around writing center space using postmodern mapping to illustrate that consultants can be a marginalized group. Hamel-Brown et al. also argue that referring to writing centers as offering a “service” places the consultant in a position of subservience (despite it being called peer-to-peer tutoring), which is relatable as we have been literally told by our director and co-directors that we don’t have a choice and must serve the students. Hamel-Brown et al. detail the changes made to their writing center when budget constraints forced them to relocate to another space on campus, causing their staff to question their identity as consultants. As consultants work during the pandemic, they are at constant risk of Covid-19 infection or possibly infecting others. Additionally, Hamel-Brown et al. make references to Nathalie Singh Corcoran and Amir Emika, who have also contributed to this particular area of writing center studies in a special issue of the journal *Kairos*. Singh-Corcoran and Emika’s article, “Inhabiting the Writing Center: A Critical Review,” analyzes writing center spaces and details issues associated with conceptualizing coursework for online formats. The digital space of the writing center is very new, and pandemic-related issues

have undoubtedly had some influence on Zoom appointments that warrant study.

### ***Pandemic Studies***

While writing centers have continued to operate in a variety of capacities during the pandemic, the event that caused such a shift is multifaceted. Research from different areas concerning the Covid-19 pandemic aid in this research significantly. In “Rhetorics and Viruses”, Baker et al. argue that the pandemic has been characterized by three separate but overlapping types of viral infections: physical, digital, and symbolic viruses. Baker et al. state that “pandemic politics have impacted the human body beyond the physical illness, coming to infect our larger, societal body as we turn to technology to work through the interruptions created by the pandemic” (210). The technology in question for this study is the use of Zoom in the writing center.

The area of digital infections is heavily connected to what we have had to deal with in the first full year of the pandemic as all sessions were moved to an online format. Were it not for Covid-19, the shift to Zoom appointments would not have occurred, and each of these appointments is a reminder of the threat of infection and the isolation that accompanies it. Additionally, learning via online instruction has been accompanied by its own sets of issues, which are explored in James Louis-Jean and Kenny Cenat’s article “Beyond the Face-to-Face Learning: A Contextual Analysis”. Though educators have been able to increase their skills in online instruction, it has been widely viewed as inferior to face-to-face instruction until recently. This sudden surge in usage of technology is thanks to the pandemic, which has turned Zoom and other conferencing programs into “the workhorses of the mass e-learning movement amidst the COVID-19 pandemic” (Louis-Jean and Cenat, 1-2). This is relatable as writers are given the



opportunity to conduct appointments over Zoom, which is now part of the new normal but wasn't offered pre-pandemic.

In line with the masking as a new part of the environment, Betsch et al. examined how mask wearing, both voluntary and involuntary, was perceived by the public. Betsch et al. point out in their article “Social and Behavioral Consequences of Mask Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic” that when a mask mandate is in effect, rates of infection are lowered and mask wearing is perceived by most individuals as an act of care and concern for others. Mask wearing has become a somewhat divisive topic, and the perceptions associated with those who choose to mask (as well as those who don't) factor into interactions at the writing center. Another change to the writing center caused by the pandemic is the installation of plexiglass. These structures have been perceived by students as being largely ineffective and only serve as a performance to demonstrate that the university is responding to the pandemic. This aligns with Derek Thompson's news article titled “Hygiene Theater Is a Huge Waste of Time” published online in *The Atlantic*. Thompson compares the rituals and implementation of sanitation practices to the type of security theater that was evident after the 9/11 attacks, describing measures like constant sanitizing of surfaces as being performative rather than being effective (Thompson).

### **Research Question**

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected writing centers and the individuals that work in these spaces?

#### ***Follow up questions:***

How has the pandemic altered the work and relationships among writing

consultants and student writers in the writing center?

What has been the emotional experience of working in a writing center during the pandemic, especially in terms of managing risks? How has this affected the work of writing consultants?

How has the physical space of the writing center changed during the pandemic, and how has this affected the work of writing consultants?

Has the pandemic exposed or exacerbated any systemic issues in the writing center?

### **Project Purpose and Methodology**

Studying how the pandemic affects educational space in writing centers while the pandemic itself is still ongoing is the perfect opportunity to gain a real-time understanding of how a health crisis changes educational landscapes and those within it. I have investigated these topics through the use of interviews and artifact analysis (another research practice from autoethnography) in an IRB-approved study. Conducting this study also aids people in the future when another pandemic occurs.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom with two student writers. This, when combined with my account of my experience as a writing consultant, provides for a comprehensive examination of experiences. The purpose of interviewing two student writers and detailing my experiences is to get an equal view of the writing center environment from the perspectives of both writing consultants and student writer perspectives. The experiences of the consultant were expected to be significantly different from that of the writers they assist, and different problems and perceptions were predicted to be exposed regarding experiences in a writing center during the current

pandemic. This grants a comprehensive experience as to how the changes in a pandemic-era writing center are experienced by the two groups that collaborate within this space. I have analyzed these interviews for recurring themes such as student writer and writing consultant well-being, the impact of spatial changes on writing consultants and student writers, inequities worsened by the pandemic, and emotional labor. All interviews were conducted over Zoom in order to eliminate the potential risk of Covid-19 infection. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed before undergoing a coding process.

Another tool I have utilized is artifact analysis, a research technique used in autoethnography. Artifact analysis involves the examination of an item to extract personal meaning and experience associated with it. Questions to explore regarding such objects include “how do I perceive this?”, “is there a theme or metaphor here that has significance?”, and “what exactly does this item make me feel and think?”. Being that a portion of this research is conducted from my own perspective, it is vital to analyze artifacts such as plexiglass windows, my own masks, signs posted in stores, or even bottles/dispensers of sanitizer. These items are tied to the current health crisis and have been altered in ways similar to the space of grocery stores. Ultimately, plexiglass was the most prominent artifact that I was able to analyze.

This thesis is made up of four chapters. The introduction details the need for this research, provides a literature review, and explains the methodologies employed. Chapter 2, titled “A Bifurcated Biopsy - Interviews with Student Writers”, contains my interviews and analysis of those interviews with individuals who have visited the writing center during the pandemic: an undergraduate who visited in person, and a graduate student who attended an online appointment via Zoom. Chapter 3 is an autoethnography that details

my own personal experiences as a writing consultant during the pandemic titled “My Writing Center Has a Comorbidity”. My autoethnography explores my experiences through the use of artifact analysis and touches on issues that I witnessed as a writing consultant. Finally, chapter 4 is a conclusion titled “A Diagnosis and Prescription for the Future” in which I make my assessment of the symptoms and conditions investigated and call for what is sorely needed.

The university writing center at Texas State employs roughly 20 or so students as writing consultants per semester and is run by one main director and two assistant directors. Writing consultants consist of graduate and undergraduate students majoring in different subjects who assist with any document the writer may be currently working on. This includes essays, statements of purpose, short stories, research papers, grant applications, and recreational writing. In addition to this, two writing consultants are typically graduate assistants. The writing center itself has two locations: one located on campus in San Marcos, Texas at Texas State University itself, and a second one at Texas States’ Round Rock Campus located in Round Rock, Texas. Students, faculty, and staff are able to attend sessions through walk-ins and appointments. All writers attending appointments are offered the option to attend the appointment online via Zoom. Texas State University is a large state institution with roughly 40,000 students and is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution with 40% of students identifying as Hispanic and the majority of students identifying as non-white (Texas State University Office of Institutional Research).

## **II. A BIFURCATED BIOPSY - INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENT WRITERS**

When setting out to conduct my research on the pandemic, I had to determine which methodologies would work well. Due to my experience with autoethnography and portraiture, two research methods that allow for self-reflection and narratives, I decided to conduct interviews. By seeking out individuals who had experienced academic spaces during the pandemic, my goal was to acquire data in the form of points of view of student writers who had attended appointments at the writing center. Interviews are a method of inquiry that pair very well with autoethnography, the method used in the next chapter, being that they are effective at providing insight into how individuals have experienced events and often leads into other areas of research that are related to the original subject. These interviews also offer balance as they focus on the student writer's experience in contrast with my writing consultant-centered autoethnography.

Interviews seemed like the best option for the subject that I aimed to cover. Ideally, listening to what students thought of the changes made to places on campus like the writing center would provide different perspectives. While they may have differing points of view on these spaces and the protective measures implemented for various reasons, I wanted to see if there were any similarities or meaningful differences in their experiences. The participants who took part in these interviews include one undergraduate student who visited the writing center in person and one graduate student who attended their appointment online. For purposes of anonymity, the names of interview participants are changed and any personally identifying information has been removed. The chapter is structured by first describing my experience conducting the interviews and my thoughts during the interviews. While reviewing the interview

transcripts and recomposing key moments in the interviews, I took note of themes that emerged relevant to the writing center and the pandemic. These themes are detailed in my analysis.

I felt that getting the stories of individuals who have been enrolled during the pandemic was the most effective way to investigate how academic spaces, and writing centers in particular, were affected during the pandemic. Of the spaces on campus that had undergone changes to accommodate for the risk of infection, the university writing center had changed drastically from the space that it was pre-pandemic. I sought out students who had visited the writing center in person or attended a session through Zoom during the pandemic. Being that there have been many changes in accordance with mask mandates, the creation of Covid-19 vaccines, and different modes of instruction, the students who were interviewed experienced the space in ways that were similar in some respects but differed in others. Themes that became apparent through these interviews include issues with technology, lack of human connection, usefulness of the help provided by the writing center, the universities response to the pandemic, racism, poor students, generations of students who never experienced a college classroom outside of a pandemic, and a sense of the writing center not fulfilling its potential.

I structured the interviews in such a way that they could be conducted via Zoom and made sure to ask questions that were focused on their experiences in academic spaces, especially the writing center, during the pandemic. Questions like “do you think that masking affected your appointments” or “how do you feel about the universities response to the pandemic” were things that I wanted to ask to understand how other students felt. Up to the point of the interview, I had heard many different opinions on

how the university's response had been received. After the interviews were completed over Zoom, I downloaded transcripts from both meetings. From there, I analyzed the transcripts multiple times using the coding methods I learned from the portraiture methodology and created a list of recurring themes as well as prominent issues that were revealed. In addition to this, I reviewed notes that I had taken during the interviews themselves. Upon completing the coding process, I synthesized my findings and reflected upon what I had learned from the participants. Once this was completed, I decided to structure this chapter by describing the interviews and key points in the conversation and following up each interview with a section detailing my thoughts and experiences. Finally, I end this chapter by comparing both interviews and providing a reflection on what they tell us about writing centers during a pandemic.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Interview with Beth**

The first student that I interviewed was Beth, a senior majoring in anthropology. Beth had visited the writing center in person more than once during the fall semester of 2021 and explained her experience as an undergraduate student on campus and in the writing center during the pandemic. After reaching out to her via email, she responded almost immediately and we set a time to conduct a Zoom interview.

I set up my Chromebook and logged into my Zoom account for Texas State before checking the time. I made sure to send the Zoom link and get the session set up to record. During my time at the writing center, Beth had selected me as a writing consultant for help with her papers, and she was always very punctual. When she appeared right on time in the Zoom room, it seemed to be very in character for her. I

greeted her and explained the project in detail before we began the interview.

I was eager to learn about how students were affected by the space within the writing center itself, and the line of interview questions that I asked Beth revealed several things. The first point of significance was the mode that the appointments were carried out in, which are Zoom and in-person. How these appointments were conducted factored greatly into how the writing center was perceived, and the changes to the environment also played a large part in the appointments. Beth had attended her appointments at the writing center in person, whereas the other student I interviewed, Don, had attended only on Zoom. Another important observation is that Beth had not attended the writing center before the pandemic had started.

### ***The Pandemic and Environmental Changes to Writing Center Space***

I began my questions in earnest and started by asking how Beth felt about the university's response to the pandemic before narrowing my questions down to the space of the writing center itself. "I think they've handled things as well as they can in my opinion, but yeah I'm indifferent," Beth said. We then moved on to questions regarding the writing center and safety measures like masking. "I know that you've been in the writing center. You've seen the different things that are in there, like the plexiglass and the spaced-out tables. How do you feel about these fixtures in the writing center? Like the plexiglass and all the other stuff in there?" Beth responded by explaining that there were some measures that seemed to be effective and others that struck her as more of an attempt by the university to show the students and staff that they were taking action. "I feel like there's this like, a just, an extra like reassurance that they're doing something. For me, masking was the biggest thing that I was like okay, that's actually doing



something. The plexiglass and stuff I'm kind of indifferent to," Beth said. I asked her to explain what she had meant in her statement about these measures. Beth explained that she works at a store in her hometown over the breaks between semesters and that they had installed plexiglass. "I feel like it doesn't really do anything because people can, like, lean around it, to talk to you". This is incredibly similar to the way many interactions with student writers at the writing center occur, as many of the students who check in at the front desk simply lean around the plexiglass to talk to the staff. It was from here that we finally got onto the topic of masking.

"So how do you feel about the consultants wearing the masks?" Beth responded nearly immediately with enthusiasm. "Oh yeah, I like that! I feel like oh, um, it's helpful, especially for like people that are you know nervous, or they have immuno, you know, are compromised," she said. "I feel like that's a very reassuring thing. I do like the mask. I still wear mine on campus even though I'm, like, not everybody does." In addition to the protective measures like masking and plexiglass, we also discussed the layout of the writing center itself. When Beth had attended her Zoom appointment, the tables were spaced apart in order to social distance effectively. While I initially thought that the large benefit would be reduced risk of infection, Beth explained that she loved the spacing for another reason.

I'm actually a very big fan of the social distancing tables! It feels like it makes the room not feel super crowded, and it also makes it feel like not everybody can overhear a conversation. Because, when you're in the writing center and you're talking about your writing, you honestly don't really want everyone to hear what you're doing wrong and you're writing, so I liked the spaced-out tables for that reason.

This was something that I had not expected to hear. The topic shifted to face-to-face appointments. Many of the appointments that I had conducted at the writing center

had been in-person, but I had overwhelmingly more experience using Zoom for appointments, as we spent a full year (a fall, spring, and both summer sessions) using only Zoom.

“How do you feel about the appointments being face-to-face?” I asked. Beth answered immediately, but pensively. “Oh, I like that. I feel like I do better talking about like writing and stuff face-to-face,” Beth said. “Zoom I’m iffy on, and I feel like it would have been a little harder to, like, share the screen, like, know exactly what section you’re talking about and everything, so I like the face-to-face meetings.” This was a sentiment that I predicted most writing students would express and would appear in my interview with my other research participant. Once the writing center had been reopened for in-person consulting, we had many students express a fondness for face-to-face consulting. I kept following this line of questioning. “Can you tell me more about that? I know that you had said that you mask whenever you’re on campus, if possible. Was that correct?” I asked. “Yes.” I sensed that I may have been repeating myself a little bit and, though I couldn’t see Beth, her response sounded a little more like she was about to say something new. I decided to gently ask once more.

“Do you want to talk a little more about that? Can you tell me more about how you feel about masking in general?” I asked. Beth let out a small laugh before answering. “Honestly it’s kind of a dumb reason that I like wearing my mask on campus. It’s so I don’t have to put on makeup in the morning,” she said. We shared a laugh before she continued. “But I also do it, it’s like you know, a covid reason, like just to keep myself from getting sick, because I do notice when I do wear a mask I don’t get like the flu, I don’t get my yearly cold or anything, so I do like that. Those are my two.” I later came to

find out after this interview that flu cases were down dramatically during the pandemic. Many people credit masking in addition to other protective measures for the near halt in circulation of these illnesses. “How do you feel when you’re asked to mask?” I asked. Again, Beth answered quickly, without hesitation. “Oh, I just do it. I’m not very controversial in that way. I’m like, okay sorry, and I put it on.” I moved then to asking questions about the writing center and safety.

“Did you feel safe during your time in the university writing center?” I asked. I had been building up to this question. I hoped to learn more about how student writers felt about the space itself. “Yeah, I did,” Beth replied. *Well, right to the point then*, I thought to myself. I probed further. “What were your sessions like? How did you feel about those?” Beth takes a moment before responding.

Um, they were very helpful. Once again, like I came in for a specific class where the professor, his TA, were grading a little intensely to say the least, and it was very helpful to know and have reassurance that my writing was not bad. That it was most likely the TA and I really liked getting the perspective of someone else who has writing experience, because my roommate’s smart, but not really cutting it when they were proofreading.

I was a little taken aback but delighted at the same time. While I had been looking for pandemic specific information, I ended up acquiring validation in my teaching methods when it came to writing (Beth had expressed doubt and anxiety about her abilities during both of our appointments, which is a common issue with many student writers). Additionally, Beth’s bolstered confidence and satisfaction with the appointments were the opposite of what was felt by the graduate student I interviewed. Reflecting upon this, some of it is likely due to differences in academic disciplines.

## *Covid and Zoom*

“Do you think that the Covid restrictions or any of the safety measures affected the appointment in any way? Do they... how did that, how did they affect you?” I asked. Beth’s answer revealed more than I had bargained for, but not regarding the virus. Instead, Zoom became the topic. “I don’t really... I’m um... If it were on Zoom, it would have been a little different, but I also, I don’t hate Zoom meetings, because they are there, but no, I don’t think any of the restrictions really hindered the meetings,” she said. I finished jotting notes as I processed Beth’s words. “Okay, um... do you think that the safety precautions like distancing and ah... mask wearing affect your appointments in any way?” I caught myself, realizing I had accidentally asked the same question twice before realizing that I thought there was something buried in this line of questions, though I can’t quite place what it is. “What was it that you had said about that real quick?” I ask. Beth took a moment before answering, and I felt bad for repeating a question. “I said I didn’t think the restrictions and, like the social distancing and masking didn’t really hinder the appointments at all,” she said. At this point I had run out of questions, and I felt that I had a lot to process, especially considering that I would need to compare this to whatever else I might find. It then dawned on me that there was indeed something that caught my attention, the buried subject from earlier: Zoom appointments.

I asked Beth, “Now, was there anything else about the writing center that you would like to sort of talk about regarding the covid restrictions or safety measures or how it might have affected your experience? I know that one thing that you had mentioned was that Zoom is more difficult than the in-person appointments.” She replied,

I, it’s... I think it like, depends from person to person, but for me personally, Zoom, when you haven’t met like the consultants already, Zoom is kind of hard to

like, be very, like, personable I guess and just like really connect. I find Zoom, just Zoom meetings, always a little awkward, especially when you don't know the people you're meeting with. So, I would have preferred the in-person, for that reason, but I think it really depends on the person because I know like, one of my roommates does everything on Zoom and she loves Zoom, so I think it varies.

I felt both relief and gratitude for Beth's explanation. As a mode of instruction as well as course participation, I had thought that Zoom may be a worthwhile area of inquiry for my examination of the writing center as well as for other areas of academia that had been forced to move to online instruction due to the pandemic. While my main area of focus had been the physical space of the writing center, it is clear that the digital space and the modalities of interaction like Zoom are just as relevant. I also had new thoughts on Zoom to grapple with. There was a human or emotional element that Zoom appointments seemed to lack. These experiences may also be different if the student writer attended in person and already had established a relationship with one writing consultant before switching to Zoom and switching to writing consultants they are not familiar with. Finally, I asked Beth if she had any further thoughts on the writing center itself, the appointments, the pandemic, and how she felt in the academic spaces she had to navigate. "I like the writing center space, I feel like it's very inviting, and once again, I didn't really think any other, like... the plexiglass or the masking or the social distancing really affected it," she said. "I will say I hadn't seen it before all that stuff, but I think it was nice. I liked it. I liked my appointments as well. I got a lot of helpful insight into my writing, so that was very nice."

With my line of questions for Beth completed, we ended the interview shortly after that. Much of what I had expected to hear surfaced during the interview, but more areas were beginning to branch out from the list of questions I had created. Zoom was a

much larger component of this topic than I had foreseen in undertaking this research. What more could I learn about it? I had already researched what other scholars had written regarding digital space during the pandemic, but was there more here, right in front of me? It had already been postulated by Louis-Jean and Cenat that forms of e-learning may not be ideal being that “face-to-face teaching interaction and feedback is not fully reflected in remote or e-learning” (3). At the time of this writing, we are in the third year of the pandemic, meaning that when we discuss college campuses during the health crisis, there are third-year students that have never known a pandemic-free college experience. The entirety of their view of post-secondary school systems is incredibly different from what older students like myself experienced in the time before the pandemic. How is this going to affect these students going forward? What sort of psychological impact will this all have in the long term? My examination yielded more questions, more issues, more comorbidities than avenues for a treatment or cure. My next interview served to expand my questions as well as reveal other symptoms and maladies.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Interview with Don**

The second student writer I interviewed differed from my first in several ways. I wondered what new things I would hear as I set up my laptop on my new standing-desk, adjusting it to the perfect height. I double checked my emails to be sure that I had sent Don the Zoom invitation. After waiting for a brief moment, the chime indicating someone had joined the session went off and Don and I exchanged hellos and chatted briefly before we began the interview.

Don, like myself, is a graduate student in the master’s in rhetoric and composition

program and is in his second semester in the program. He had visited the writing center as an undergraduate just as the pandemic had started and was eager to share his experiences. As soon as the proper measures were taken and introductions were done, I began my questions.

“Did you visit the writing center very often while doing your undergrad or even now?” I asked. Don answered quickly, “I would say infrequently. It was recommended we use it for every paper in one of my classes, so I used it approximately... I’d have to look up the emails, but three to five times during the Fall and, possibly, I may have scheduled in the Spring, but I’d have to look that up.” I move to the narrower question. “So when you, you said that the last time you visited was when you were a senior right? That was during the pandemic.” Another quick answer. “Correct. I finished my bachelor’s degree Spring of 2021”.

“So did you go to the writing center in person or did you... were they doing Zoom at the time?” I ask. Don nodded as he answered, “At that time, Zoom was the only option. Most of the university was distanced. There were still on campus classes, but it was at a time when masks were still required anyways.” I chimed in, trying to get context for the time. “Ah, so this was like early on, when all this stuff was happening.” Don continued. “Fall of 2020 and Spring of 2021. It was all online because they had only offered it online, they had yet to start doing anything in person there, and because all my classes were online in the Spring, every professor essentially had their class online in the Spring,” he said. “All classes were strictly online in 2021, so it was not really on campus anyway, and I would have opted for Zoom, even if they did have something in person. It wasn’t really logical for me.” This made sense. Why drive to campus if most of the

classes weren't even being conducted in person? I decided to dig a little deeper.

### *Zoom and Writing Center Space*

I asked him, "Would you prefer the Zoom option just out of safety or... can you tell me a little bit about that?" Don surprised me again with his answer:

Actually, having experienced it multiple times, I'd prefer not to do the Zoom option again. Unfortunately, just the way it worked... just the nature of... I guess I don't know if it's the nature of Zoom or the lack of explanation before. Showing up to Zoom it just wasn't really clear. Like, are you going straight to your consultant person or what? And then I got stuck in waiting rooms without a lot of explanation and it just sort of felt cold and clinical. By the time I got to the person helping me with my paper, I was sort of bounced around a bunch at this point. So I mean I feel like, I assume they were doing the best they could and Zoom is the... maybe they were, but Zoom is the university's official thing, and so maybe there wasn't a better way to do it. It was awkward and frustrating.

I immediately realized that Don's experiences with Zoom were similar to Beth's - cold sterility and a lack of human connection was clearly a recurring issue among student writers. Don took a moment to collect his thoughts before continuing and further explained his frustrations and thoughts. "I don't know if this would have been the case in person or not, because, honestly, I was transferred to Texas State with like 60 or 66 hours, but as a junior I never used the writing center," he said. "As an ACC Austin Community College student I used the writing center a lot. That was in person, and it was usually an adjunct faculty member, or someone with graduate hours. I actually one semester had my professor. He was the person who was the assistant in the writing center. So they were very well qualified." I could already tell where Don was going with his thoughts and reasoning. Don continued, "They were people, instructors, who had taught class and were capable of really helping you with a paper," he said. "In that time we didn't schedule it, so it's just sort of like he sat down and then he... you know he read like, the four or five pages," Don continued. "I waited quietly and then we started



working through it. As we went through it, he would ask questions about requirements, or to address things, MLA, APA, or the prompt.”

Don then spoke about the time constraints of Zoom. “As someone, as an actual writing instructor professionally it was just very thorough,” he said. “In my experience, I don’t know if it was the nature of Zoom, but I was bringing these five- to 10-page papers and although I tried to request our sessions, most of the time I could only get a 30-minute session.” Don paused for a moment before detailing the math for the appointment. “If you do the math, the average person can really read 200 words a minute. I’ve got like a 2500-word paper, and you can read 200 words a minute, theoretically we’re gonna sink 13 minutes of my 30 minutes.” I had heard similar concerns from student writers during my time as a writing consultant, and this was something they tended to express often. “I was like okay, I can wait for you to read, that’s fair. I could understand not wanting to pre-read papers, because what if somebody cancels and you’ve read a paper for nothing. I got that, but then it just sort of felt like, and I really like this part,” Don said before taking a moment to find the right words for what he says next. “It felt like I was in a... some sort of like... LGBTQ ally meeting and everybody was just trying to be affirmative,” Don says. That was a turn I didn’t expect to appear so suddenly. In most cases, writing consultants underwent allies training to be more affirming for those in the LGBTQ+ communities. I was surprised because I did not expect this to be the largest takeaway from their appointment rather than getting meaningful help with their work. Don had taken a quick step into another area. I tried to keep up with him, hoping that it led somewhere I hadn’t foreseen or thought about.

Don continued describing his thoughts on the usefulness of the writing center, “I

was like, I don't really see that I got anything out of this. I don't really think you improved my paper, but my professor is highly recommending it and, ultimately, I was going to gain extra credit," he said. "I just... after the first one, I don't know if I would have done it. I don't know how they hire people, but I found that I was dealing with just other undergraduates who had passed some basic assessment or had the right GPA," he said before continuing. "I was like okay, for extra credit, this is worth half an hour of my time, I guess, but if I were actually coming there for help with my paper, I probably wouldn't have come back after the first time to be honest." I thought for a moment about what I was hearing. Though Don did not realize it, he was right. To be employed by the writing center, there were certain academic requirements. I had also attended the learning labs at Austin Community College during my time enrolled there, and I had always thought that it was odd that I, another English major with a near-perfect GPA as an undergraduate, would try and look for assistance from students who were at the same level as myself. The couple of visits I had made to the writing center as an undergraduate felt almost useless being that the consultants seemed to have the same issues that I did. "Let me ask you this: do you think your experience would have been a bit different if you had gone in person?" Don explained again that he felt that things were more natural in person. "In general, things progress more naturally in person," he said. "I think that's just been proven over the last couple of years."

Don shifted gears once again to another topic. "The other thing that was confusing to me, and I don't know if it's this way if you go in person, but I was like, I couldn't find or just, like, pick whoever I was always trying to select, the consultant, on the appointment" he said. "I am just randomly picking from the top of the list because

whatever, I have no idea who these people are, what their qualifications are. Why are we being given a choice? It's not like they are well known names, I just didn't understand... sorry, I don't want to... I'm not trying to trash undergraduates..." Don's concern struck me quickly and I understood what he was trying to articulate. "No, no, no, be as honest as possible, it's okay," I said as I tried to calm him down. Don looked pensive and appeared to be mulling over his thoughts for a moment before continuing, his expression softened by a look of relief. "I'm like, I have a 4.0, I'm just trying to do this paper better, and you're not really getting anything," Don said.

Like, there is still room for improvement, my professors aren't expecting to get sort of the same paper that other students can turn in because they already know what I'm capable of doing. I need your help making this paper better. I mean like I had a poli-sci professor, and I think anything that I had turned in was going to get an A just because I wrote more than three pages on any given thing. The English department and the writing courses are already intensive... It just kind of felt like a waste of time and no, I wouldn't go back, to answer your question. In summation, Don was very confident in his abilities and reasoned that if the consultants weren't at a higher level than himself then why go? I understood the issue with visiting the writing center for help and discovering that they can be as lost on a topic as the student writer is. These were issues before the pandemic began and are worsened by the current health crisis.

From there we moved to discuss more pandemic-oriented topics. I began by asking about the changes to campus. "You talked about the shields at the writing center and all the stuff that's been set up and the changes to this space. Can you tell me a bit about your experience on campus regarding that? Especially if you've seen it around the writing center or classrooms?" Don arched an eyebrow before responding, "I think the only place that I've consistently seen it in is the food service company that runs the Paws N Go and like Evans," he replied. "They set up a sufficient shield for their workers, and you can hear clearly and communicate clearly. There's enough room to move the product

back and forth, and like payment, form of payment stuff. I feel like I haven't, like I said, I hadn't physically been to the writing center. I felt like classrooms were sort of..." Don trailed off and thought for a couple of seconds before discussing classrooms. "Okay, in Fall 2021 it was required that everyone is wearing a mask, period, including the professor. That made it difficult to hear the professor. At some point it was no longer required. As long as people in class were masked, it was better when the professor wasn't," he said. "You could hear them because they're doing a lot of the talking. I don't know that any of the shielding plexiglass would have made sense in a classroom setting when you have to be a little more interactive."

At this point, Don began describing associations with plexiglass shielding. "It's like when you go to a high crime store," Don explained. "Like an area where you'll notice that more of Walmart is locked down, the bank is more locked down, you're communicating through plexiglass with the voice," Don continued. "Like some Walmarts in nicer areas don't lock down anything and then in other ones they're locking down any makeup that's worth more than five dollars," he said as he brought his point full circle. "My point being that the whole lockdown like plexiglass with the voice thing, I mean even in Old Main where you've made payments. It's got the big plexiglass, you just have that little space to push your money through and make tuition payments," Don said before relating this to the writing center itself. "I feel like if I were going to the writing center, I would expect to see if there's a bunch of us sitting around maskless, not at an open space like a bank. I didn't trust the writing center anymore, so I certainly wasn't taking my grad papers to them."

I took a second to make some notes and press the question further to keep Don on

track regarding the plexiglass. “Let me see, how do I phrase this... It seems to change the sort of feeling the environment has,” I said. “Did that make you more uncomfortable because of the sort of feeling that it gave the space?” Don responded with an apt science-fiction reference. “How do I say this politely if you’ve never seen Blade Runner. I would just say if you’ve seen a film where you’ve got some sort of like dancer-type person locked in a little plexiglass shell,” he replied. “You can walk up to it and pay to use it or ignore it and move on. Yes, it’s sort of like a zoo, it sort of becomes a zoo. Any environment that the customer is free to walk around and you, the cashier or bank teller, are locked behind this thing,” Don said. “I mean it just sort of creates a definite instability in not the power dynamics necessarily, but just the ability to have an organic conversation that doesn’t immediately feel so clinical.”

### *University Response*

From here I decided to shift to the university's response. “How do you feel about the university’s response to the pandemic?” I asked. Don took a moment as though deciding on what to respond with first. “I think the university president needed to get us back on campus because things cost money. Dorms that were built cost money. Spaces that were built cost money,” he said before continuing. “It’s very difficult to charge students, i.e. it’s difficult to charge students \$95 a semester for a bus system that no one is using or \$300 in academic fees even though they fucking did. They charged for games that weren’t being played or attended,” Don said before touching on electronic courses. “Thankfully they did not insist on maintaining their \$150 electronic course fee per course during the first couple of semesters, especially Spring of 2021 when it was sort of like no one was in person anymore, basically there’s a handful of classes and that’s it.”

Don began to lament some of the things that these changes caused. “A film studies professor had a hands-on ‘how-to-make-a-film class’ where she said that none of this will be on Zoom because the only way to do this is in person, period. You need to touch the equipment,” Don explained before launching into political aspects of the university’s response. “I feel like the university’s president had to balance, she has the regents who are controlled by Republican scum and, so regardless of her own opinion, she’s balancing a nearly billion-dollar budget,” he continued. “The pressure from the regents who are pressured by the state government and students who were being very vocal about all kinds of stuff online, I feel like that’s the beginning where I kind of felt like I’m not buying the mask mandate as protecting us more than as proving that they were doing their best to limit liability,” he said. “With mask mandates we’re no longer supported by the state and the university can no longer enforce the mask mandate and they just depend on the whole ‘let’s respect each other’ thing,” he said. “I felt a smidgen more of like maybe she’s still trying to cover liability, or maybe she’s legitimately doing the best she can with her hands absolutely tied. With that said, the university president seems to have genuine concern for our staff, faculty, and students just from the emails and things like that.”

Don continued explaining his feelings on the response by gauging how he interpreted the pre-semester speeches from the university president and department chair. “You know, they were just very clear. They’re like look, you know a lot of these kids are coming in with opinions given to them by their families, they may not think the masks are worth it,” Don said. “The department chair was just very empathetic, and she was like ‘please, let’s do our best to be good examples... to get our vaccines, to get our boosters’.

She was also concerned that they're coming off of like a year or two of Zoom life and they haven't even experienced a college classroom at all," he said. Don went on to explain that nearly everyone with an administrative role in the English department that he had interacted with pushed for a positive, supportive strategy in wearing masks and social distancing. We finally moved to questions about masking on campus and whether Don regularly wore a mask. "When it was still required, yes. The exception was now, you know the bus system is mandated federally. You have to wear a mask or the driver won't take off."

Don continued and explained that this depended on who was around or where he was. "In private places like the restrooms or if I was alone like in the computer lab or if it would just be me and a student worker, I didn't necessarily wear a mask then, but if it was in a class filled with other people, I did wear a mask," he said. "As a grad student... people just felt the responsibility and felt the legitimacy of wearing a mask to class. I find it kind of humorous and hypocritical of myself and others, that when we're in class we have to mask, but whenever we're eating suddenly nobody gives a shit."

Don then went on to point out something interesting, that if a single student refuses to mask, it comes with the risk of alienating them from the rest of the class. He described a situation in which a student suggested that the class vote on masking only to ultimately be told that they couldn't force a student to mask. "In my head I was thinking we're going to Chik-Fil-A later and we're going to sit right across the table from each other... and not one of us is going to give a shit about have masks on once we're seated," he said. "This ends up alienating the student for no reason, so I get pissed about that to be honest." Don went on to add to this point. "Everyone in the room has also gotten their

vaccines and is boosted. I'm not sure who that student even was, they weren't one of us (a MARC student).” After a few moments of silence, Don asked if he had addressed the question. “You did. Absolutely. Was there anything else that you feel like you could like to talk about regarding the pandemic and how it affects school or educational spaces or anything like that or have there been any good things to come out of it?” I asked. He replied,

No. In Fall 2020 we were dealing with one of the most contentious elections in modern history. In Spring, January 2021, we had an actual insurrection attempt, an attempted coup. The Right doesn't realize how close they were to actually derailing confirmation, they just needed to grab the papers. We have lost the ability to mandate masks, the anti-vaccine movement is picking up, and at the top of all of this we're still dealing with people who don't think that racism is real. My sister is anti-vaccine, but she has adopted five Asian kids, so I don't have to fight her on the race argument because she gets a ton of shit having Asian kids. Like, a ton of shit. They get treated like shit a lot, especially with the 'Wu Han virus' shit from Trump. So you've got racism, you got a pandemic. You've got all this shit, all these conflicting reasons. You have educators wanting to protect themselves and protect their students, then you have even seasoned educators like a friend of mine, a choir director. How do you maintain a stable choir program? You can't have rehearsals on Zoom. It disrupts so much that requires socialization.

This tied into the deeply social aspects of students not experiencing a college classroom for nearly two years in addition to other social activities that are vital to teachers and students. Additionally, the issues raised by Don at this point significantly overlap with one another to the point that it is not as simple as addressing a single issue, they had to be addressed in tandem with each other. *The pandemic really does infect everything* I thought to myself. The next thing that Don explains feels particularly important.

“The only good thing that came of it is us understanding how prepared, how not prepared, we are for it to happen again,” he said. “I am in an honor society, and we



basically shut down for two years. We haven't done any fundraising or recruiting." Don explained that it was extremely difficult to recruit or do any of the things necessary to keep the organization running. At 6 members total, they've been forced to organize themselves through a Groupme chat. "Events around you have history. Some people are saying they're trying to prepare for that post-apocalyptic/remote environment to happen again. Some people are just trying to grasp being back in person," Don said. "I hope we've learned lessons on how to be flexible and to pivot more quickly as an educational system, but I don't think it'll ever be equal until there's solid equal internet supplies and equality everywhere."

### *Socioeconomic Issues*

Don lamented that school districts like those in Austin give each student MacBook computers while other schools struggle to send home tablets. "There's all the stories we heard during the pandemic about like that one middle school girl, she would take her laptop or tablet and sit outside the school so she had access to the internet so she could study," he said. "The school found out and told her she couldn't be there without an adult. The school had cut off her lifeline to learning because their family didn't have internet. Someone donated like a hotspot or something to the kid." These socioeconomic issues were things that aligned with things I had read regarding the pandemic before, but it somehow felt heavier to hear it from another person. Eventually, Don moved on to putting a final word in about the writing center itself. Don pointed out that the other student assistance center that dealt with student writing, SLAC, didn't seem to suffer from the issues that the writing center had. "My last thing would be that SLAC, I guess over at LBJ, it seems like I didn't hear even a tenth of the drama there... I'm not sure

where the fault lies as to why SLAC seems to have resumed or never really ceased operations,” Don said. “There’s so much contention at the writing center... I’m not sure if that’s leadership, I’m not sure if that’s resources, experience, whatever. I don’t know what the lacking thing is, but clearly it just seems like SLAC performance hasn’t been nearly as affected as the writing center.” I take a second to mull that over before Don adds a last couple of sentences on the matter. “It’s got the same university guidelines, same rules, but without all of the controversy.” Having run out of questions, I finish jotting down my notes and thank Don for his time, telling him we could call it a day.

### **Interview Analysis**

Of these two interviews, there were several recurring themes as well as some that differed significantly between these two students. Of the similar issues, both preferred to not use Zoom for multiple reasons. Between Beth and Don, issues with the technology were an issue. Using Zoom felt, as Don put it, sterile, while Beth stated that it was more difficult to be personable through the modality. The overarching theme with this issue is the lack of human connection. During the pandemic, Zoom has been utilized as an alternative to in-person instruction. With that method of instruction, it is obvious that a human component, an emotional component, is absent. Using Zoom felt sterile and ultimately frustrating to Don, who also pointed out a problem connected with the usage of Zoom: certain courses could not be conducted using it. Additionally, economically-hindered students like the high school student alluded to in Don’s story were at a severe disadvantage even before the pandemic began. Now, when everything has been shifted to an online form of teaching and instruction, students with no internet access or the ability to afford a computer were placed in an even worse position than before.

### *Issues and Consequences of Technology Used for Distance Learning*

Zoom seems to be a space that, while it was made before the pandemic began, is an environment that grew out of necessity due to COVID. Based on my experience and findings through these interviews, I have come to the conclusion that, in line with Baker et al's findings, Zoom is a space that is indeed infected by the pandemic. However, Zoom is not just a space that has been infected by the pandemic, it is almost exclusively characterized by the pandemic. Before the health crisis, far fewer people used it. Now it is the default choice for online office hours, classes, and online instruction. It's as though Zoom has stepped over the threshold of being something we used to adapt to the pandemic to also being a symptom of the same health crisis. This new effect, however, is that it causes the element of human connection, the social and emotional aspects of academic courses, to atrophy.

Another consequence of an all-online academic environment is that, as Don had pointed out, there is now a generation of students that have never experienced an in-person college course. Courses that are vital to students, especially classes that offer valuable hands-on experience in areas like film making, cannot be conducted. This is also true of student organizations like the one Don is a member of as well as school programs in K-12 education like music and choir. If all of the hindered activities were placed into a list, I suspect that it would make up a very large portion of what we would expect to be necessary and normal parts of a healthy curriculum. While there are benefits to learning to adapt by using an online environment in light of a pandemic, they come with costs. Students already buckle under the stressors of a normal semester or school year, and asking that they adapt to a new technology that dictates whether they can even participate

only worsens this. Again, some of the humane parts of everyday life as students that some of us experienced in the time preceding the pandemic are things that current and potentially future students may never get to experience.

### ***University Response and Perceptions of Protective Measures***

The topic of protective measures taken by the university also showed similarities between the experiences of these two student writers. Both pointed out that the university was likely doing all that it could given the circumstances. The point of divergence between Beth and Don, however, was that Beth's statement was a solid opinion, whereas Don's was an in-depth speculation of the university's response. There is a small amount of similarity between the two regarding this issue when discussing the plexiglass, as Beth had stated that they do not actually help, but the university seems to install them in order to show that they are doing something. This aligns with Don's speculation that they may just be doing things to save face and limit liability on their end. Both Beth and Don's responses indicate that the view that the university has an image they are attempting to maintain is obvious.

While Beth and Don had similar views of the plexiglass their perceptions of it ultimately differed significantly. Beth viewed the plexiglass as a mostly useless feature, save for the idea that it may be one way the university is attempting to show that it is making an effort to keep people safe. This is in line with the sort of hygiene theater mentioned by Derek Thompson in his article "Hygiene Theater Is a Huge Waste of Time" published in *The Atlantic*. Thompson points out that the pandemic has caused families and business to "obsess over risk-reduction rituals that make us *feel* safer but don't actually do much to reduce risk." Don, on the other hand, associated the plexiglass in

stores located in areas with higher crime rates or places in which an active and reasonable threat necessitated the use of such barriers. I have held similar thoughts on the appearance of plexiglass shielding in everyday places that they were not in before like grocery stores. It stands to reason that of the hundreds (or more) of students that pass through the writing center on a weekly basis, that there are more of them that associate these windows with an active threat of some kind. This potentially leads to the academic space of the writing center to be associated with danger rather than comfort. It should be noted that of the protective measures observed by Beth and Don, masking was the most helpful and imbued the space with feelings of safety and comfort, while the plexiglass was viewed as useless while leading to associations with crime and danger.

The appointments experienced by both student writers were affected by the precautions put in place due to the pandemic. Though Beth stated that in her case she didn't believe that the safety measures affected her appointment, her answers during the interview contradicted such a statement, though in a positive way. The way that the tables were distanced gave her the feeling that others would not be able to hear us discussing her writing, resulting in a more comfortable and private session. Additionally, the use of masks by the writing consultants gave the impression that, while the pandemic was still in effect and the virus was a constant threat, the consultants were doing everything they could to keep the student writers safe, especially if they had health conditions that put them more at risk than other students.

Rather than creating an atmosphere that induced anxiety and worry, Beth's statements indicate that as long as precautions were taken by the staff, the writing center was a welcoming place that she genuinely enjoyed visiting. It should be noted, however,

that the writing consultants were not required to mask and that mask mandates were not enforced by the university. Beth's views of masking differed from Don's in that he viewed the behavior as potentially alienating for those who would not mask, as well as feeling hypocritical in not wearing them outside of class at social gatherings.

Regardless of whether a mask mandate is in effect or not, it is clear that when writing consultants adopt masking and other protective behaviors such as social distancing, it has a positive effect on student writers visiting the space. My observations align with findings put forth by Betsch et al in that I have found that masking, when perceived in the context of a social behavior, is viewed as a caring and socially positive behavior that causes individuals to view those who wear masks as being more caring and pro-social (21851). The adoption and continued usage of masks during the pandemic causes students to perceive the writing consultants as caring and welcoming, especially in the case of students with health conditions. Don's feelings on masking differed from Beth's in that he viewed the behavior as potentially alienating for those who would not mask as well as feelings of hypocrisy in himself and others in his graduate courses.

Don's experience regarding the writing center was also influenced. Zoom appointments were implemented due to the pandemic. Therefore, any appointment conducted over Zoom must be influenced by the health crisis. How could they not be? Zoom is a constant reminder of the pandemic and would not be utilized by the writing center otherwise. As Don had stated during the interview, he did not know if attending an appointment in person would have yielded a different outlook on the writing center. The experience that he did have, however, was a frustrating experience over Zoom that felt clinical, sterile, and ultimately useless. Don also stated that things tend to be more

organic in person. It is within the realm of possibility that if Don had attended in person that he would have had a more positive experience, even if he still felt that the help on his papers weren't worth the time.

*Economic Disparity, Racism, Politics, and Preparedness*

Don's interview touched upon many things that Beth's interview did not. Issues of economic disparity, race, politics, how unprepared for the pandemic schools were, and the overall utility of the writing center were discussed at length. Don's story about school districts in Austin and students from families that could not afford necessities such as internet access echoed similar struggles that I had encountered as a student from a low-income background (I touch on this topic again in the autoethnography that comprises the next chapter). Even if they were to receive the technology that is required to participate during the pandemic, they still need to be able to use it effectively. This is another issue that Louis-Jean and Cenat point out with e-learning by observing that in "less affluent and underperforming schools, students have very limited access to no exposure at all in using technology" and that students in these environments are suddenly "expected to master the use of technology distance learning platforms to complete and submit assignments" (3). We assisted students who were unable to afford things like laptops that were incompatible with Zoom once we returned to on-campus instruction. Students that couldn't afford the equipment necessary to attend classes in the early stages of the pandemic when lockdowns were in effect were severely hampered in terms of academic progress. These students would likely have to either start later than their more affluent peers or forgo attending college for the foreseeable future.

While it rarely came up in the writing center, Don lamented at the racial

component of the pandemic. The distressing amount of xenophobia that was unjustly levied at Asian Americans by Trump still endangers the innocent. Additionally, minority communities often have less access to the resources necessary to succeed in academic institutions. The pandemic affects groups of people unequally. The notions of epigenetic trauma or generational trauma and the concept of “bodily memory,” a concept referred to by Baker et al regarding how certain populations are disproportionately affected by the rhetoric of pandemic politics, are all things people of color have had to endure (Baker et al., 2019). In a similar vein to the poor students mentioned earlier, minority students are also at an increased disadvantage due to the pandemic in terms of financial resources, but they must also deal with the horrors of racism.

Don also brought up the political component of the pandemic. The events of the last couple of years certainly add to the stressors of the health crisis as well as the rigors of dealing with post-secondary education. Politics were often at the root of whether a student writer would be willing to mask or receive vaccines. The views held by republicans, the alt-Right, and the Right in general were often topics of conversation among writing consultants. We often discussed what new conspiracy theory was being spread about the virus or vaccines as well as whatever bigoted or reckless lunacy was being put into action by Gov. Abbot. During appointments, however, politics rarely surfaced, though they likely influenced perceptions held by more conservative students visiting the writing center.

In terms of preparation, the pandemic revealed how unprepared most parts of society were for something like the health crisis to occur. This is especially true of school systems. To be fair, the likelihood of something like the pandemic taking place was likely



not something that was expected. Now that this event has happened, we must be better prepared for other instances of such an event occurring in the future. The switch to Zoom and lockdowns were things that we had to adjust to, and this change was much more difficult for some than for others. Issues with technology and the access to such technology were made more apparent. The ability to teach online became far more necessary than it had been before the pandemic began. Internet access went from being a utility that an individual or family didn't necessarily need to an indispensable tool to attend school, work from home, or even to secure groceries, medicine, and even things like appointments with therapists. It caused us to question how we run programs like choir classes, student honors organizations, and classes like the film course mentioned by Don, programs that require a great degree of in-person instruction and interpersonal activity to grasp meaningful concepts or complete any meaningful work. It is clear from Don's interview that we must learn all we can from our experience with this pandemic in order to prepare students in the future for when it happens again.

### ***Writing Center Efficacy***

Possibly the greatest difference between Beth and Don's perceptions of the writing center lies in how helpful the visit ultimately was. In Beth's case, the sessions were helpful and enjoyable. Social distancing in the form of separate tables made Beth more comfortable and face masks gave the impression that the health and safety of students were being valued, especially in terms of those with health conditions. In contrast, Don found appointments to be frustrating and ultimately not worth the time. There are several things to consider when comparing these perceptions of writing center space. First, Beth is an undergraduate majoring in Anthropology while Don has a

bachelor's degree in English and is more than half-way done with a master's degree in rhetoric and composition. This means that there is likely a vast degree of difference between the amount of writing experience between these two student writers. Don, a graduate student who had a perfect GPA as an undergraduate, already had a wealth of writing experience prior to his online appointment.

Don's expertise led him to have a different frame of mind when attending his appointment, one of an expert, whereas Beth expressed self-doubt and anxiety with her writing. While this may account for some of the differences in how they gauged the usefulness of the appointment, Don's view that visiting the writing center to get assistance with a paper as being pointless is more common in writing intensive programs than people realize. The majority of writing consultants are undergraduates, and not all of them major in English. This is not always perceived as a good thing. Don makes a valid point regarding his own writing as a student who has likely spent many more hours developing writing expertise through sheer coursework than some of the consultants. The question here is whether or not visiting is even worth it when the consultants are less qualified, have less experience, and may, in Don's case, emphasize LGBTQ inclusivity to the degree that, while wonderful and necessary, it becomes the only worthwhile thing to come out of the appointment.

In terms of expertise and student writer perception, it is worth noting that writing centers share many similarities with hospitals. In truth, what we do is very similar to what a doctor may do with a patient, at least as experienced by a student. A student writer will book an appointment and list the problems they are experiencing, arrive and check in at a front desk, and then wait for the writing consultant to see them. As writing consultants

(the doctors in this scenario) we collaborate with the student writer (the patient, who views us as seasoned writing experts), diagnose the paper, and prescribe a treatment to fix their problems. Writing consultants even wear lanyards around their necks rather than a doctor's stethoscope. This is incredibly reminiscent of Kenneth Bruffee's discussion on the history of collaborative pedagogies and where to use them, stating that these methods trace their roots back to methods utilized by medical students in the 1960's (636).

Writing centers are spaces for collaboration pedagogies, a lineage Bruffee traces back to the medical field, specifically in regard to medical education. Despite the hesitancy to do so, it must be acknowledged that while scholars were seemingly reluctant to refer to pre-pandemic writing centers as paper hospitals, the pandemic has only made it clearer that, by virtue of pedagogical lineage and spatial structure, this is how they are experienced.

In truth, Don's motivations for attending the appointment as a form of extra credit are not uncommon. We often see waves of student writers attend only the appointments necessary to earn extra points and never see them again. Some students even show up just to get the requisite proof of visit slip that they need to get the extra credit they are pursuing and then try to leave the appointment early. While this doesn't necessarily speak to the issue of the pandemic, it opens a doorway to the issue that perhaps offering extra credit for attending the writing center does not provide student writers any significant help in terms of growth. How could it when the majority of them never return? During the course of the pandemic, however, I have observed that in the case of Zoom appointments where extra credit and proof of visit slips were mentioned (which are a result of the pandemic) student writers tended to stay for the entire appointment.

Finally, Don makes mention of SLAC, another resource that provides students

with tutoring services. There are several differences between the writing center and SLAC, the largest differences being that they do not have time limits for assisting students, they offer help with several different subjects, and (according to Don) remained open and active in a greater capacity than the writing center has. The environment for SLAC is much more similar to the one in Austin Community Colleges learning labs that were mentioned by Don during his interview. In terms of controversy, Don may be referring to the constant complaints about the writing center's administration, or the policies regarding masking. Whatever the subject of these comments, they remain somewhat ambiguous, though Don's comparison of the two resources available to students makes it sound as though the writing center is fraught with problems while SLAC seems to have been operating just fine.

Ultimately, the information from these interviews reveals a great deal of information as to how the changes within the writing center that have been caused by the pandemic, especially in methods of instruction, have been perceived by student writers. My findings expand the ways that we understand the space within writing centers during a pandemic as well as things that can be improved upon and implemented so as to prepare for and appropriately handle the next health crisis. While this chapter details the student writers' side of this space, my autoethnography titled "My Writing Center has a Comorbidity" in the next chapter illustrates the writing consultants' experience, my own experience, in navigating this environment and observing the changes that have been caused by the health crisis.

### III. MY WRITING CENTER HAS A COMORBIDITY

This chapter is an autoethnography that I created detailing my experiences as a writing consultant during the pandemic. I structured this article to have an evocative impact that accurately recounts our feelings and experiences on the issues that we have had to endure in our roles. It is worth noting that several of the problems detailed in this autoethnography are issues that were troubling before the pandemic began but have only become inflamed by the presence of contagion. This autoethnography is made up of artifacts such as photos of plexiglass windows in the writing center, vignettes from conversations between myself and my fellow writing consultants, and my reflections on my time assisting students with their writing during a health crisis. The vignettes at the beginning of the sections are intended to further enmesh the reader in my position as a writing consultant, while the visual that I constructed with lines and phrases is meant to be an evocative point in the text that causes readers to grapple with the divided nature of things writing consultants would speak, think, hear, or be told on a daily basis. This piece is deeply personal and serves to illustrate a first-hand experience of the tribulations that we have had to endure as academics and student workers.

\* \* \* \* \*

“We don’t have a choice. We have to serve them whether they mask or not,” the director of the writing center said at our first on-campus meeting prior to the fall semester, relaying the implications of the university’s policy as required by the state. My heart rate sped up as I heard the words. Were they serious? Not everyone was vaccinated. How did they expect this to work? I spoke up. “Well then if that’s going to be the case, then they can get help from another consultant. Unless they wear a mask, they won’t be

getting my help.” This was what I felt should have been a non-negotiable thing in an academic space. Unfortunately, we were at the mercy of Gov. Greg Abbot’s laws, and being that he had lifted all restrictions regarding Covid-19, the university had no way to create their own rules regarding masking.

This autoethnography is written to address a fundamental problem, or rather, a symptom of a much larger issue in the US regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. I suspect that my writing center has been affected (infected) by Covid-19 metaphorically, and that there exist comorbidities (conditions accompanying the primary condition that harm the infectee) that have been brought on or worsened by this infection. Of all the states in the US, Texas has some of the least restrictive Covid-19 policies. Because mandates like masking are implemented at the discretion of the states rather than with a top-down approach at the federal level, all states are left to their own devices when creating rules for the public-health crisis. Any law created on the state level affects state institutions. This means that Texas State University, as a state-level facility that is not privately owned and operated, has to adhere to whatever mandates (or lack thereof) are put in place by the state government. In this case, it meant that when Gov. Abbott removed all mandates and protective measures, we became unable to require things like masking in the writing center.

I was especially upset by this. That meant that every writing consultant, professor, and university employee was now potentially at the mercy of students who may or may not have been vaccinated. We were put in a vulnerable position during a pandemic that has, at the time of this writing, killed over five million people worldwide, and more infectious variants like Omicron have just surfaced. Through the use of artifact analysis,

interviews, and self-reflection, I will examine the infected space and present my diagnosis.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You know, there was this blood-plague thing in World of Warcraft awhile back. The CDC actually took a big interest in it.”

“What? Why?”

“Because this plague only infected players that entered a certain area of the game. If they got too close to other player characters’ pets or minions while they were still infected, then the other characters got infected too. It could spread from character to character, and it killed tons of lower-level players. Tons of them got infected. So they started telling people to not go to that area until it got worked out, and if they did, then they should stay away from other players. So guess what happened!”

“They didn’t listen?”

“Yep! Some of the players listened, but others just wandered back into the towns knowing they were infected on purpose or because they just didn’t want to listen. For some it was accidental, I mean it jumped from animal companions to other people, and I don’t know if they realized that could happen. It infected ENTIRE TOWNS. They made quarantine areas, but a bunch of it failed because some weren’t taking it seriously. The in-game characters like shopkeepers could get infected too, but you couldn’t tell they were infected, like they were asymptomatic carriers. It killed so many characters and spread in such a way that epidemiologists wanted to study the event to learn how people would act in a real-world pandemic. And you know what? Initially the community playing the game didn’t think they should do the study.”

“Why?”

“Because they said that ‘there’s no way people are really that selfish’.”

\* \* \* \* \*

No student expects that they will have to endure a pandemic while they attend a university. The ways that the pandemic changes the experience on campus are staggering when you compare it to how it felt in the “before times”. The look and feel of almost every space on campus is very different than when it was before the pandemic. Typically, a writing center is a place that is set up in order to assist student writers in becoming better at whatever area they are concerned with. When a student writer comes to the writing center, they usually feel more vulnerable than we believe they do. They are coming to us with a need for help, and as writing consultants, we are viewed as experts in all manners of writing. When they walk through those doors and approach the desk, it is usually because they feel lost on an assignment, had a paper butchered by a professor, or have no idea how to use a particular writing format. They come to us with their worries, nervous and afraid that they won’t be able to get the hang of how to write and fearing that they won’t graduate. They come to us and utter the most ubiquitous phrase used in the writing center: “I’m not a good writer”.

Much of the time, this is far from the truth, but the fear and worry that they bring with them is compounded by the changes that the pandemic has caused. The writing center used to be a place where student writers could hang out and work on their papers, read, or converse while they waited for their appointment or simply just to have a space to write in. We served coffee and the writing center had a relaxing atmosphere. Now the coffee is absent, and the writing center is closed off to anyone with the exception of the



staff. All of the writing consultants wear masks, and sanitizer is available at every table. If one were to break down and read this physical space in the vein of postmodern mapping and geographies, what one would take from these physical changes as compared to the layout and structure of the space pre-pandemic would be startling. Jackie-Grutsch McKinney's work on writing centers as a space is a method that I applied in deconstructing my own writing center. In her article "Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces", Grutsch-McKinney points out that writing centers are almost universally structured as a place of comfort, and that "spaces are read like texts" (7). While these changes are all very different, the one thing that seems to stand out the most is the wall of plexiglass that has been installed at the front desk.

The plexiglass window itself is a holdover from right before the first lockdowns came into effect. It was installed when the university (and the state of Texas itself for that matter) was in the process of adapting to the current health crisis. This plexiglass is the first thing that the student writers see when they walk through the door. Normally this sort of fixture was something that you would see in a bank, but now that the pandemic is in full effect, these windows are a normal fixture in everyday public places like the grocery store. These windows have a type of rhetorical effect on the people in the space in which it is installed. Seeing this window changes the space within the writing center from one where student writers could get help in a somewhat comforting space with warm drinks and knowledgeable people to one in which they may be harmed by a deadly virus.

\* \* \* \* \*



Illustration 1. Plexiglass Window at the Front Desk in the Writing Center

The plexiglass is easily the first thing that anyone notices when walking into the university writing center. This barrier is designed to halt the spread of the virus and keep the staff safe. This is, however, a strange fixture in this space for a litany of reasons. First, plexiglass that is used in this space this way doesn't effectively stop the spread of aerosols that carry the virus. When a student walks in and speaks with the front desk staff, they are difficult to hear and end up moving their head around the sides of the window so that they can be heard. They often do this without wearing a mask, even though we provide them in a basket (or in this photo's case, a fake rodent of unusual size, which is ironic as rodents are symbolic of plagues). In addition to this, the writers that opt to not mask end up walking around this barrier and through the writing center to a table where they spend between 25 and 50 minutes before walking by the exposed area of the desk on their way out. Wearing a mask keeps the mask-wearer from spreading the virus but provides little protection from the maskless.

\* \* \* \* \*

The objects used in the appointments themselves warrant analysis. Writers and students tend to prefer certain objects and spaces over others, and in a fascinating way,

such preferences affect how well writers perform. These spaces can range from certain spots such as a preferred corner of a cafe, a comfortable spot in the home, or a quiet area in a library. The objects could be a set of Moleskine notebooks, favorite sets of pens, or coffee from a certain mug you only use when writing. Jacob Craig points out in his article “Affective Materialities: Place, Technologies, and Development of Writing Processes” that spaces and objects are able to influence and affect writing tasks, and that writing “bleeds into other spheres of life” thereby creating an association between the writer and these objects (2). In a pre-pandemic world, normal things like notebooks and cozy coffee shops were objects and places that one could associate with their writing process. Now, however, I fear that in a pandemic where everyone needs to wear a mask in any given public space, keep bottles of sanitizer handy, and use plexiglass, these things are what may be associated with the writing process. More often than not, I find myself feeling uncomfortable if I go anywhere without a mask, and this was especially true in the writing center. If student writers associate masking, social distancing and all the other precautions that go with the pandemic in the writing center, how would that affect their views of writing? How would they associate an environment in which every part reminded you of Covid-19? Would it just become a new norm?

\* \* \* \* \*

“You guys do so much for us.” “We appreciate you” “We value you all.”

“You’re a wonderful consultant.” “Please tell us if you guys need anything.”

Where You the ?

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do Draw Line

“I lost nine family members to Covid.” “I don’t feel safe.”

“We don’t have a choice, you have to serve them. “I’m immunocompromised.”

“We make shit money.” “How am I supposed to know if they’re vaxxed or not?”

“Our pay is just us getting money back that we’ve already paid the university.” “I

hate conflict, why do I have to even ask them to mask?” “Why do their voices

matter more than ours? We’re students too.” “I can’t afford a doctor.” “My Dad

only has one lung.”

“One of us died.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The text above is meant to evoke many different emotions while speaking honestly about the issues that we faced as writing center consultants during the pandemic. The literal line that divides up the question “where do you draw the line?” is meant to be both physical and metaphorical. On the surface, it represents the plexiglass windows that separate student writers from writing consultants, writing center staff from writing consultants, and the university from those of us who have to deal with its rules regarding the pandemic. Metaphorically, it represents the divide between the niceties that we hear every day (the top) and the issues and realities that we have to contend with (the bottom),

things that we have stated, feelings like fear and doubt that have been expressed, and ultimately, the side of the line that the university and writing center administrators have chosen in contrast with the thoughts, feelings, issues, and reality of the students.

My father has one lung. We are asked to work in a hazardous environment for low pay and no health care. Students can pose a life-or-death threat to us or our loved ones by choosing not to mask, and we are told that we can't refuse to help them. Students who choose to not mask are put in a position where their voices matter more than ours do as student workers, otherwise our concerns would be given just as much weight. Finally, even death won't sway their minds. During the winter semester of 2020, a former writing consultant who had been enrolled in a Doctoral program was infected and died January 9th during the winter break. While the university said it would shut down if a student perished during the semester, it is clear that if they expire during the break then it means little, if anything, to them. I met Arun Raman and shared a beer with him years ago at The Growling, a horror-themed bar next to campus. I briefly met his mentor, Russell Hodges, weeks after Arun's death as I tried out a course on Community College Pedagogies as a cognate. I had to look Dr. Hodges in the eye as he started to cry when Arun came up in our conversation. My illustration shows two sides of the line, but only one of them is honest.

\* \* \* \* \*

The appointments themselves that take place in the writing center are infected in a manner of speaking. The specter of Covid-19 haunts the space itself through reminders that even though we are all meeting in person again, the virus is still with us. The tables are numbered and spread apart from each other. On each table is a Bobcat trace sign-in

sheet for the university's contact tracing system, and every table has its own bottle of sanitizer. Most of these tables are paired with a cubicle with the same number. The cubicles themselves are reserved for online Zoom appointments. During the pandemic, both physical and digital spaces are infected by viruses both physically and mentally. Baker et al. point out that with the Covid-19 pandemic, the shift to online environments and acting through digital avatars still carries the reminder that there is a deadly virus present in the face-to-face environment (211). Zoom sessions are much safer and very convenient, especially for those with at-risk health conditions, non-traditional students, and parents who have to watch their children. The switch to Zoom was, however, not without difficulty, as adapting to this new technology was (and still is) very difficult for some students, especially those who do not have much experience with online learning. The challenges that have accompanied the switch to Zoom due to the pandemic are illustrated by several scholars, notably by Louis-Jean et al., who state that “many schools are completely unprepared for the massive e-learning caused by the impact of COVID-19” (2). While Louis-Jean et al. point out that much of this is due to operating budgets on the part of schools, it cuts both ways with the university. Some students simply can't afford new laptops to adapt to Zoom, and online coursework comes with extra fees that normal, face-to-face courses do not. Despite all of these changes, some students become irritable when asked to wear a mask, and some opt to not wear one at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

“All right, so we're going to be right over here today.” I tell the student writer as I take a  
seat.

I sit down and I notice one of my coworkers with their student writer who hasn't put a

mask on.

I try to focus on my student writer's work, but it's no use.

I go the entire appointment angry and distracted. I feared for my coworker.

Covid-19 infected my appointment.

\* \* \* \* \*

I recall that there was only a single time in which I agreed to help a student who refused to wear a mask. It was the single most bizarre appointment I have conducted in my time at the writing center, and easily the most internally polarizing for myself. I was conducting an online appointment in one of the cubicles, which have a single door and a window right next to it that is as tall as the door itself. A student writer suddenly appeared in the window. He had glasses, curly hair down to his shoulders, and an anxious expression on his face. He was maskless. I held in my surprise as best I could while I attended to the student writer that I was working with. Why was this guy just wandering around the writing center without a mask? Was he my next student writer? Did he wander in without being seen somehow? And why the hell wasn't he masking? All these thoughts ran through my head as he nervously wandered off. I still had around 20 minutes left in my appointment, so I would have to wait until I was finished to find out what was going on.

As soon as the appointment wrapped up, I walked out into the waiting area where I spotted the maskless student writer. I don't know how I knew that they had an appointment with me, but I just flat out knew that they were there and I would have to deal with them. I felt my pulse quicken and I took some deep breaths. I checked the sign in sheet at the desk and saw that I did indeed have an appointment. I read the name of the

student writer aloud and looked around. I was right. He stood up and walked towards me. I took a step back to maintain my distance.

“Hey there! Thanks for coming in. I’m Anthony, I’m going to be your writing consultant today. Did you want to wear your own mask or would you like to use the ones that we provide?” He took a breath and his eyes darted around. He didn’t say anything. I tried again. “Hey bud, did you need a mask?” He started to rub his hands together and shifted his weight back and forth on his feet. Yep. He’s definitely uncomfortable. “Hey man, you okay?” Suddenly, he wandered over to a wall in the waiting area and started tracing an index finger over it. “I... don’t really want to wear one.” He spoke with a speech impediment. Suddenly I realized that he may not be a neurotypical student, that there were some other things going on here. As soon as I realized this, I felt a type of internal struggle begin. I had been absolutely ruthless about masking up to this point. You either put one on or you got another consultant. Those are my rules. But it felt wrong to tell him no, that I wouldn’t help him. I realized that I couldn’t turn away someone like this with a clear conscience. “Hey, it’s okay. Let’s get to a table and see what you’ve got going on.”

We take a seat and I try to figure out how to go about this appointment. I had never done an appointment with a maskless student, so I had a difficult time distancing far enough away from him to be safe. He kept trying to follow me to the same side of the table (the tables were set up so that we were able to distance by sitting on opposite sides), so I accommodated by staying on the same side, right around six feet of space. This made it very difficult to work on the paper with him. We had to keep passing his paper back and forth across the table, and he seemed extremely anxious and uncomfortable. I was



nervous too. I felt several things during that appointment. I was angry with myself for making an exception.

I felt like a hypocrite. Refusal to wear masks was one of the reasons that so many people had died. But this student writer was different. I assumed that there was some sort of neurodivergence that probably complicated the matter, and I felt the need to help him. My emotions were mixed, and I spent days grappling with it after the appointment was over. I feel that I did the right thing, but as with all the important questions in life, doing the right thing in this situation was more complicated, felt more complicated. I couldn't turn this student away.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the fall semester of 2021 continued, we all more or less fell into a routine. I usually worked the mornings into the early afternoon, and usually around half of my appointments were online. Though around half the appointments I conducted were face-to-face, it was still a very big jump from doing nothing but Zoom sessions for almost a full year. Though we still had to work like this during a pandemic, the change was a welcome one. There is something about in-person sessions that is much more personal and, in a way, intimate. This makes sense though, as sharing your writing with another person is to put oneself in a vulnerable spot. It is essentially an admittance of “okay, I can't do this alone. I need help.” If you have ever shared your writing with another person, then you likely know exactly how it feels to expose yourself to another person through writing. Some of the prompts (especially those at the freshman level) ask for personal stories, and through these sessions, I was introduced to who some of these student writers really were. The pandemic, however, factored into all of these

appointments and added a layer of discomfort regardless of how well the appointments went. Scholars such as Nathalie Singh-Corcoran and Amin Emika stress the importance of a comfortable writing center environment in their article “Inhabiting the Writing Center: A Critical Review” in which that state that “the writing center space promotes a certain kind of student-to-tutor engagement, one that encourages conversation and collaboration” and that a “comfortable writing center environment is also conducive to a level of intimacy and familiarity that cannot be replicated in the traditional classroom” (Singh-Corcoran and Emika). Despite how personal the appointments that I have helped student writers in, I will never know what it is like to have a normal, Covid-19 free session.

Every appointment is at a distance. Every session consists of hidden faces and the constant threat of infection. There are no handshakes or fist bumps, no, not in this space. It is all just sterilized desks, plexiglass, and contact tracing sign-in sheets. We are separated from the student writers by what feels like a mile-long divide made of wood and other composite materials that make up the tables that we work at, connected only by the papers we pass back and forth and this damnable virus. Many of the sessions are still enjoyable, but the worry and the fear are still there. I feel that this is very much in line with what Bob Fecho et al. refers to in his article “Teacher Research in Writing Classrooms,” which indicates that large issues relating to writing are often tied in with the day-to-day. Much like the students who worked and collaborated with each other using the same texts, student writers and writing consultants collaborate in a similar way (111). Rather than sharing texts, those who navigate the writing center use the space (as well as their papers of course) as a text and interpret it in similar ways.

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Zoom appointments were a topic of constant thought and debate among writing students and writing consultants, and for good reason. Many of us had to adjust to working from home when the pandemic began, and that came with its own set of burdens and benefits. Writing students were likely to be less experienced with Zoom than we were, given that we had to use the software for both work as well as our classes. Writing students often had questions about breakout rooms, and whenever they experienced difficulties like bad internet connections or inadequate computers, they often became irate and frustrated. Considering the difficulties that student writers and writing consultants experienced as a result of being forced by the pandemic to use this software, it is difficult to say that the health crisis hasn't infected the appointments at the writing center via digital means and worsened already existing inequities for students.

If a student writer didn't have an internet connection, then they were forced to attend appointments in person. If a writing student could not afford a computer, one that supported Zoom, then they were at a tremendous disadvantage, especially if they had a health condition that made attending in person dangerous. I myself had a Chromebook that had difficulty using Zoom, making it difficult at times to attend classes online effectively as well as provide meaningful help to student writers. I was lucky to have the Chromebook. I received it as a gift before attending graduate school and would not have been able to afford one on my own. While I was grateful to have it, it was still frustrating at times to have need of other resources that were easily accessed by others. When I had become a writing consultant I was not able to receive any pay for the job as my Chromebooks default browser was google chrome (Firefox could work, but

Chromebooks do not allow for the installation of most browsers), and therefore could not even access the proper site to record hours.

I didn't receive my first paycheck for my work for a month or so, and while I was able to find a way to report my hours, I didn't even have the resources to be paid for a job that required things that I would not have been able to afford if I were not fortunate enough to have been gifted such things. Students with economic burdens had difficulty with affording what they needed before the health crisis. The fact that we were much more reliant upon the internet made attending classes much more difficult. Sure, students could use on-campus computers or check out laptops during a typical school year, but those already had limitations. The pandemic made the socioeconomic barrier for poor student writers and writing consultants. These issues were less apparent once we returned to in-person appointments, but the problem remains. Some students without laptops would have to use the computers we provided in the writing center, but these had been sitting for nearly a year by the time we returned and required updates and other maintenance before they could be used properly. On top of this, masking provided an additional layer of difficulty for us.

Getting the student writers to mask was the absolute crux of the pandemic-related issues at the writing center. Every person that walked into the writing center was a potential carrier. We could ask if they were vaccinated, but what would that accomplish? People lie all the time, especially when it comes to uncomfortable topics or conflict. We were not allowed to require masks, but I always made sure to, at the very least, ask them to wear one. If they weren't willing to mask, then I found myself assuming that they might not be vaccinated and that we are all put at higher risk. From the very beginning, I

viewed people who didn't mask as incredibly disrespectful, and this sentiment was echoed by many of the other writing consultants. This was also in line with how I felt when someone refused to mask during their appointment. In fact, it bothered me to the point of barely being able to focus on my own appointments, especially when I would spot another writing consultant at a table with a maskless student writer.

In talking with other writing consultants, I realized I was making judgments about students regarding their sense of morality, social responsibility, and their character based upon their masking behaviors or lack of. This affected our relationships as consultant and writer. I had been dancing around admitting it to myself for the longest time, probably before we had even been told that we were conducting in-person appointments again. I realized that I absolutely did not think that people who went against masking were good people. I think that I knew that I had felt this way, but I avoided the thought until reflecting upon my conversations with other writing consultants. In discussing what others thought about masking, I ended up confronting something about myself. Now that I've been able to reflect on it, are they awful people or are they just disrespectful and irresponsible? Is there a difference? Are they just denying that there is any danger? Maybe they had been preyed upon by people who exploited their ignorance and they themselves had been infected with this faulty rhetoric that the virus wasn't a big deal, or that they thought that the whole thing was just a hoax. Perhaps they were a part of the group that "knew the risks" when they rejected vaccines? This example in particular was always baffling, because to me it sounds like "well I know the risks I'm taking" regarding their own health, but what they get incorrect is that it isn't about them, it's about the people they end up killing by getting them infected. If asymptomatic transmission is as

prevalent as the CDC says that it is, then how would they even know they were ill?

Ultimately, what they are arguing for is the opportunity to do what they like regardless of who it kills. It is an argument to have the right to endanger others and not take responsibility for the results. There is a complete lack of empathy here, and there is no defense for it. The short answer as to whether they really are horrible people is complicated. It is, however, rooted in selfishness, ignorance, and a lack of empathy.

Writing center consultants commonly discussed among themselves mask conspiracy theories that surfaced in social media and student writing and especially the topic of the university's response to the pandemic itself. The complete lack of mask mandates or safety requirements baffled all of us, and the fact that the university itself didn't seem to care about our safety put us at odds with the school itself. There was distress at the fact that the school was asking us to work in a potentially hazardous space while being paid with money that we essentially had already paid into the university.

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I had always been told "the students' tuition fees pay your wages" but it somehow never occurred to me that I was one of those students until discussing pay with another writing consultant. I paid into the writing center funding too, and all of the money that I put into the university was basically just being handed back for my labor. This also raised another concern that I had been dwelling on. Why was it that it was the student writers' voices that mattered over ours? They were the ones putting us in a compromised position. We were all students too, so why exactly is it that our voices are valued less than theirs? They refer to us as peer tutors, but how can you be someone's peer if you are placed in a position of subservience to them in the same academic space that you are told you have

equal rights in? The fact that we are told that we don't have a choice during a health crisis, that we have no choice but to serve them, is, very frankly, bullshit. It's a slap in the face. I am reminded of Christine Hamel-Brown's words that we are essentially "marginalized and devalued when we are characterized as a 'service'" (455). This position that we have been placed in is a marginalized one that places the choices and voices of students who aren't employed by the university above those of us who are. We are placed in a subservient role despite being told that we were akin to peer tutors. How can you be someone's peer while being in a submissive position to them? We were told that students that could be carrying a virus that could kill our family members, a virus that had already killed a former writing consultant, would be coming to the writing center and if they didn't mask, then we had no choice but to serve them anyway. There was nothing ethical about that, and nothing could ever make it so.

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"Did you guys see that email they just put out? The one saying they expect to see a drop in the number of cases?" I asked.

We all sat in the reception area while we waited for our student writers to appear.

"No, what are they trying to do?"

"They're trying to say that on-campus infections are going to drop dramatically, and the day after they send out that email to everyone, they close all the testing centers on campus! Do they not realize that if you shut down the testing then OF COURSE your number of infections is going to drop! I swear they're doing this on purpose."

The writing consultants sigh and nod knowingly before one of them responds.

"Yeah, they'll do whatever they have to to stay open, I guess. That's shady. It's not like a

pandemic is dangerous or anything.”

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Gauging the university's response to the pandemic has been a very hit-and-miss topic. Truthfully, my views on it changed over time. Initially I had thought that the university did indeed have our best interests in mind in the beginning. When the pandemic began, there was a massive shift in how classes were taught. Most instruction initially took place over Zoom. Other courses were conducted face-to-face and masking was required. While I approved of most of these courses of action, I was still upset that anything was being instructed in person at all. The policy mostly held up during the Spring semester of 2021, but as soon as Fall came around, the governor announced that all the mandates were going to be lifted, claiming that the people would be able to have personal responsibility in taking precautions. Initially I thought it had to be a joke, something out of an article by *The Onion*. If I had learned anything from researching how people act during the pandemic the entire fall semester of 2020, it was that many people will not mask unless they are required to do so. According to a study carried out by Betsch et al. titled “Social and Behavioral Consequences of Mask Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic”, there is a very sharp increase in the adoption of masks by the public when mandates are in effect (21851). Further, those who do mask are viewed as being more prosocial and caring than those who do not (Betsch et al., 21852). If the university was an extension of the governor’s decisions, then that meant that repealing the mandates took away most of what was protecting us.

Writing centers are curious spaces in the education community. They are places of creation and collaboration, but they are also spaces that can either be comforting or (in



the case of the pandemic) harmful to both writing consultants and student writers. Covid-19 has warped writing centers, changing them into areas in which the real, genuine experience of getting help from the writing consultants is fraught with worry, distress, and even anger. The writing consultants have gone from being genuinely valued academics to a marginalized group that is told that they have no choice but to place themselves (and indirectly, their loved ones) in harm's way for low pay in the service of a university that tells them that, even though they are students, their voices matter less than the voices of non-consultant students. They are clearly not valued. The issues and changes were brought about by the metaphorical infection of a physical virus, one that has infected the writing center itself. If a comorbidity in a patient is described as conditions that occur with a primary condition, then my writing center has been infected by Covid-19, and marginalization, inequity, and a lack of ethics are its comorbidities.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION - A DIAGNOSIS AND PRESCRIPTION FOR THE FUTURE**

The pandemic has infected academic space and worsened several underlying issues. Many of the educational comorbidities outlined in this thesis must be addressed, a treatment must be prescribed. The flexibility with which we are able to adapt to a health crisis must be remembered as an absolutely vital point of focus. As evidenced in previous chapters, being caught when our guard was down was a massive problem for academic institutions and is still difficult to handle.

##### ***Comorbidity 1: Addressing Economic Disparity***

My first prescription is that there must be internet access for students at all levels and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as access to the devices necessary to use the internet for classwork. This was a serious problem before the emergence of Covid and, like an illness that could have been handled with preventative care, it flared up when another condition worsened it. It must be said that students should have reasonable and equal access to these resources regardless of their backgrounds. Students facing economic hardship must be provided with the resources necessary to take part in coursework and the academic services provided by the university. For example, students who are unable to afford a laptop or live in a household lacking internet access need to have such needs met, especially during a pandemic. A student without these services has a difficult time in a non-pandemic world, let one with a full-scale pandemic. Such students cannot participate in coursework, much less attend writing center appointments through Zoom. Additionally, when another health crisis occurs, these resources must be provided as quickly as possible and school programs should refer back to strategies that were successful for instruction. In the time between the end of the current pandemic and the

next one, preparations must be made to circumvent the difficulties faced by educators like the choir director and film professor mentioned in Don's interview.

### ***Comorbidity 2: Addressing Racism***

The second comorbidity is the issue of racism that was inflamed by Covid. As evidenced by Don in his interview, dealing with Covid also means dealing with the politics and social issues that accompany such an event. While writing center staff members create an environment of inclusivity, they (as well as all educators) must be more aware of the harm and suffering that marginalized groups bring with them into these spaces. Marginalized groups and minorities have all suffered disproportionately in many different ways. There is the issue of epigenetic trauma referenced by Baker et al. as well as the fact that, like many things in the United States, Covid "affects certain bodies unequally" (209). The trauma from the pandemic is yet another type of inherited trauma in the form of chronic pain, stress, and scapegoating perpetrated by an unjust government. Don's adopted nieces and nephews are just some of many thousands upon thousands of Americans who have suffered from racism, especially by the coronavirus. Indeed, many bodies are affected unequally by the virus for many reasons. My attempt at prescribing a treatment for such an insidious comorbidity is a call for stronger education regarding race and science. There is no good reason that children such as Don's nieces and nephews (or anyone else) should suffer the horrors of ignorant, racist propaganda that is put forth by carcinogenic leaders. Issues of race and ignorance are not issues that can be excised; they must be treated. The only treatment that could be effective is stronger awareness and acceptance of all groups of people and more accepting educational

curricula from the k-12 system. The patients best able to overcome these societal ills are students, and they need 100 cc's of Critical Race Theory and LGBTQ education stat. Don's statements serve to strengthen Baker et al's observation that this virus "has not created these structural inequalities; it has only made them apparent" (210) in addition to illustrating that these conditions that existed in a pre-pandemic world have worsened. The same statement can be made regarding the inequalities among students and student workers.

### ***Comorbidity 3: Student Worker Equity***

Possibly the largest of these comorbidities is the inequity placed upon student workers. There must be an effort made to foster greater equity for student workers. The benefits and rates of pay that are allotted to student staff, in addition to the lack of benefits like health care, was already a contentious issue before the pandemic and are made far more apparent by the health crisis. Student workers, as was pointed out in previous chapters, are paid back using tuition they already paid the university, work for rates that are criminally low for their expertise and time, and are only allowed to work equal to or less than 20 hours a week if the writing center's budget allows for it. This is especially true of graduate students, being that they already hold a degree in their field of study and are often in positions of financial difficulty. Asking student workers to work in a position that places them at risk of becoming infected with a novel virus whose long-term effects are still unknown, constantly evolves, and is highly transmissible while not offering fair rates of pay and/or health insurance is unethical. Placing students whose sole source of income is from their student job while they are in a position of risk while being required to take a full-time load of classes (the university requires that student workers at

the writing center be full-time students to be eligible for hire) is unethical. The most realistic treatment for this affliction is simply a higher dosage of pay. During my time as a writing consultant, we received a paltry raise of 25 cents for working during the pandemic. This amount is inadequate. More pay must be given or other benefits must be provided to further equity for student workers even after the pandemic is behind us.

### *Diagnosing Writing Center Space*

The changes to the space of the writing center had clearly affected the student writers and writing consultants. Changes like masking and social distancing were largely viewed as positive changes to the environment. The socially distanced tables provide the benefit of social distancing while providing enough privacy to have a comfortable appointment. Masking was viewed by both student writers and writing consultants as a positive behavior that made the space of the writing center more comforting and welcoming. It is significant that this was the case being that many of the things that initially made writing centers feel more welcoming in the absence of a pandemic (coffee, the freedom to simply relax and work on schoolwork at unoccupied tables, etc) were removed. In line with my observations regarding plexiglass in my autoethnography, plexiglass was viewed by student writers as being a useless fixture, one that gave the impression of a potentially dangerous area.

There is still so much more that we can learn from our experiences during the current pandemic. My examination of a single academic space during the Covid-19 pandemic is just one small portion of the academic body, and the entire body must be taken care of. It is my hope that the research, stories, and experiences that I have put forth in this thesis will serve generations of academics that come after me. There will be

another pandemic after we finally overcome the current one. My concern though is that we may become complacent in the time between now and then, that we might forget what we had to endure to make it to the other side of this crisis that may have permanently altered the ways that we teach and take care of students at all levels. I worry that the suffering of millions of Americans will become a hazy memory, that we will simply return to what was easy rather than adapting and preparing so that history is not repeated, that the social infection of the Covid-19 pandemic will not be a chronic one. I hope that this is of use to scholars studying the pandemic, but more so, I hope that this finds its way to scholars in the future during the next pandemic so that they might be able to say “no, not this time.”

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