

Donnie Sackey







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SPEAKERS

Ruby Mendoza, Donnie Johnson Sackey, Cadaxa Chapman Ball

-  **Cadaxa Chapman Ball** 00:00
be monitoring it. Okay. We are recording so
-  **Ruby Mendoza** 00:04
awesome.
-  **Cadaxa Chapman Ball** 00:05
This will all be on record.
-  **Ruby Mendoza** 00:07
Yes. My name is Ruby Mendoza. I'm a first year PhD student here in writing rhetoric and American cultures studying, potentially professional writing.
-  **Donnie Johnson Sackey** 00:20
hmmm, cool
-  **Cadaxa Chapman Ball** 00:21

And I'm Cadaxa Chapman Ball. I am a first year MA student here. I'm in the critical studies in literacy and pedagogy program, and I'm primarily interested in critical pedagogies.

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 00:36

And I am Donnie Johnson Sackey, I am a assistant professor here at the University of Texas, in Austin, in the department of rhetoric and writing, and I teach mostly classes in user experience, design, and environmental rhetoric.

R

Ruby Mendoza 00:56

Well, Donnie, thank you so much for agreeing to this. It's been months we've been emailing back and forth. My emails are probably annoying, but you've responded so kindly. Thank you so much. So again, this project is just storying the Writing Center here at MSU. There are several categories that we'll be talking over with questions. So context category: gathering stories, organizational culture, logistical questions. And then final, questions. So I'm going to begin with some context category questions. When did you work at the center, and who was on the leadership team?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 01:36

So I started in the Writing Center. My, during my MA was my second, some second semester, my first year of my MA. Um, at the time, Trixie Smith was the director of the writing center. And Diana Baldwin was the assistant director of the Writing Center.

R

Ruby Mendoza 02:04

Perfect. And while you were working? Where were the center locations on campus? Can you describe the spaces?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 02:12

Yeah, so I, when I first started, I was aware that there are multiple locations on campus, I'm not going to be able to tell you all of them, but the two that I knew primarily, we're the main Writing Center in Bessie. And the writing center that was in the library, I also know that there was an Online Writing Center. That happened predominantly in Second Life, I think the Writing Center was really interested in Second Life and built an outpost there. I know that there were, I think there was like one additional writing center that was in a kind of, like a, like a dormitory space slash classroom. Like, it's it's like the building was a dorm, but it also had classrooms in it. And I think there's a writing center there as well. Other

than that, I couldn't tell you some of the other locations, I thought there was one in the business school. But most of these other locations I just sort of heard about, I'd never visited I was mostly either in the library or in the in Bessey.

R

Ruby Mendoza 03:28

Perfect things. What services did the center offer while you were there, and like, for example, writing groups, face to face appointments, walk in services, online, etc.

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 03:41

So we had all those we had walk in services, so you could schedule ahead of time or you could schedule as you walked in. There were writing groups that were available that were facilitated mostly by sort of writing fellows. Um, there was workshops that were offered, particularly, I ran the navigating the PhD workshop with Marilee Brooks Gillies, um, I think that those were the only services that I can think of off the top of my head.

C

Cadaxa Chapman Ball 04:25

Awesome, thank you. We did one of these interviews with Marilyn. So I remember a little bit of that. We're going to ask some questions about gathering stories. So my first question for you is, from your perspective, when you think of the Writing Center at MSU is history, what comes to mind?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 04:47

This is very conflicting for me. I found the Writing Center at MSU, very scary. I found that place to be a spot that created a lot of anxiety for me. I absolutely hated working in the writing center. And not only did I hate working in the Writing Center, I remember when it was time for me, when I applied for the PhD. I had other offers from from from two other schools, and I was really considering going to those two other schools. And I knew that I was basically I was competitive, but I couldn't get any of the sort of top tier fellowships at MSU, because those fellowships are used to recruit people to MSU. Whereas I had a fellowship at another university, and it was a quite a nice fellowship. And the only thing that MSU could offer me was a fellowship in the Writing Center, which I did not want not because I hated writing centers, I actually loved writing centers. But my experience being in the center for the year and a half prior made me not want to have that experience again. And when I was coming in as a PhD student, the Writing Center had redid the fellowship, and they redid it. It used to be with any fellowships, right? You do your first year fellowship and the Writing Center, and then your last year, right, when you're working in a

recession or going in the market, you'll do in the Writing Center. Well, they changed it because it was a five year fellowship. And what they found figured out is that most of the people, would do the first year, they would go through four years, they would graduate, and then they would never come back to the Writing Center. Because they're they they didn't take that fifth year. So what they ended up doing was they restructure the program or the fellowship program, so that you did your first two years as a fellowship in the writing center. And that was a prospect that was really horrifying to me, only because I had those stressful experiences beforehand. And now I was under the prospect of having to be in the Writing Center for two years. So I was really literally looking at, and I remember seeing this, I spoke to Malea Powell about this, and I even spoke to Bill Hart-Davidson and I said, I don't want to be in the Writing Center. I can't do two years in the Writing Center. This is terrifying. And I remember Malea saying to me, I think I still have the email someplace. She's like, well, I she's like, I don't understand. She's like, uh, Trixie, is really happy and looking forward to you being in the Writing Center. And I just, I couldn't really go into all the details as to why I did not like it. But you know what, I took the fellowship, I came to you at MSU. I was in the Writing Center for a year and a half. And then some it was a year and a half. I think it was a Yeah, it was a year and a half. And then Jeff Grabil bought out the rest of my time, and I went to WIDE, where I worked as a research assistant for the duration of my time at MSU.

C

Cadaxa Chapman Ball 08:22

Thank you so much for for being honest about your experiences, I appreciate it a lot. The next question, I'm going to kind of shift a little bit. So like, how, how did you grow individually during this time at the Writing Center? Or how Didn't you grow? And have and did the Writing Center facilitate you reaching your personal and professional goals? Or how didn't it do that?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 08:54

Yeah, so, I, um, I think that, you know, it's really interesting. So we had the fellows program and part of the fellows program was was was designed to help us sort of grow as leaders, right, even I think, in a sense, grow as future administrators. What I can say is that, and I think I can echo another one of my colleagues, who I lived with, I'm not gonna say their name in the recording, but we both, you know, with sort of debrief after our meetings, our fellow meetings, because we lived together. And one of the things that we often came back to was the fact that neither of us were really getting much of anything out of out of being in the Writing Center. Now, with that being said, I know that there were some other people who were getting a lot out of being in the Writing Center. So So I sort of say that I was on the other side of the coin, I think that if you come into the writing center with no

leadership experience, or you haven't been put in a position to have been an administrator before, or if your goals are kind of a bit foggy, I think that, um, that being a fellow was a really productive space for you. The thing for me is that I already had a clear sense of, of what I wanted, and and who I was, and I'd already been put in leadership positions. And it wasn't as if the light Writing Center was giving me something that I had never done before. Right, I felt that a lot of the tasks that I was actually asked to do were pretty easy and rudimentary, right. And so I think that one of the reasons, there was an additional reason why I wanted to leave the writing center. And that was because I just kind of got bored. I got bored. And I felt that I felt like, it takes a very specific person to be interested in other people's ideas, especially if those ideas are coming from other disciplines. And I did find that I was interested in that work, I did find valuable, but at the same time, it got really repetitive. And it just got an interesting and it didn't work for me anymore. And so on a certain level, I just, I felt as if that space was just not a useful space for me. And that's why I left for WIDE. I will say that WIDE gave me an opportunity to do administrative things that I'd never done before. Um, and so yeah, the Writing Center was not very productive for me. I know, I know, that sounds like, I know that sounds terrible to say. But it just it just wasn't



Cadaxa Chapman Ball 12:04

Ugh no, personally, I definitely understand that perspective. So the next question we have kind of goes in a different direction, and then we'll kind of circle back to what we've been talking about. But do you recall any like outreach programs or significant events the center had, like done or created while you worked there? It's okay, if you can't,



Donnie Johnson Sackey 12:34

yeah, I feel that you know, it's funny, because I'm thinking that I'm, I'm blanking, because I feel like there was an outreach program. I think that we did, if I remember correctly, I think that we, because I was involved in this workshop a couple of times. We did some work with Upward Bound, specifically helping students with their, what you call it, with their like personal statements, applying to graduate schools, I'm applying to jobs, right. Like we did kind of a version of navigating the PhD or professionalization version of that, with the Upward Bound students. That was the only outreach activity that I remember the Writing Center doing. And I don't think that that was something that was initiated by the Writing Center. I think that that was something that was initiated by the outward or the Upward Bound coordinator at MSU.



Cadaxa Chapman Ball 13:51

Awesome, okay. I don't remember outreach programs that we've done, like last semester, so I can, I can understand, you know, it's hard to remember those things. Um, so do you think that there were any opportunities that the Writing Center missed during your time there or any opportunities that you didn't recognize until after your time there?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 14:34

No, I can't I can't think of I can't think of anything, honestly. In terms of the missed opportunity, I don't know. I think that often, I think that, I think that and I'm speaking as a PhD student right in the program, um, I a PhD student who was in a leadership role. I think that up opportunities and, and choices or at least potential opportunities, were often constrained by the structure of the Writing Center, right. In the sense that we were always asked like, sort of questions about like, what like, what type of mentoring would you like? But I don't think that there were a lot of sort of moments created, wherein we were empowered to sort of create initiatives, right, I feel as if there was a very small group of people who were more likely to develop ideas, and then bring them to the group, as opposed to, you know, people being empowered to develop opportunities as individuals. So I think in many ways, our choices were constrained. Again, I think the people who did really well, in the Writing Center were people who had envisioned careers doing Writing Center work in the future. And these are people who got to teach the Writing Center class, right, I think it's like a writing center theory and practice course. Some folks who taught that went on to teach writing centers, some are working Writing Center, some folks who taught that don't work in writing centers at all. I think that there is some question, I would say as to who had access to opportunities, and who didn't have access to opportunities, I think that there was some level of like, favoritism there. But I mean, I'm, I'm, I'm happy I'm where I need to be. So I'm not I'm not looking back at this in a bitter way. So

C

Cadaxa Chapman Ball 16:58

no, I don't think you come off as bitter at all. And I appreciate the perspective. Apart apart from from that, what is something else that you think that the Writing Center could have done better? While you were there?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 17:21

I think the Writing Center could have been less clicky. I think that one of the reasons why I hated the Writing Center and didn't want to be a part of that space, is that I saw really easily how sort of cliques develop in the Writing Center and the ways in which cliques were used to shut people out or create pariahs. And, and sort of make it so that that wasn't necessarily a comfortable space. I felt that that there were moments where things that

happened, and like I, you know, tried in earnest to do the right thing. And I can think of like, two incidences, and these are incidences that literally sit in the back of my mind, and I've like, they come up every once in a while. And they they're coming up now in this in my mind, as we're talking about the writing center. And I think that in these moments, there were there were times where I went to (in audible), I said, Hey, this thing is going on, this is what's happening. And basically, either I would get ignored, or it was sort of treated as if I had like a personal vendetta against someone. And what I've realized is that the the people that I had brought complaints about, were people who were favorites were part of like cliques within the the Writing Center, and I don't really have, I didn't really have a strategy or a way of sort of combating that or engaging with that other than I knew. Like, all I needed to do was just be consistent and continue on to sort of say, hey, this thing is happening. This is why this is a problem. And I knew that over time, it brought like, it created a perception of me. And in the end, I remembered literally I remember how I remembered my my last semester in the writing center because I was the coordinator for the library Writing Center. And there was this one particular co-worker Who was like, her behavior was habitual, I had seen this over the course of four years, what she was doing. And there was a coordinator who, a co-coordinator who was going to take over that role for me the next semester moving forward. And he was really incensed by her behavior. And her, he was like, I'm going to, I'm going to go and I'm going to report her to admin. And I remember saying to him, I'm like, Look, it's a waste of time, here's what's gonna happen, you're gonna report her to admin, they're going to say that you were influenced by me, hey, Paul, the door, I'm in the middle of an interview, they, they're going to say that you were influenced by me. They are going to pull her out of the satellite Writing Center, they're going to bring her to the main Writing Center where they're going to monitor her. And then after some time, because she's not going to do these behaviors in the main Writing Center, they're going to let her come back to the satellite, and all will be well. And I said, any like, well, that's fine, but I'm gonna do it anyway. And I was like, well, when you do do it, please do make sure that like, you tell them that you had this conversation with me and tell them exactly every single thing that I told you. And he did it. And he came back and he said it and I said, Well, did you tell them that I told you exactly what they would do? And he said, Yes. And I was like, Well, what was their face? And he was like, their face was very shocked. And I was like, thank you. And so I always sort of think about that, I think that the Writing Center was just very cliquey, and I hated it. I know that you're probably getting interviews with people who like loved it, but like, I absolutely, like hated my time there.

R

Ruby Mendoza 21:59

I also think that, aside from the questions that your experience, and your story is so important to hear, because I think people try to create this, like false idea of that writing

centers are these healing collaborative spaces when there are tensions. So I just want to say, I'm really enjoying and thankful for your genuine honesty,

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 22:20

thank you, I do appreciate it. I'm not again, I am not trying to shit talk anyone, but I'm just gonna be absolutely honest. Like, I hated my time there (laughter).

R

Ruby Mendoza 22:33

No, and off topics while we are recording, I just did a podcast for my MA program. And I didn't, I wasn't talking smack. But I was against inherently White, there's no culture, we don't think about intersectionality. And those things were true. And the department chair was like, I agree, and we're, we're changing the program, because of you, so they're so like, there's real things that can be considered and thought about,

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 22:55

I'd also kind of want to echo this. And I do think that this might sort of fall under the category of missed opportunity. I felt that the Writing Center was a very white space. And I felt like there. I know, it's there's this kind of thing that happens with people who are liberal, or at least perceived to be liberal, or perceived to sort of have the same politics were in, I think they're less likely to address or see problems, because they, they don't see them as being issues. But whiteness was definitely kind of specter over the writing center. And to be honest with you, um, I don't, you know, I have to sort of sit and marinate and think about this. And sometimes I wonder if some of my uncomfortability being in the Writing Center was that it was just so White. And I know that like the people that I'm good friends with in the Writing Center to this day, and I still talk with like my friend, Ashnita (do not know if this is the correct spelling). Or even some other folks like the folks that I do keep in touch with the non-white people who worked at the writing center, I don't know what that's all about. But we spent so much time with each other. And I found that one of the things that we tried to do a lot is we tried to coordinate our schedules together so that we would sort of be in person or be with each other. So that just came up in my mind as you were saying that.

C

Cadaxa Chapman Ball 24:42

No, I find your perspective really refreshing personally, as someone who hears a lot from everybody around me that the Writing Center is this beautiful, wonderful place and I'm grateful for the opportunities that is given me and I'm also currently employed by the

Writing Center. So you You know, I definitely feel like I have to be a little careful about the things that I say. So, you know, since since you were gone and are doing great things, now you can you can come back and give this perspective. And I appreciate that. And for sure it is, it is still a very white space, every Writing Center I've been to is very white space. And, you know, I definitely I do contribute to that, obviously. So, yeah, some of some of these questions like, now that we're having this conversation, definitely feel like, I don't know, almost inappropriate to ask. Because our next question is, what is your favorite Writing Center story, but I think like,

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 25:45

Well, I do have a favorite Writing Center story. Um, and I tell this story, like, I have like, two, but like, I'm one I just don't even think is like, appropriate to even, like, share. It's mostly because it just, it sort of gets into the area where like, sort of, like sexual, like, sort of, like sort of sexuality becomes like, kind of like, humorous, because you're like, well, what is it that we're actually doing in this moment, and then another involves like, um, sort of conflict, which I think in this weird way, like writing centers, kind of like operate under the same sort of weird mantra that you see in retail, where the customer is always right. And I think that we try to sort of cater to the customers need, especially when customers are, like, are recalcitrant, and just like, inherently not good people. Um, so like, sometimes I should sort caveat that caveat there. I remember there was this one time, I was working on, someone that came in, it was just like, it was a walking appointment. And it was a person with a paper. And to be blunt, the paper was, um, it was a manifesto. But it was a manifesto on bottoming. And it was a man, it was a paper that he wrote for a class. And I remember, we were going over the paper. And it was for me, it was funny, because like, like, obviously, I'm gay. And there's like a lot of like, it was it was me sort of looking at it from trying to look at this from like, a serious academic standpoint. But I'm like, Oh, my God, this topic is insane. And I'm like, in my mind, I was like, Oh, you're gonna submit this for a paper in class. But I remembered we went over it is a fine paper. And I was, you know, giving serious feedback. And I remembered that the question that he'd asked, was, he's like, well, I want this to be impactful. And I want this to sort of like, like, you wanted to circulate it, and he wanted it, um like, to sort of do some work in the world. And I can't remember exactly what I said. But I was like, I'm like, it was one of those things where I was like, this is this is a funny, but also important topic. But then I had this try to figure out a way like broaching the subject by saying, like, this manifesto isn't the most unique manifesto in the world, like, you can go on online, you can go on Reddit, you can even go anywhere, and you're probably gonna find manifestos of like, people sort of declaring, like, bottoms rights, like it's, it's, it was just one of those things where I'm like, like, this is like a funny interaction in the Writing Center. But it was also a really sort, it was a, it was a moment that that sits with me in the sense that like, when you work in writing centers, you

never know who's going to come through the doors, and you never know what you're actually going to be asked to read to read. And for the most part, you always know on some level, you're going to find some engagement with the subject matter, right? Like I always felt like, writing centers gave me an opportunity to engage and learn from other people. And it's moments like that, that I think, really kind of tested my character as a person. Because I think that when people come with you come to you with stuff like that they're trusting, you right? And to not be judgmental, and to create, like a safe space where you can talk about ideas, and, and sort of feel like you're not being judged. And I think on a certain level, that is one sort of that story is kind of a story that like I carry with me, particularly today as a faculty member, because I have students who are writing about all sorts of things. I have students who talk to me individually about all sorts of things. And one of the things that I think students like about me, I think this is something that some of my colleagues like about me is that I'm really good about not being judgmental. I'm really good about taking situations that I think people would feel really nervous about, and kind of pulling the humor out of it. And I think that's what I was doing. In that moment. Without paper. I'm like, What are like, what are we? Like? Are we doing this right now? Okay, bye. All right, let's do it. Um, so I think that, that, that moment stands out to me, and I always come back to it. Especially the moments where people brought papers that, you know, topic wise, I found reprehensible, but I still had to figure out ways to like, you know, to help them achieve the goal that they had. Um, the next story involves, this poor student was just like a mess. She, um, there was a, it was an MA student, in German. This is, this is my last semester in the Writing Center. So I had very little fucks to give. And she came to the library Writing Center, and she was harassing, she habitually would harass consultants. And there was a consultant who is in the middle of working with with another client. And for some strange reason, she felt that it was appropriate to interrupt that session. And she was trying to get feedback from from that consultant. And the consultant was like, I'm in the middle of this, but she wasn't really taking no for an answer. And she, she'd done this habitually. So you know, finally, I just kind of, I'd worked with her before, and I just looked up, I was like, mame, can I help you? Like, what was the problem he's working, and she just went into this profanity, laced tirade against me. And I remember, like, part of our training, we were always like, no, like, try to de escalate the situation, try to remain calm, you know, try to be respectful. And I think in that moment, I was like, no. And I think that, like, there are two things you could do that you could get angry. Or you could just kind of, sort of, you know, turn it into like a humorous situation. And I turn it into a humorous situation. I don't know why. But for some strange reason, having someone call me a son of a bitch and flip me off in the middle of the library just seemed insane. And I just kind of just, I don't know why I can't ever have things I said, but I know that it did involve laughing at her, apparently laughing at her disarmed her, she left the scene and then went and complained to a reference librarian that I had laughed at her. And it was I don't know, it's, it's like these two memories stick in my mind, because

umm, in a way, like it wasn't, I think it was important for the other consultants to see that you don't have to behave rationally with someone who is behaving irrationally, with you. And that this, this idea that you have to give like respect to another person who is harming you, or insulting you, as being a sort of implicit or explicit policy of the Writing Center is actually really dishonest and harmful. And so hopefully, I always think at that moment, because I know that there are other consultants that were there. And I want to believe that they sort of saw a lot more agency with respect to that situation. And so those two moments always stick in the back of my head with respect to the Writing Center. So I don't know if that's what you were going for with respect to stories, but those are my favorite stories.

C

Cadaxa Chapman Ball 33:56

I love both of those stories a lot. And they really show like just your sense of humor and the way that you deal with, you know, unexpected situations. Yeah, I love that you laughed at her, I think I think that's hilarious. Um, alright, let's, let's move on a little bit. Okay, so this question is during your time at the center, did any significant world political or university events occur like a pandemic? Can you describe this centers approach or response?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 34:34

I mean, there were. There were lots of things that were happening on campus. I don't really think the center was very much dialed in to those issues. I mean, MSU has HR I think the chapters the font, but the only chapter of young Americans for freedom in the United States to be designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center was at MSU. And so Yaffe was doing a lot of events on campus, like, for indigenous peoples day, in the Virgin Islands, we saved Puerto Rico vi Friendship Day, but they would host catch an illegal immigrant days, and they would put these fliers around campus. And obviously, they would go around profiling students. Um, they did a lot of events like that. I don't think the Writing Center ever really responded to it. Um, I think that the Writing Center, in many ways was a very A political space, I just don't think that they were like, even like, with respect to like union issues, like everybody who is a grad student that's working in the Writing Center is technically a member of the Union. The Writing Center, really didn't engage in any type of like, sort of union activity, or at least I don't think that we were encouraged to sort of engage with with with any type of activity that was coming out of the Union. Um, no, I think the Writing Center was very aloof to any I mean, maybe we painted the rock one time, I don't know, but I kind of feel like that's just like, what's the point? You know? Just like, I don't know, maybe if they were, in this, this might be like, really kind of, like crass to save. There, there could be, there could be times where we just kind of focus on gender and sexuality issues, or sexuality issues. But the reason why, like,

I'm just kind of like, whatever about that is that I felt that at the time, the Writing Center when it did sort of address issues of sexuality, it was from like, a very, sort of, like, white gay perspective, or theoretical perspective. And so I was just kind of like, what, I don't know just kind of threw my hands. I was like, what, what's the point these these are not like the people who are here are not necessarily people who I have political community with. And these are not the people that I'm organizing with. And so, in many ways, it was easy for me to see them in the space as being A political, because I didn't necessarily think that like my struggles, or my interests in the political or policy room intersect with them in any way.



Cadaxa Chapman Ball 37:36

Thank you. Yeah. disappointing to hear about the Writing Center, but not completely surprising. Okay, last question in this section. Is while you were there, were you aware of how the center was perceived by others, including faculty staff, the community or larger field?



Donnie Johnson Sackey 38:00

Yeah, I mean, I think I think, larger field now, I don't think anybody really cares about MSU Writing Center. University, yes. I think that one of the things that MSU Writing Center, I think most writing centers, often tried to sort of combat is like this idea of the Writing Center being a space where you're just there to sort of do editing, right to sort of check grammar, and in fact, is the place where you come to sort of talk and develop ideas. I think that is a never ending struggle in the Writing Center community. I think that writing centers have tried to do all sorts of creative things, from changing the names, from tutors, to consultants, and to tutees to clients to changing even the names of writing centers. So I knew that there was this big sort of movement away from like labs, like calling like writing labs and calling them writing centers, because labs sort of have like, this science like formulaic approach. So I think the Writing Center in terms of its perception to the university community, was always going to be something that's always gonna be an issue that the Writing Center is going to combat and that was definitely something that they were trying to combat. When I was a consultant, I think in the department and from the standpoint of students in the program and faculty perspectives of the Writing Center, I think that it's really important to contextualize that. I existed in a very interesting point in the history of rhetoric and writing at MSU because I don't know if you folks are aware, but um, and I think the Writing Center still like this, but um, rhetoric and writing WRAC and the Writing Center, used to always be three separate entities. Rhetoric and writing was a free floating program in the College of Liberal Arts. WRAC was actually a department but it was a department that was ran by American Studies, which is now defunct, and the

Writing Center, which is basically like a free floating entity in the college. And so as a student, um, your life in, I guess that sort of ecosystem was largely dependent upon where you got your funding. So if you were a TA, you were primarily in WRAC. If you were a fellow, you're primarily in the writing center. And if you were a fellow, like you got a university fellowship or whatnot, you were in rhetoric and writing and your office was literally in Old Hall, because that's where the, that's where rhetoric and writing primarily used to be located the first the basement of old, Old's Hall. So in in a lot of ways, the reason why I bring this up is that my last year in the Ph. D program, that's when R&W began to be absorbed by WRAC. And I think the year after that, that's when we took over leadership of WRAC and Americans Studies faculty, either stayed or left, or retired, right. And so I think that for a lot of folks, the Writing Center was just kind of like its own thing, in the sort of rhetoric and writing ecosystem, in the sense that I think a lot of people didn't have to interact with it. And so if you don't have to interact with something, you don't really have your opinion of it. Most of the people who had opinions of WRAC, oh not WRAC, of the Writing Center were people who literally had to deal with the Writing Center, or interacted and say, deal but interact with the Writing Center. So if you were a TA in rhetoric and writing rhetoric in American cultures, what you were dealing is you're probably interacting with the Writing Center in the sense that, you know, you're asking consultants to come and give presentations to your classes, or you were taking your classes to the Writing Center for a presentation on writing center services, or your students were coming to the Writing Center to actually work on on their stuff. Or you had an opinion of the writing center because you work in it, right. So you saw the sort of day to day functions and the comings and goings. So that's kind of like I give you like three different or four different tiers of people's perspectives to the Writing Center. But I think that that's how I would sort of, say faculty and students, proceed the Writing Center.

R

Ruby Mendoza 42:53

Thank you so much, that that's super interesting to hear. I didn't know any of that, of those distinct organizations. We're moving into organizational culture. And some of the things some of the questions, it feels like you've already answered them. I'm just gonna repeat them, because we're required to. So the first question is, how would you describe the key values, pedagogies, or culture of the Writing Center at Michigan State University?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 43:32

Do you hear those crickets?

R

Ruby Mendoza 43:35

Absolutely. There is the answer. Should we move on to the second question?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 43:40

Yea,

R

Ruby Mendoza 43:40

Okay, perfect. What tensions did you experience individually, organizationally and globally while working at the Writing Center, did the center helped me navigate those tensions?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 43:52

Absolutely not. The center created those tensions. I'm trying to figure out how to talk about this damn woman without actually like using her name. Yeah, I should. I should. I can't be nice. So I should pass on this question.

R

Ruby Mendoza 44:13

No, I think that is super valid. And we never want to put anyone in harm or a potential risk. I absolutely agree. So the third question, whether intentional efforts in place to recruit staff across disciplines, for example, can you describe the recruitment process for graduate and undergraduate consultants?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 44:32

So I think that they were in the I think that I will say this, I think the Writing Center was always interested in making sure that they had people coming from a diverse set of disciplines. And I know that that was part of having so they did have a satellite business writing center that's just sort of coming into my mind, and I know they tried to get students from the business world to sort of participate in the Writing Center. I know that, for the most part, if I can remember correctly, most of the folks that did work in the Writing Center were other folks that came from Wracor folks that came from English. And again, I feel like that's not really different from a lot of writing centers, because I think that the the sort of pipeline for recruitment really comes out of the out of these traditional places where writing centers have been traditionally housed. Right. I think for the most part, even though every single discipline on campus has a stake in writing, and can talk about how to write in their specific discipline or field. I think for the most part, people will always think of either writing programs, writing departments, and English departments as

being the primary places where people, or the primary pieces where folks are gonna be more concerned about that, and I might even throw in TESOL programs, and this might actually get back to issues with the Writing Center, I mean, I need to sort of formulate my opinion about it. But I remember the ways in which ESL, I felt like the Writing Center could have played a larger role in sort of facilitating discussions around how second language English as a second language learners, or speakers, I should say, we're sort of treated within the institution, because there were definitely, I remember, there were students, and I remember going to Wells hall with a student, because I was just so incensed. It was a, it was a, it was an undergraduate student. And the thing that, like I was really concerned about was that there there was, there was, there's very little help that I could give her in that space with respect to her paper, because there were there were larger structural issues that needed to be addressed, in the sense that, um, I think at the time I said, I am concerned about there, there was a way in which they're sort of their, their, their English proficiency, I felt, may create, like barriers. Not necessary just to success of the university, but just like navigating day to day life, like in East Lansing. And I'm like, they're like, I wish like there has to be like some type of like, free like language services that were available. And at the time, I don't know if that's helped, or that's approved, it's kind of wasn't, at least there wasn't anything that that student didn't have to pay for out of pocket. And at that moment, that's when I saw like a real sort of breakdown in the sort of ways in which we use TOEFL scores to admit students in the program, because what ends up happening is is like, okay, you can pass a test, but you pass a test, and you bring that student to university, there's like, that that test score assumes a lot about that student, that is it really sort of bringing into focus what their material reality actually looks like. And, um, and the fact that there weren't support services for the students, the fact that we know that students who were taking, I think at the time, it was called, um, preparation for college writing PCW, which was the sort of basic writing class before you get into the rack, 113, yada, yada, yada courses, these are classes that I knew students would have to take two, sometimes three times at zero credit right? Over and over again, because, they were there were issues with their issues with their ability to sort of like use English, that the university was not interested in helping them with, right. There was no programs for that. And so I wish that the Writing Center had taken more of a role to be a leader in helping faculty and the university understand that the students just did not have the resources that they need. And I know that that might be tangential to the question that you asked. But the question that you asked, like, helped me to sort of think back to another question that you asked previously. So thank you for that.

R

Ruby Mendoza 49:52

No, absolutely. That was well put in that something deeply to consider ways that we're failing students and that was a moment. That's true. So that's powerful. If possible, could

you share with us about the design and implementation of the undergraduate course to train undergrad consultants for the center? If so, when did this occur? And what was the rationale behind creating and requiring this course?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 50:20

Oh, God, I don't think that that course existed when I came. I think that I think that if it's the course that I'm thinking about, it's the visit the Writing Center theory and practice course.

R

Ruby Mendoza 50:31

Yes.

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 50:33

I think the first time I was aware that that course, that I personally was aware that this course was taught, and I'm not sure if it was the first time that that course was actually taught, was when Matt Cox taught it. I don't think that that I don't know if that course had been taught beforehand. I could be wrong. It may have been. But um, I don't know anything about the design of that course. I know that, um, we did have sort of, in the summertime, right before classes started, we had a writing center orientation, when we just sort of brought in all of the the Writing Center staff in and that would be just like a way of sort of, I guess, creating community. And sort of setting an agenda, not just for this semester, but for the entire year. And I felt like that was a crowd of mixed people, some who were consulting for the first time, I remember hearing an undergraduate student complain. And this complaint seem pretty valid to me, or it seemed valid to me. And that complaint was not really understanding why undergraduate students were required to take the course. But graduate students weren't required to take the course in order to work in the writing center. And, you know, like, I don't really like Personally, I don't have an answer for that. I don't have I never I didn't have an answer for that at the time. But I do think that it's, it's one of those. One of those things that I'm not really sure anybody was really interested in answering. And it kind of made me think, if that course was for that sort of requirement that was attached to the course was really just kind of a way to sort of retain enrollment in a class. So of course, for the sake of a course, not necessarily a course for the sake of improving people's knowledge about the Writing Center. This is again, this is speculation. Feel free to ignore. But I do think that that is something that someone said to me that I was like, I don't I don't have anything to say about that. Because I think that that is a valid criticism.



Cadaxa Chapman Ball 53:02

I had the exact same complaint when I was an undergrad in my writing my undergrad institution, because we had to take a training course and the graduate students did not. Also, I'm very thankful that the undergrads get paid here, because I did not get paid as an undergrad writing tutor and I had a full training course. And then the graduate students had like two weeks of training, and they got paid. So you know, at least at least the undergrads are getting paid here. But I also have definitely thought that that, you know, graduate consultants are not, in my opinion, any more prepared than undergrad just by virtue of being grad students. So I'm glad you brought that up, because I'm kind of passionate about that. But, alright, we're gonna move on to some just logistical questions. And then we'll have one more set of questions after that. So when working in the center, how did you organize and facilitate consultations?



Donnie Johnson Sackey 54:09

Um, so I think what I traditionally did was, obviously started by reading the paper out loud, and I would, you know, I would give them either the client, I would give them the opportunity either to read, or if they prefer that I read, which I was hoping he would not do, but I would say 90% of the time, they would ask me to read out loud, and I think a lot of it was that several people just is very weird and awkward, but several people were just like, I just really liked the sound of your voice. And so I'm like, but people, people are weird. But like, what I would do is, I would have like a system of markings that would have like, pencils, and different color markers, and I would tell them What I was doing ahead of time, sort of say like, I'm going to be, as I read this lab, I'm going to be making sort of notes. And basically, as we make notes, we'll be able to sort of come back to this. I think with individual papers, that was a lot easier, oftentimes, excuse me, you would have students who would come in with dissertations. And the dissertation students were a little bit harder, because they were not interested in talking about ideas, they were just really interested in editing services. And those were usually like hour long appointments. I think that, if I remember correctly, I used to have someone that he people used to schedule like, like two back to back hours, especially if there was like a vacancy. And I think there was a policy that was put in place that required like a breakup. But what I would do with those, because it's just kind of insane to like, read entire dissertation, I said, Alright, let's sort of break this up by chapter. And we can just like, read a chapter in this session, and we can just like sort of go through the entire chapter and read it once and then sort of talk and talk about what it's like afterwards. Or, what we can do is we can sort of talk through the chapter. And so I would give them a little bit more of an option on how to structure feedback. So that it, it wasn't exhausting for them. But it also wasn't exhausting for me at the same time, and then just sort of agree to have like a standing appointment where they would come back and we can continue with the rest of the document.



Cadaxa Chapman Ball 56:46

Awesome! Thank you. That's that's kind of how my session scope to. Alright, do you remember ever receiving or being directed to a handbook when you were hired?



Donnie Johnson Sackey 56:58

I, was there a handbook? I think there was a handbook. And if there was, I didn't read it. I think I think there was a handbook, but like, I doubt that I read it. Yeah.



Cadaxa Chapman Ball 57:17

All right. Cool. Please describe that. Sorry. Um, could you describe the center's approach to hiring, and, or like onboarding and training?



Donnie Johnson Sackey 57:33

Um, I don't think I can just, I don't think I can describe it, it. I don't know if there was really a formal process to it. I know that orientation was a big thing. But like, you, I think you had a probationary period, where when you first started out, you had to be for the most part in the main center. And I think a lot of that had to do with wanting to observe, like newly hired people to make sure that they had good practices. And I think that there was kind of a limit on how much you could work when you were first hired. Um, I always thought it was weird, because like new consultants would come in mid year, but they didn't necessarily have the same sort of like requirement as consultants who maybe were coming on in the summer and in in full, like, sort of consulting mode in the fall, and it seems that those would have to go through the Writing Center orientation. Um, so I think, I don't know, I think that the sort of hiring and, and, and onboarding was very inconsistent, but I think that it release were dependent upon when you came into the Writing Center during the time of year.



Cadaxa Chapman Ball 58:52

Awesome, thank you. Okay. Last logistical question is do you remember any kind of general concerns about funding?



Donnie Johnson Sackey 59:00

hhhhmm, no.

R

Ruby Mendoza 59:12

And we reached the final questions, tada! based on your current work in the in academia, what you've learned, what have you Wait, what you have learned since leaving the Writing Center at MSU? What advice would you provide to your past self working in the Writing Center at MSU? I can repeat that if that wasn't clear.

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 59:35

Yeah. What advice like I give to myself or

R

Ruby Mendoza 59:39

what have you learned since leaving the Writing Center and what advice would you give your past self?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 59:47

First bit of advice I give my past self is you have healthcare through the Graduate Student Union. Go and get a prescription for anxiety meds, it will save you a lot of time. The second advice that I would give to myself is this is a, this is a temporary situation, do not stress yourself out. The other advice that I would give myself is every opportunity. Like I think that up. So I think that I was really good about taking opportunities while I was in grad school, in the sense that you never really know what you want to do. Unless you, you've tried it. And one of the things that I did was I said, Well, you know, I've worked in the Writing Center, but I've never worked in a writing center as a as like a full time or a sort of quasi administrator. So let me go ahead and try this. And I saw it didn't work. And I said, Well, you know, I've never ran a research center as an assistant. So I'm going to go ahead and do that, right. So I kind of treated MSU as an opportunity to sort of like test around different jobs. And I think that if I could go back to the past and talk to my prior self, I would say like the sort of way in which you're approaching work at MSU, like you're doing a good job, this is going to benefit you in the future, because you will have a good sense of what you want to do, and also what you need to say no to. And I think that if anything, I would like my sort of presence, in that moment to pass off of mine would just be to sort of affirm the choices that I've made, and to sort of tell myself to, to keep on that track, because and I'll sort of frame this by saying the people who I was in the writing center with, who framed their entire experiences as students around the Writing Center, we all have different career trajectories. I think that when we I noticed this, I remember saying this as a student, but I thought that it became very apparent when we were all on the market at the same time, because I think that so many, because I think that like a

handful of people framed their identity around the Writing Center, I think it was it was it was more difficult for them. When they were applying for jobs, we know the job market, because they really couldn't talk about themselves outside the context of the writing center. And perhaps maybe that was kind of a failure on the writing centers part in terms of helping students to professionalize themselves and to think about how they could translate those experiences into into stories that I think potential employers would understand as as being translatable or skills that are translatable. And so what I will say is that, that's why I say, I'm going to go back and reaffirm the decisions that were the choices that I was making at the time, or thought I would make because, again, I those job group sessions were interesting, because I came in some days and people were crying, and I was like, What is going on? And I just, I just didn't, I didn't understand it. But I also realized that a lot of people were crying because I think they made terrible decisions early on. So this is also me. Because I know that y'all are students, and I don't really know, well, y'all are all new, you're relatively new. I spoke to your class, I believe I saw your class with Alex. The thing that I'm trying to say in this moment is that every single opportunity you have and I may have said this every single opportunity that you have to do something that's different. Take that opportunity, people will tell you that you are making a mistake that it is wrong. I will tell you that those people are giving you bad advice. Do like this is this is your one time but it's probably your last time this is your last time to experiment with things at like a at with very little cost to yourself. Right. And I think that the best that you can do is to take those opportunities and put them on your CV and even if they're not things that you follow up on, they become stories that you can talk to people about in the future. And you know what, in all honesty, as much as I hated working in the Writing Center, I have have eight years of writing center experience between MSU Writing Center and the University of Tennessee Chattanooga, his writing center, which I love. And one of the things that I can say is that if and when I get tenured, if I were to ask if I were asked to run the Writing Center at at here at UT, I would absolutely do it. Because I have the experience. And and I took that opportunity to get that experience. And if I were asked to do that at UT, like one of the things that I would sort of walk into that experience with is on, how can I make this place not like the place that I hated? How can I make this place enjoyable for the students who are working here, all students who are working here? So yeah, I think that's, that's how I would answer your question. Are those a very long winded way of answering it? I know, there was some advice that was laced into it. But I think that that is probably the most important message that I have to offer.

R

Ruby Mendoza 1:06:08

Hey, I deeply value that. I am valuing everything you are saying just like snapping over here. Not really, thank you. Do they know who you're interviewing me by the way? Ughhh, Yes, they do.

D Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:06:21
That I'm sure. I'm sure they're probably wondering is like, what is this bitch gonna say?

R Ruby Mendoza 1:06:27
Whoaaaaaa

D Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:06:28
Like, I'm, like, I have a I have a reputation in that program. (laughter)

R Ruby Mendoza 1:06:37
So there's questions. Is there anything else that you'd like to share about the history of the center? You know, I think that, you know, the Writing Center is actually a really interesting space in not, and I would sort of come at this from not necessarily the history of the center, but the history of the rhetoric and writing program. When I think of the rhetoric and writing program, I think of four spaces, one of which isn't even relevant anymore. But anyway, Olds Hall, I think of Bessey Hall. And I think, specifically of Bessey 317. And I think of the writing center. And the reason why I think of the Writing Center is I think that for the purposes of the R&W program, the Writing Center, oftentimes was a central hub, where, you know, people would just come together and talk with each other, right? share information, share stories, eat right there, there was that central, like kind of bar or food would be you just like walk in and get food. This is where we had a lot of the department talks where job candidates came to speak or where people who are giving lectures would come to speak. And so I think, the Writing Center, I think, the sort of history of the center or just even the history of the center in relation to the R&W program. I think it's always has been, as long as I was there an important gathering place, right, regardless of any of the others that that was surrounding the department. I felt that the Writing Center was a really important space for people to decompress to gossip. Yeah, it was a good space. I love that so much. And finally, is there anyone else you would you worked with at the writing center that we should reach out to potentially

D Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:09:09
Yes, um, there are a lot

R Ruby Mendoza 1:09:13

Name drop, Donnie name drop.

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:09:15

I don't have I don't I have some I don't have all of their emails. I have some of their emails. I'm Ash Mita Gupta. A s Ah, have you interviewed her already? Are you reached out to her? No. Okay. ashrita goop a s h, m i t a. Gupta. g-u-p-t-a. She's in Australia in Melbourne, Australia. I could try to get her contact and that'll be a fun.

R

Ruby Mendoza 1:09:44

Please, Donny.

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:09:47

There's Cassidy Kettner. I don't have I think I can get in contact with them on Facebook or on on LinkedIn. Owen Kilmer is another one. Um, see who else asked me when I'm trying to think of people who don't. Who I still in contact with. Who else? I think that those would be the folks that like I can. Oh, yeah, Abby Brengle, a b b y. And b r e n g l e and her husband, Noah Ulman, Ulman, u l m a n, and they both worked in the Writing Center. At the time we overlapped. Yeah, I think that those are all really good people.

R

Ruby Mendoza 1:10:55

Perfect.

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:10:56

You also spoke to. Well, you're only looking at consultants, right?

R

Ruby Mendoza 1:11:00

No coordinators?

D

Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:11:01

Have you all spoke to Dave Sheridan at all?

C Cadaxa Chapman Ball 1:11:04
We might have. I can check.

D Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:11:07
Dave Sheridan was the person who ran the Writing Center before Trixie got there. I don't think we have Yeah, y'all should interview Dave Sheridan. Okay. Especially and if you haven't entered, like after Dave Sheridan, another person. What is this lady's name? Oh, god, it's is it Nan, Jan? Oh, there is there's a lady before the woman there's a woman before Dave Sheridan, who went, she left the Writing Center and went to the College. So she basically is in the role that Bill Hart-Davidson is in right now. And I can't remember her name. I want to say it's like Mr. Jan Swearigen and keeps coming in my head. But it's not Jan's origin, it's that that's a different person who passed not that long ago in our field. But I can't remember a map to ask bill HD about it. I can't give you the name. But like those two people, I think are interesting. From an institutional standpoint, because the Writing Center I've always remember when I came in, I came in with Trixie who had recently been hired. And a lot of the people who were there had overlapped when Dave Sheridan was a director Writing Center, and some of the folks talked specifically about how the how much the Writing Center had changed. And some of those changes for the most part, I think they felt we're not we're not good. And so Abby and Noah are two people who kind of overlap I believe with with Dave, I could be wrong, but I think so.

R Ruby Mendoza 1:12:48
Sorry, my cat keeps scratching me? That is so good to know. And if you could send us names and emails, Donnie, we would value that.

D Donnie Johnson Sackey 1:12:58
I'll make that part of my mission today.

R Ruby Mendoza 1:13:01
Yay. Well, thank you so much, Donie. We're gonna stop the recording.

C Cadaxa Chapman Ball 1:13:07
I can go ahead and stop it right now. So

