

Invisible Identity: Working With Low-Income Students

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The Issue:

In the writing center, an effort is made to be cognizant of a wide range of student identities, but there remains an identity that has gone largely unaddressed: socioeconomic identity. According to Harry Denny and Beth Towle,

"Class, despite being ubiquitous, is not necessarily an addressed phenomenon, even at our most social justice-oriented writing centers"

As higher education becomes more accessible, a rising number of students from low-income backgrounds are attending college. This remains true even at highly selective universities albeit to a lesser extent. (Cilluffo and Fry). However, their retention rates are significantly lower than students from higher-income households due to a complex combination of personal, financial, and academic hurdles that other students may not face. To address some of these issues and make higher education a place more accessible to students of all classes, the Writing Center is a key resource. What are some methods to better align the Writing Center to meet the needs of low-income students when socioeconomic identity has been a taboo and underresearched subject?

Tutoring Methods:

Students from low-income backgrounds are often at a fundamental disadvantage when it comes to entering and trying to succeed in academic spaces. They often lack what David Bartholomae calls a **"commonplace"**, a **"culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement that carries with it its own necessary elaboration"** (7). Trying to catch up while dealing with financial stress and other personal issues that go hand-in-hand with low-socioeconomic identity can be overwhelming. Writing centers can help fill in knowledge gaps and better acclimate students to university writing conventions by teaching them these commonplaces without forcing them to go out of their way to seek extra help.

This can present a roadblock in sessions because advisors/tutors are often biased against direct instruction due to writing center scholarship that largely pushes towards getting students to reach conclusions on their own. However, research shows that working-class students often want and ask for direct instruction but are left dissatisfied by sessions that only offer them motivational help (Denny et al.). Because of this, advisors must be adaptable and be willing to adjust to the student's needs even if it requires them to act outside of what they are normally comfortable with. When it comes to learning the conventions and expectations of college-level academic writing it is sometimes better to simply instruct the student rather than encouraging them to come up with the answer on their own (Shamoon and Burns). Try to address any issues head-on at the beginning of a session. Work together to outline a plan and get a sense of what specific instructory elements you may need to address at the beginning of a session by asking questions about their familiarity with writing in the respective discipline or their comfort level in presenting the information.

Lastly, be prepared if you cannot address all of the student's concerns within the limited time of a session. Be able to direct them to resources they can use when the session is over and they have to carry on the work alone. This includes directing students on where to find information on citation styles, formatting, or other resources that may be of use.



Foster a Dialogue:

One of the most effective ways to actively address socioeconomic class in the writing center is to create an open dialogue. Unfortunately, economic background is not the easiest or most comfortable topic of conversation. It can carry with it many traumatic experiences. Because of this, it is important to conduct this discussion in a way that recognizes and is sensitive to these experiences.



One way to go about this is for writing center staff to actively engage with their own identity and talk about it with each other. Clients of the writing center are not the only ones who must deal with this aspect of identity. Robert Mundy and Rachel Sugerman advise against viewing student identity **"as a writerly issue, one that is brought into the session by the client, and not a concern that consultants must be aware of and contend with themselves, about who they are and how they approach their work."** Implement reading and articles about socioeconomic identity in writing center training to start this conversation. Build up an understanding of intersectionality among tutors/advisors because socioeconomic status often goes hand in hand with other identities and can manifest itself in different ways. By understanding the multifaceted components of intersecting identities, writing center staff will feel more comfortable engaging in these conversations amongst themselves and enable them to better understand how it might affect sessions.

The difference between whether or not a student makes the decision to come in for a session could hinge on what extra resources like food or access to a comfortable space are provided to them. Students should be made aware of any extra resources the center provides through an accessibility statement or other method. Provide a physical space for students to sit down and work. Other resources to consider are school supplies, reference books, and free snacks or drinks. Ensure there are directories to other campus resources such as counseling, job services, student groups, and other services. During this time when many writing center services have moved online, students should still be able to access some of these resources remotely through links on the website or by talking with advisors. Staff should also be aware of and able to offer these resources to students when the need presents itself. The awareness of and the presence of these additional resources can help to alleviate potential discomfort when conducting these conversations and create a space where students feel comfortable engaging in them. I

Another solution, offered by Denny and Towle, is to publicly publish writing center data about low-income/working-class students so they are able to see themselves and become more comfortable talking about the subject. As with anything, the more a subject is researched the more we will learn about it. As of right now, compared to other aspects of identity, socioeconomic identity in the writing center is severely underresearched. Research, on top of helping to start a dialogue, can be one of the best ways to discover the needs of students and come up with solutions. It can help us to be more aware of what resources to provide and how best to tailor our tutoring methods to help these students. Studies done on other aspects of identity can often easily be replicated and adapted to explore socioeconomic status. Include the students affected by the research at all levels of research and continue getting their opinion to ensure it is being done in a sensitive and respectful way.

Conclusions:

The age of intersectionality in the writing center demands the recognition of socioeconomic identity. As the demographics of higher education are changing so too must the writing center. It is our responsibility to create an open and safe space where students can feel comfortable, welcome, and have their needs met. This means evolving and adapting to the needs and traumas of all student identities including socioeconomic identity. This change requires a willingness on the part of writing center staff and the ability to listen and learn from the students they serve and adapt to their changing needs. To understand and acknowledge the unique challenges that low-income students face. To provide additional resources and access to services outside of our primary function. It requires an open dialogue to be built around socioeconomic identity, the same that has been done with many other aspects of identity, and along with that dialogue, more research must be conducted. The interpersonal relationship between student and advisor is a key part of what makes writing centers effective. This requires advisors to be **flexible** and adapt to a student's needs when the method they are taught or are comfortable with does not satisfy that need. To be **sensitive** and provide a space where low-income students can feel comfortable and supported. And to be **open** to new ideas and new ways of operating. The acknowledgment of socioeconomic identity helps us to better serve the student population and fulfill our promise to help all writers.

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