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“Maybe He’s the Green Lantern”:  
Low Socioeconomic Status in the University Writing Center

By

Wyn M. Richards

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Shari Stenberg

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2018

“Maybe He’s the Green Lantern”:  
Low Socioeconomic Status in the University Writing Center  
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University of Nebraska, 2018

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University students with low socioeconomic status face a variety of unique challenges. With income inequality rising amongst the general population in the US, the gap between students with high socioeconomic status university students identifying as having low socioeconomic status is also increasing. This master’s thesis examines scholarship regarding students with low socioeconomic status at the higher education level, through the lens of composition studies, turning the spotlight on writing center studies. Through an Institutional Review Board approved, qualitative research study, the gap in scholarship on the role socioeconomic status plays in the university writing center is examined. This qualitative study, sent to 153 (garnering 18 replies) higher education writing centers across the United States, asked questions regarding the use of writing center tutor/consultant training texts that specifically address the intersectional identity of low socioeconomic status, the existence of accommodations for writers with low socioeconomic status in the writing center, complimentary services offered to writers beyond that of writing tutoring, and feedback survey content completed by the participating writers in each individual writing center. In the discussion and conclusion, the implications of the research study are examined, along with suggestions for writing tutor training and accommodations in writing centers considering writers with low socioeconomic status.

**Keywords:** class, socioeconomic status, writing center, writing tutor training

## Introduction

In an episode from season nine of *Seinfeld*, “The Strongbox,” Elaine meets a new love interest. This man exhibits some puzzling behavior, including refusing to give Elaine his phone number, or telling her much about himself, running away from a woman on the street and displaying a vast knowledge of the side streets and alleyways of Manhattan. These incidents lead the gang to the conclusion that he must be a superhero or, much more likely, married. Later, Elaine believes the man’s wife is confronting her, but this woman turns out to be the man’s “welfare” caseworker. He’s not the Green Lantern; he’s poor. *Seinfeld* is one of the highest regarded situation comedies in US television history, but the truth regarding low socioeconomic status is far from a laughing matter. However, the takeaway from this particular *Seinfeld* episode is that it is impossible to divine, just from outward appearance, what a person’s class or socioeconomic status is. In fact, the four friends jumped to the fantastical explanation of Elaine’s new boyfriend being a super hero, rather than having poverty figure into the equation.

This example raises the question of what low socioeconomic status looks like. Certainly we’re all familiar with Internet memes showing stereotypically poor children – large, sad, sometimes tear-filled eyes, shabby, torn clothing, and dirty faces. But this is hardly an accurate or appropriate representation of poverty or low socioeconomic status. In fact, with income inequality growing in the United States, more and more citizens are classified into low socioeconomic status. In a 2015 article, Nicholas Fitz writes for *Scientific American*,

The average American believes that the richest fifth own 59% of the wealth and that the bottom 40% own 9%. The reality is strikingly different. The top 20% of US households own more than 84% of the wealth, and the bottom 40% combine for a paltry 0.3%. The Walton

family, for example, has more wealth than 42% of American families combined. (scientificamerican.com)

This illustrates a critical and fast growing problem in the US. Bernie Sanders made income inequality the foundation of his campaign for the 2016 presidential race. Former President Barack Obama referred to income inequality as “the defining challenge of our time.” Even comedian Chris Rock has weighed in on the topic of income inequality. In the same article from *Scientific American*, Rock is quoted as saying, “Oh, people don’t even know. If poor people knew how rich rich people are, there would be riots in the streets” (scientificamerican.com). Needless to say, income inequality, and as such low income/low-socioeconomic status is an issue that the majority of US citizens face, and as such, many university students may find themselves in an unexpected socioeconomic situation.

In various disciplines in academia, it is generally understood that socioeconomic status and class are prevalent intersections of identity. As Evagelina Holvino states in her article, “Intersections: The Simultaneity of Race Gender and Class in Organization Studies,” “The intersections of race, class, and gender are an accepted reality in the fields of women’s studies, feminist theory, and literary criticism” (248). Holvino argues for a reconceptualization of what these intersections mean in feminist organizational studies – giving class/socioeconomic status the study it deserves, as such an important intersection of identity. Not only is this reconceptualization needed in feminist and organizational studies, but also in writing center studies particularly due to the recent rise in the amount of university students identified as having low socioeconomic status.

This discipline of composition studies has recognized the need for considering socioeconomic status in writing. In her 1998 article, “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class

Enterprise,” Lynn Bloom writes, “Freshman composition, in philosophy and pedagogy, reinforces the values and virtues embodied not only in the very existence of America’s vast middle class, but in its general well-being – read the ability to think critically and responsibly, and the maintenance of safety, order, cleanliness efficiency” (34). In 1998, the middle-class was still “vast.” However, as journalism has reported, the US middle-class is rapidly shrinking, income inequality is growing. The gap between college students with low socioeconomic status and students with higher socioeconomic status is growing. According to a December 2015 article from *The Hechinger Report*, a publication of the Teacher’s College of Columbia University, dedicated to covering issues of inequality in education,

Rich kids go to elite private and flagship public campuses while poor kids — including those who score higher on standardized tests than their wealthier counterparts — end up at community colleges and regional public universities with much lower success rates, assuming they continue their educations at all. And new federal data analyzed by the Hechinger Report and the Huffington Post show the gap has been widening at a dramatically accelerating rate since the economic downturn began in 2008. ([hechingerreport.org](http://hechingerreport.org))

For a more personal look at income inequality on university campuses, the online financial news source, *MarketWatch* published the 2015 article, “The Ivy League’s Hidden Poor,” written by Jillian Berman. Berman highlights the story of Columbia University student, Chris Sinclair, a “poor” student on a campus with a pervasive perception of wealth. Berman writes,

Ever since he came to Columbia last year, Sinclair, who is in his second year at Columbia’s School of General Studies, says he has been well aware of how

his “normal” is different from that of other Columbia students; whether it’s turning down a night out because he can’t spare the extra money for drinks and subway fare or struggling to make sure his tuition balance is current so he can register for classes. (marketwatch.com)

Sinclair’s experience at college is not a very middle-class endeavor. Columbia University is in New York City, a location that most likely skews toward a higher socioeconomic status and class. It does appear that Sinclair’s experience at Columbia isn’t an aberration. In the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, an undergraduate student publication, Ana Gonzalez wrote, “To my Fellow Low-Income Students.” In the article, Gonzalez writes about “coming out” as poor to her fellow Columbia students, and how that process, although uncomfortable, isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Gonzalez states, “There are more Columbia students than you think who face similar problems. Fifteen percent of undergraduates at Columbia are first-generation students, and while first-generation and low-income don’t always go together, the backgrounds are usually similar. If you do the math, that’s over 900 undergraduates at Columbia who are likely going through a situation similar to yours”(columbiaspectator.com). Both of these articles put a marked personal spin on often dehumanizing effects and devastating numbers regarding income inequality, and university students trying to get by.

Studying low socioeconomic status and class in university systems continues to be a much-needed academic conversation. There is a significant body of scholarship surrounding writers who identify as working-class or having low socioeconomic status in composition studies, however, this scholarship and research needs to extend to writing center studies. Current searches in the archives of *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, *The Writing Center Journal*, and *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship* produce zero results when searching for articles

discussing the direct relationship between writers with low socioeconomic status in the university writing center. Considerations of class and socioeconomic status are an important identity marker, which deserves serious attention from writing center scholars and researchers.

Just as with any aspect of any person's identity, we, as writing center professionals, just like our writers, are not merely one-dimensional, thus, in writing center scholarship, implications of socioeconomic status must begin to be given the same amount of scrutiny that race, gender, and sexuality have been given – from all perspectives. In fact, with most higher education English departments, as well as most higher education writing centers being committed to advocating for social justice, particularly surrounding identity, it is critical that the importance of social class be figured more prominently into writing center scholarship.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln writing center's mission statement includes the sentence, "The UNL Writing Center also contributes to the English department's mission of fostering imaginative reasoning, with its emphases on social justice, diversity, community and civic engagement, and belonging--values that are at the heart of the work we do" (unl.edu). The Boise State University writing center's mission statement expresses its commitment to helping and accepting all students. "Because we appreciate the courage it takes to share writing, we respect all the identities, cultures, and points of view writers bring to the Center" (boisestate.edu). The University of Washington-Tacoma writing center's mission statement goes even further,

The writing center works from several **important beliefs** that are crucial to helping writers write and succeed in a racist society. The racist conditions of our society are not simply a matter of bias or prejudice that some people hold. In fact, most racism, for instance, is not accomplished through intent.

Racism is the normal condition of things. Racism is pervasive. It is in the systems, structures, rules, languages, expectations, and guidelines that make up our classes, school, and society. For example, linguistic and writing research has shown clearly for many decades that there is no inherent “standard” of English. Language is constantly changing. These two facts make it very difficult to justify placing people in hierarchies or restricting opportunities and privileges because of the way people communicate in particular versions of English. We also realize that racism is connected to other forms of social injustice, such as classism, sexism, heteronormative assumptions, etc., in similar ways. We promise further to do our best to compassionately address these issues as they pertain to student writing as well. (tacoma.uw.edu)

The writing center journal, *Praxis* published a blog post, “Writing Centers as Spaces for Dialogue about Social Justice” on February 6, 2018. The Midwest Writing Center Association conference in March of 2018, a featured theme of, “Social Justice in the Writing Center: Opening the Center for All.” From blog posts to mission statements, it is clear that social justice is a value of myriad university writing centers and writing center professionals, and as such socioeconomic status based research needs to be given a chance to “catch-up” to other important intersections of identity.

Like many other identities, economic status is most often not available as a series of visual cues. Due to the stigma surrounding poverty and being a poor person in the United States, most students with low socioeconomic status and low income are not likely to self-disclose to a tutor. Socioeconomic status can be far more important in the life of a university writer than

writing center professionals may know. If a student writer isn't eating because of lack of funds, it might be difficult to care about a pending writing assignment.

With social justice being an important value found in university writing centers, it makes sense that socioeconomic status and students' basic needs should be a focus of research in the university writing center. Herein lie my own research interests in the intersectional identity of low socioeconomic and its challenges in the university writing center. But, perhaps more importantly, my own experience as a single mother, living below the poverty level as a non-traditional undergraduate student and graduate student, has strongly contributed to my passion for this research. The university writing center is in a privileged position where personal relationships between writers and tutors/consultants are often nurtured through recurring appointments and more personal discussions that often accompany writing projects, and as such can lead to collaborative problem solving, not just with writing projects, but personal challenges that may be inhibiting productive writing.

### **Literature Review: Socioeconomic Status in Higher Education, Composition Studies, and Writing Center Studies**

Socioeconomic status and the role it plays in the success of university students is well studied. Perhaps one of the most important documents considering university students with low socioeconomic status is the Federal TRIO Programs home page on the US Department of Education website. The TRIO program was a response to the 1965 "War on Poverty." On the TRIO home page, links to program information, news, reference documents, newsletters, organizational charts, etc. According to this home page,

The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from

disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs. TRIO also includes a training program for directors and staff of TRIO projects. (ed.gov)

Through the TRIO program, grants are given to institutions of higher education in order to give additional support to these disadvantaged students to enable academic success, retention, and ultimately graduation. Within this home page, a vast array of information exists from demographic statistics to instructions on how to run TRIO programs.

In 1993, editors Michelle M. Tokarczyk, English faculty at Goucher College and Elizabeth A. Fay, English faculty at University of Massachusetts-Boston, produced the reader, *Working Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory*. Although this reader specifically addresses the intersection of gender and class in higher education considering faculty, the book highlights the challenges that people identifying as working class/low socioeconomic status face in higher education. In the preface to the book, Tokarczyk and Fay write,

Our intent was to engage useful ways of conceptualizing class to understand more fully the emerging issues of contemporary academia. The anthology's diversity may perplex some readers accustomed to a more unified approach within a collection. But by selecting multidisciplinary essays written from different feminist ideological perspectives, we seek to represent more accurately the variety of voices that make up our pluralized academic community. What does unify the collection is a repeated attempt to

conceptualize class position in relation to other factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. (vii)

Tokarczyk and Fay, in 1993, introduce the essential consideration of class/socioeconomic status when examining intersectionality.

In their 2005 article published in *Qualitative Sociology*, “The Interactive Relationship Between Class Identity and the College Experience,” authors Elizabeth Aries and Maynard Seider argue that institutions of higher education are concerned that the majority of their students come from upper middle-class backgrounds, excluding working class students. Aries and Seider write, “The top colleges draw three-quarters of their students from the wealthiest quarter of families in America, and only three percent of students from the poorest quarter. Lower-income white students in particular are underrepresented at highly selective colleges and universities, and with only 1% of white matriculants coming from families with incomes below \$22,000 with two parents who did not attend college” (419). Because of this, Aries and Seider interviewed students with low socioeconomic status with the intention to “understand how class-based aspects of identity shape the college experience, and how the college experience influences the class-based aspects of identity of lower income students” (420). In the discussion portion of the paper, Aries and Seider come to the conclusion that,

The findings of this study have important implications for faculty and administrators at prestigious colleges and universities, where disparities in wealth among students are great. As these schools commit themselves to recruiting more low-income students, and to counteracting the reproduction of social advantage, attention must be paid to how to best support and incorporate lower income students into the life of these campuses. (440)

Recognizing the challenges that these students face, even after the implementation of TRIO programs, shows just how unique challenges of class and socioeconomic status are. TRIO programs began to be established in 1965, yet this article was published in 2005, demonstrating that the challenges of class and socioeconomic status have not been solved.

In another 2005 article, “I am Working Class”: Subjective Self-Definition as a Missing Measure of Social Class and Socioeconomic Status in Higher Education Research,” Rubin et al write,

Worldwide, universities are striving to provide a curriculum and student services that support expanding and diverse participation and the needs of a 21st-century knowledge economy. In order to maintain its relevance, the education research community needs to provide robust and informative research that accurately defines, describes, and communicates the increasingly diverse demography, experiences, and outcomes of university students. (199)

This article adds to the existing conversation about socioeconomic status and class in higher education research. Rubin et al argue that the working class/low socioeconomic status student self-determination of class be used for considering assessments on class, rather than that of their parents.

Wolfgang Lehmann’s 2009 article, “Becoming Middle Class: How Working-Class University Students Draw and Transgress Moral Class Boundaries” examines through interviews with working class students aged 17-21, asked motivations for attending university, and the influence of other people on that decision. The interview subjects were also asked about their higher education expectations. In the conclusion, Lehmann discusses the motivations of the interview subjects in attending their university – primarily social mobility and the liberation from

financial struggle. Of particular importance is Lehmann's focus on the subjects' ability to reflect on their assertions. Lehmann states, "This article has documented working-class university students' realization of the structural disadvantages they encounter while simultaneously constructing moral advantages that help them overcome these disadvantages" (643). This idea of student reflection supports the earlier writings of Rubin et al – placing the focus on the students themselves, not on parents or institutions.

In his 2005 article, "Teaching Work: Academic Labor and Social Class," Bill Hendricks examines the idea of the college level teaching as a working class occupation. Hendricks goes on to examine the for-profit aspects of higher education, particularly the student loan industry. Hendricks writes, "Higher education would not be expanding in today's economy, whose every inch and hour is becoming commodified, if it could not be sold for a profit" (592). Hendricks goes on to discuss the decertification of academic work, highlighting the problematic nature of adjunct instructors replacing more costly professorships, as he leads the reader through the problems with low salaries and the lack of job security. Hendricks' piece addresses a critical piece of the puzzle regarding the working class and those with low socioeconomic status in higher education.

To narrow this literature review, class and socioeconomic status in composition studies shows a deep commitment to taking the challenges of working-class and low-income writers in college composition courses very seriously. In his 2001 article, "Returning to class: Creating opportunities for multicultural reform at majority second-tier schools," John Alberti writes about the "downfall" of humanities departments, and the "erosion" of full time, tenure track faculty contributing to the "vocationalist restructuring" of many college campuses. Alberti examines the fact that most universities do not attend top-tier, elite universities. Alberti writes,

Such models obscure the fact that most college students in the United States do not attend elite, selective-admissions four-year institutions. By neglecting this fact, we fail to come to grips with what is a major class division in American higher education: the gap between first-tier, selective-admissions schools and second-tier, open-registration, regional two- and four-year colleges-what I call "working-class" colleges-that represent the majority of institutions of higher education. (563)

This certainly gives interesting context to Bloom's "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Endeavor." If more university students are enrolling in Alberti's "working-class colleges" then it is logical that more class considerations should be invoked when teaching freshman composition, perhaps steering the focus away from the elite university model itself.

In "Class Affects, Classroom Affectations: Working Through the Paradoxes of Strategic Empathy," Julie Lindquist discusses an important point in the opening. Lindquist describes how discussing working-class experiences can become contentious. Lindquist writes,

A well-known rhetoric scholar demanded from a panelist discussing strategies for teaching working-class students how she knew that her students were in fact working-class. The questioner added that her own sister was working-class but would be mortified if anyone presumed to identify her as such. On another occasion, a man in the audience angrily wanted to know how the panelists, each of whom was narrating his or her experience of being and being represented as a working-class academic, had the nerve to call themselves working-class, when his own experience was so different. (187)

This opening describes much of the complications regarding class and socioeconomic status concerning college composition. It is next to impossible to tell someone's class or socioeconomic status just from looking at them. And, there is still a considerable stigma surrounding the working-class and those with low socioeconomic status. Lindquist goes on to examine the rhetorical difficulties of truly understanding what class means. Lindquist states, "If critical inquiry can't supply mechanisms for uncovering truths about social structures, power, and class identity, then what resources are available to teachers in this effort? The short answer is that these resources lie within the domain of the emotional: they include students' affective experiences of class and teachers' affective responses to these experiences" (188). Understanding class within composition studies is complicated, but critically important.

In his chapter, "How Social is Social Class Identification" from *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*, Tony Scott writes about the idyllic university campus, the separation from what Scott calls the "real world," with, "Architecture that is ready-made for pictorial montages; magazine rankings; branding slogans like "Dare to Be Great" and "Thinking Ahead"; and sleek Web sites—in some cases actually featuring models posing as students—are combined in marketing schemes calculated to attract students and dollars" (109). However, Scott argues that the boundary between the pristine university life and "real life" are not so clear. Scott states, "The working lives of students and many of their writing teachers are significantly shaped by the terms of work in fast-capitalism—on a daily basis" (109). No more is the ivory tower fantasy of higher education in the public consciousness. Scott continues to discuss the disheartening neoliberal values that have found their way onto the university campus. Scott writes,

A number of very contemporary factors make it as important as ever that class be made more conspicuous in the public political discourse, including the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States; the systemic political disenfranchisement of the less- and under-privileged; an increasingly transnational economy that puts labor at a disadvantage globally; and the neoliberal philosophy that has pervaded all spheres of society, including government and education. (110)

Scott emphasizes the important role that writing instruction plays in this situation – closing the gap between the “higher” and “lower” classes.

In “On Class, Race, and Dynamics of Privilege: Supporting Generation 1.5 Writers Across the Curriculum” by Kathryn Nielsen does not specifically address class in the writing center, this article does address writing across the curriculum. Writing center professionals are nothing if not agents of writing across the curriculum. Nielsen defines Generation 1.5 writers as, a diverse range of multilingual, immigrant learners who were born and educated outside the United States and who enter the US educational system while in the process of learning English. Because generation 1.5 students arrive with vastly different educational, political, social and economic histories, it becomes imperative that researchers and instructors broaden and deepen their understanding of their students’ academic realities. (130)

Interestingly the crux of Nielsen’s piece is reporting the findings of a qualitative study regarding the institutional discrimination against these Generation 1.5 writers. Nielsen’s sample size was very small, only consisting of 5 students between the ages of 19-22, who were born in the Dominican Republic. The implications of this study completed in 2014 indicate,

While the findings from this study reflect a relatively small sample of students, they provide needed insight into the experiences of resident, multilingual writers who are navigating predominantly White, monolingual, socioeconomically privileged classrooms and campuses. I was surprised yet heartened to hear that the students overwhelmingly felt their instructors valued the diversity of thought and experience they brought in the classroom, especially in light of the fact that the instructors did not formally inquire about their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. (145)

Nielsen's study supports the ideas of previous composition and writing center scholars, through affirming diversity, supporting writers' using "they own" English, and recognizing that each student writer is an individual, with individual talents and challenges.

Other important pieces that write about class and socioeconomic status in composition studies are, "The Reification of the Basic Writer" by George Jenson, books, *Contingency, Exploitation and Solidarity*, a reader edited by Seth Kajn, William Laliker, and Amy Lynch-Binick, and *Writing Assessment, Social Justice and the Advancement of Opportunity*, edited by Mya Poe, Asao B. Inoue, and Norbert Elliott. Writing assessment may not take place in the writing center, however, one of the most common motivating factors in students visiting the university writing center is to receive a "good grade" on a writing assignment. Poe et al, through this book, also highlight two tenets of contemporary scholarship in composition and writing center studies, social justice and opportunities for all.

While many writing center scholarship/tutor training texts address several of the facets of intersectional identity, such as Harry Denny's essay, "Queering the Writing Center," Barron and Grimm's "Addressing Racial Diversity in the Writing Center," and Julie Neff's

“Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center,” there remains one glaring exception, particularly considering the topic of this master’s thesis. Class and socioeconomic status are considerably under-examined in writing center scholarship. The last piece of this literature review focuses on the scholarship that is available.

In a recent interview with Rose Jacobs for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, regrettably titled, “What’s Wrong with Writing Centers,” Temple University writing center director, Lori Salem addressed Jacobs’ questions regarding the “fact” that writing centers “attract students of lower social privilege. Is there anything wrong with that. Salem replied, “Writing centers are very much in the business of trying to not be perceived as remedial. The early developers in our field had the idea that you have to reject that if you want to preserve any status for yourself. And if that’s the goal, then we can’t but interpret the fact that we attract low-privilege students as a bad thing. To me that interpretation is horrifying” (thechronicle.com). Salem went on to say, “Two co-authors and I have a paper coming out soon that is a qualitative study of working-class students’ experiences in writing centers” (thechronicle.com). Salem addresses the work that still needs to be done in the writing center when considering these underserved students, stating,

We could celebrate the work that we do helping students integrate into the university, and maybe especially the students who are struggling to be at the university. The thing that drives me absolutely crazy is that we are, in fact, doing that, but because we do not acknowledge that we are doing it, we have not built a pedagogy that actually serves it. We should be a laboratory for understanding the kinds of pedagogies that would work for these students. Instead we’re busily

denying that they're there, and then applying pedagogies that work really well for privileged students. That's not helpful. (thechronicle.com)

These thoughts were previously addressed, even if more generally, in Salem's 2014 article, "Opportunity and Transformation: How Writing Centers are Positioned in the Political Landscape of Higher Education in the United States." This article addresses many concerns about the positionality of higher education writing centers. For the purposes of class and socioeconomic status, Salem addresses how higher education institutions with high rankings and high status favor student admission of high socioeconomic status, while the lower tier, unranked institutions are where working-class students attend. Salem writes, "By and large, the institutions that are least likely to have writing centers are lower tier colleges that attract students with the least privilege: working class students, including many who are first-generation college students, racial minorities, and adult working/returning students" (35-36). This highlights the need for considerably more scholarship regarding university writing centers taking more care to understand the needs of their writers with low socioeconomic status.

Harry Denny's *Facing the Center: Toward and Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring*, and within it, the chapter, "Facing Class" is one such piece of scholarship. This is truly the only recent piece of writing center studies scholarship that discusses class and socioeconomic status. Denny writes of the importance of considering class, "It's hard to imagine class cleaved from other aspects of who we are since they are so intertwined with one another" (62-63). Denny points out the critical aspects of intersectionality, yet provides a sound reason for missing scholarship regarding class and socioeconomic status in writing center studies. Denny goes on to discuss the erasure and marginalization of working-class (academic code for anyone who is NOT middle or upper class) in composition studies. Denny states "In so many ways, what

we're pressured to do in writing centers is to cleanse working-class students of their identities, to enable them to start read and sounding like right-proper middle-class folks" (72). This paints a bit of a dismal picture – as if the purpose of the writing center is to stifle “unacceptable” voices. Yet for all of the talk in writing center studies, and more broadly, in composition studies, about encouraging the different Englishes all of our students bring to academe, we can't quite seem to bridge the gap between writers using “they own” English, and access to legitimate academic discourse. Denny continues these thoughts, writing “As hyper-attuned as academics are to working-class rhetoric and vernacular of outsiders in the midst, they also seek to eliminate it, telling students to adopt, without question, academic discourse practices that propose to be neutral. These default position are anything but; by positioning academic discourse as anything but *that*, the discourses that working-class students use, their language practices and community instantly signify as exterior, opposed to but also constituting as academic language” (72-73). Due to these mixed messages, it is no wonder that any student that isn't middle to upper class feels pushed out of the university. Of this, Denny goes on to write, “I do often hear students whispering to one another insider knowledge about how to navigate the waters of this or that professor, colleagues of mine whose arbitrary rules and regulations for essays range from the esoteric to the convoluted” (81). Within this chapter, Denny often implicates himself as a gatekeeper. However, Denny does not leave his reader hopeless. Denny writes about how many universities profess not to see class – to be the zenith of democratic opportunity. Denny states, “I'm struck by the sheer diversity within our writing centers and our general stasis toward not engaging that diversity” (82). Yet, by dedicating a chapter of *Facing the Center* to class and socioeconomic concerns, Denny elevates this intersection of identity to critical mass.

Nancy Grimm's *Good Intentions* discusses issues of class to a certain extent. In the chapter "Cultural Denial, or, Let's Pretend Identity Regulation Doesn't Happen," Grimm cites Lynn Bloom's "Freshman Writing as a Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise" and discusses Bloom's experience with missing presentation proposals on class for an MLA conference. Grimm writes, "She tells how when she was chair of the MLA Division of Teaching Writing in 1993, she issued a call for papers on race, class and gender in composition studies, and received only one proposal on class – in comparison with a dozen on race and ninety four on gender" (60-61). Grimm goes on to cite historian James W. Loewen regarding class, and Barbara Ehrenrich's book *Fear of Falling*, writing "Class is kept as a invisible issues because it contradicts the "our great country" story" (62). However, Harry Denny's "Facing Class" truly is the only text that directly addresses class/socioeconomic status and its intersections in the university writing center. We must discuss all aspects of our diverse identities – writers, tutors, and administrators.

Through database searches and conversations with the director of my institution's writing center, I felt as though I knew what scholarship was in existence regarding the challenges of writers with low socioeconomic status in the university writing center. I was curious if other writing center directors/administrators might be able to point me in the direction of their own research, or research in their own institutions regarding the intersection of class/socioeconomic status and the writing center. I also had an interest in how many tutor training texts would intersect, institutionally.

With the IWCA 2016 conference on the horizon, I decided that a research project was in order. After all, in their book *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice*, authors Rebecca Day Babcock and Therese Thonus write, "writing center practice has been based largely on lore and application of theories from related fields rather than on research

results” (31). If I could tap into the lore, by way of research, found in other writing centers, perhaps I could discover more, unknown-to-me texts regarding low socioeconomic status and class that I wasn’t aware of, and also see the connections between writing tutor training texts used in a variety of institutions.

## **Methods**

I first began this research project with the purpose of presentation at the International Writing Center Association (IWCA) annual conference in October of 2016. I knew that quantitative research would be challenging, as writing center research isn’t exactly rooted in a mathematical, numerical abstraction. Additionally, quantitative research would leave me wanting further explanation of and conversation about these “hidden” texts. I took my cues from Babcock and Thonus. As Babcock and Thonus write, qualitative data analysis “focuses on qualities, non-numerical patterns in the data” (43). I was confident that using qualitative data analysis, the information I received through this research would answer my questions about tutor training texts/scholarship regarding low socioeconomic status in the university writing center, and, as a result of this research I could compile a list of common texts, utilized by other writing center directors for training tutors that will help other writing center administrators, directors, and tutors in outside institutions. Additionally, I could research what, if any, accommodations for writers with low socioeconomic status are available in different institutions.

Bearing in mind the IWCA 2016 conference, for Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval, I designed four, simple, and purposefully, open-ended research questions: 1. What specific texts do you use in the training of writing center tutors/consultants, considering low socioeconomic status/class/poverty as intersections/challenges in the writing center? 2. In your writing center, in addition to consulting/tutoring, what services are available to writers/clients

that are free of charge? For example: Computers, Printing, Coffee, etc. 3. Do you survey writers/clients to ask what services, in addition to help with writing, would be helpful? Are your surveys anonymous? 4. In your writing center, do you assist writers - and if so, in what ways - in accessing information regarding campus services and community services that focus on low income, poverty, domestic violence, child care, mental health care, etc.?

I decided that the easiest, and most efficient way to conduct this research was through email. (See Figure 1.) I reached out to 153 institutions of higher education. For each state, including the District of Columbia, via publically available email addresses on institutional web sites, I contacted writing center directors from one large, public, state university, one liberal arts college, and one community college. In order to select these institutions, I did a Google search – for example: “Nebraska colleges, Minnesota colleges, California colleges, etc.” The large state schools were easily chosen. Community colleges were widely available to choose from in each state. When choosing liberal arts colleges within each state, I often chose the school appeared first in the Google search. However, this was a more difficult process, as some states with smaller populations, such as Idaho and Montana, did not have several liberal arts colleges to choose from. If the name of a liberal arts college could not be located, I chose another branch of a state university, or an additional community college campus.

If writing center director contact information was unavailable, I sent emails directly to the writing center or general tutoring center. There was a considerable variation in how different institutions handled the online presence of their writing centers. All large state universities, and liberal arts colleges, regardless of their location, had a dedicated email address available for the writing center director, though sometimes it was not easily accessible on the writing center home page, and required a little bit of digging. However, Community Colleges were a different story.

Some community colleges, particularly those in a more rural setting, did not actually have a writing center proper, but had writing tutoring available through a student success center/tutoring center. When this was the case, it was difficult to find a name to target. Much of the time, my option was to send an email to a general email box, tangentially related to writing tutoring.

## **Results**

Out of 153 emails, at the writing of this thesis, I have received 18 replies. I am uncertain as to why the response rate was so low. The emails were sent between September 15 and September 19, 2016. Perhaps it was too soon in the semester to expect fuller participation. Perhaps the writing center professionals I targeted were too busy preparing their own projects and presentations for IWCA 2016. Most of these replies came back to me very quickly, and I was pleased to have the opportunity for some short, online conversations with some of my respondents.

Research question one, the question about which texts were used in tutor training that specifically address writers' class, particularly low socioeconomic status, presented a varied response. Harry Denny's chapter from *Facing the Center*, "Facing Class," was mentioned. Many of the familiar, stand-by writing center texts were proffered – The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors (a guidebook consisting of writing instruction and advice, such as guides to sections regarding the professionalism of a writing tutor, the structure of a writing tutoring session, the writing process, and helping writers understanding different styles – not writing center studies scholarship), *St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Centers*, Stephen North's seminal piece, "The Idea of a Writing Center." The inclusion of the North essay is unsurprising, as it remains the most cited piece of scholarship in writing center studies. Although written in 1984, it continues

to provide much needed context for tutors new to the positionality of the writing center within an institution of higher education, as well as a good reminder to seasoned tutors and administrators.

Jackie Grutch McKinney's "Cozy Homes," was also mentioned, which certainly makes sense, as it is common within many writing centers that a strong sense of community and hominess is encouraged among writing tutors. Lynn Bloom's "Freshman Composition as a Middle Class Enterprise," was another mention.

It is interesting that Bloom's article was brought up. Although "Freshman Composition" is about the middle-class practice of first year college composition - it does not specifically address the writing center context. It is important that in his chapter "Facing Class," Harry Denny engages with this important work of Bloom's. In my efforts to learn more about the texts addressing socioeconomic status and class in the writing center, I did find it reassuring that this particular article was mentioned, as this draws upon Babcock and Thonus' mention of how much of writing center studies scholarship is centered around lore, and theoretical work borrowed from composition studies. Bloom writes, "Composition is taught by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle-class either in actuality or in aspiration – economic if not cultural" (656). Bloom writes about the middle-class values of self-reliance, responsibility, and respectability, or what Bloom calls, "middle-class morality." These are all values deeply rooted in assumptions about students' life experiences. Bloom writes, critically, "No matter what kind of writing assignments we give, as middle-class teachers we expect freshmen papers —on whatever subject— to fall within the realm of normative discourse in subject, point of view, values implied" (659). This article addresses the problematic writing assignments that those who are not middle to upper class may be dealing with – experiences and literacies that are possible unknown to the writer with low socioeconomic status – this certainly comes up in the writing

center – from helping a student decipher a professor’s rubric/assignment sheet, to fully fleshing out new, and rhetorically effective ideas in a piece of writing.

One respondent was kind enough to send the list of all texts used in their writing center training course (Balester, Valerie M. “Tutoring Against Othering.” Canagarajah, A. Suresh. “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization.” Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “Letter to My Son.” Cox, Michelle. “Identity Construction, Second Language Learners, and the Writing Center.” Craig, Jennifer. “Unfamiliar Territory: Tutors Working with Second Language Writers on Disciplinary Writing” Delpit, Lisa. “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children.” Delpit, Lisa. “The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse.” Greenfield, Laura. “The ‘Standard English’ Fairytale: A Rhetorical Analysis of Racist Pedagogies and Commonplace Assumption about Language Diversity.” Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lau, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach.” Praphan, Pimyupa W. and Guiboke Seong. “Helping Second Language Writers Become Self-Editors.” Matsuda, Paul Kei. “Writing Involves the Negotiation of Language Differences.” Smitherman, Geneva. “A Student’s Right to Their Own Language: A Retrospective.” Young, Vershawn Ashanti. “Should Writers Use They Own English?” Zamel, Vivian. “Strangers in Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESL Students Across The Curriculum.”). While these are all excellent and important texts, I was struck by the apparent lack of writing center specific texts on the list. I was grateful for this list to add many of these to my own reading list.

Another respondent from a large, midwestern state university replied that there were no class specific texts in their writing center training course, but asked me if I had a bibliography of such texts. I shared the texts I was aware of with this person, and when my research is formally

concluded, it is my intention to assemble a sharable bibliography of texts that specifically address class and low socioeconomic status in the higher education writing center. There were many “no, but” replies to this question. Several writing center directors said that although they didn’t have texts that address class and low socioeconomic status specifically, they had other texts that could be comparable. One Writing Center director from a small, Midwestern liberal arts college wrote, “We don't have any specific texts on these issues in our staff development course, but many readings and activities and discussions that get peer consultants thinking about diversity in general.” The director of a Western State University’s writing center replied, “In our three-credit tutor training course, we have no readings on socioeconomic status, class, or poverty even though we have multiple readings on race and ethnicity, sex and gender, and sexual orientation.” This kind of defensive reply is certainly understandable, particularly given the fact that so few texts specifically address socioeconomic status and class in the writing center. However, it is unlikely that a text, which addresses gendered differences in the writing center, would be easily transferred to considering non-white writers in the writing center. This leads me to question why socioeconomic status and class might be minimized by some writing center directors and scholars.

One particularly poignant reply came from this writing center director, “We do not have the luxury of a semester-long course for our peer consultants, so we have only eight hours in which to train them before they begin consulting, plus two required 'training modules' (about an hour each) during each semester. As a result we have time to cover only material that we feel consultants 'need' to know before hitting the ground running, and, for us, that has not included training on socioeconomic status. Also, to be frank, at a highly selective, very small, private institution, we have a limited percentage of our population that would qualify as coming from a

low-SES (socioeconomic status) background. Personally, I think that's a shame, but it's the reality of our situation.” This particular response speaks to a different kind of defensive and deflection by this writing center director. Because of the vague nature of my questions, and my purposeful lack of follow-up emails, I was left to my own interpretive devices, which ultimately led to many more questions. What does “highly selective” mean? Does it mean that poor kids aren’t wanted? Does the “highly selective” nature of this institution rely on rich parents to “buy” admission for their children? Is being “highly selective” based on test scores? Academics? I also find myself curious about why a small institution would indicate a lack of students with low socioeconomic status. I wonder if this reply merely showed this particular writing center director’s privilege of ignorance regarding poverty in the area, let alone within the institution where they work. “Personally, I think that's a shame, but it's the reality of our situation.” This particular section of the reply also puts more questions in my mind. Is this writing center director still talking about low socioeconomic status, or diversity in general? They speak in such general terms, reminding me of some incidents in my own life where I have assumed something to be true because it was based purely on my own experience. This is not an attempt at cruelty against this writing center director. Running a functional writing center is difficult labor, not the least of which is emotional labor. Perhaps this particular director is stretched so thin they are unable to really know the demographics at their institution or writing center. This reply is very important, however. Much of writing scholarship, particularly concerning the intersections of identities focuses on assumptions, the danger of assumptions, and that no matter how difficult, we, as directors and tutors, should do our best to leave our assumptions outside of the writing consultation.

Research question 2, focused on the complimentary services found in writing centers, other than writing tutoring. I was particularly interested in these kinds of services, due to the easy accessibility for students with low socioeconomic status who happen to utilize their university's writing center. Seven writing centers replied that computers were available for writers to use free of charge, but only while at a writing center appointment. Four writing centers offer free printing, only available to writers while they are in the writing center for an appointment. Four writing centers replied that general office supplies, like sticky notes, pens, staplers, and paper clips were available. Only two replied that hot drinks (coffee, tea, and hot chocolate) were available. Two different writing center directors replied that they have candy dishes. One writing center director replied that writers visiting the writing center received free parking during consultations. However, the majority of free services offered in the writing center were limited to writing tutoring and writing workshops. The writing center director from a private university in the southwest added, "All of our services (consulting appointments, one-time workshops, multi-week workshops) are free, but in general we do not provide any services or goods beyond our academic services. The one exception is for our weeklong Dissertation Camps. We provide them with coffee in the mornings, a full lunch, and snacks and other drinks throughout the day, all of which are free. We also bring in wellness speakers 1-2 times during the week, one of whom brings free items (thermometer, heating pad, shampoo, ibuprofen) from the student health services. It is important to note that this population (graduate students) is one that is often struggling financially. We also provide (free) light snacks for our bi-monthly writing group that is open to all students at our school." This particular response highlights several issues that concern writers with low socioeconomic status. While many graduate students come from privileged backgrounds, many of them live below the poverty line, particularly single parent

graduate students. A dissertation camp is a wonderful and important idea. It is admirable that the students are fed lunch, and supplemented with drinks during the day. However, given the particular economic challenges faced by so many graduate students, this response has me wondering why this week-long activity couldn't be spread out a little more, guaranteeing some kind of weekly meeting, sustaining graduate students for more than just a week. Of course, offering additional resources to student writers in the writing center is almost entirely enabled by departmental funding. It is important and encouraging that this writing center director clearly understands the financial struggle that faces the majority of graduate students. The wellness speakers featured 1-2 times weekly is significant. From the description of health services goods distributed, this writing center clearly has a commitment to writers with low socioeconomic status, even though this director didn't name it in so many words. Wellness means a lot more than basic health care. Although I did not ask this writing center director any further questions, I do wonder if campus and community services are discussed in these wellness meetings. Government funded social welfare programs can be very difficult to navigate, and many undergraduate and graduate students could qualify for benefits. I would like to think that assistance in procuring these benefits is offered.

Of the responses to my third research question about the practice of surveying writers about their experience in the institutionally specific writing center, only one writing center director replied that they did not survey their writers, however, this director said this is something they intend to do in the future. Of the remaining responses regarding surveying writers, only one replied that the surveys were not anonymous. This writing center director from a southern, evangelical, Christian university stated, "We do have a survey we email to visitors asking them about their experiences. We don't ask what additional services would be useful, and

they are not anonymous.” The director of a Western, private university replied, “Currently, we do not include this question in our regular student satisfaction surveys, but we hope to gather this info through occasional focus groups or our comment box. “ Nine writing centers replied that surveys were only related to writing tutoring. The Writing Center Director from a large Midwestern, State University wrote, “Since we don’t offer services outside of help with writing, we don’t have any such survey questions.” Of course, the primary purpose of a university writing center is to help writers become better writers. But, because of the unique one-with-one position writing center directors and tutors have with writers; it is possible to be a more personal face than even an academic adviser. It makes sense that the writing center can be so much more than merely a place for writing. The personal narrative is such a common first year writing assignment. When students write about their experiences, it is almost an invitation to talk about more than writing. This is a unique chance for a writing center director or tutor to make sure a hungry student eats, or a homeless student finds shelter.

Regarding my last research question, in your Writing Center, do you assist writers - and if so, in what ways - in accessing information regarding campus services and community services that focus on low income, poverty, domestic violence, child care, mental health care, etc., the majority of responses were that the tutors were trained to direct writers to available information regarding these kinds of services. Four writing centers said that if writers self disclosed a particular need for help, they would do anything they could to get the writer the help they needed. The Director from the Writing Center of a large, east coast, state university replied, “We help when/if it is brought up by a tutee.” Only two writing centers replied that they didn’t offer any kind of assistance, and of those two, only one writing center director answered this by saying simply, no. However, nine respondents shared that writing center consultants were trained

to refer students to different resources. The Writing Center Director at an Ivy League institution wrote, “We are housed on a floor with other in-house support services that advise our students on financial aid, field placements, disability support, student life, and academic experience (including mental health) and recommend students with the concerns you list to the appropriate offices on our floor.” Given the collaborative nature of writing center work, this previous response is not surprising. It is fortunate for this particular writing center that they are in a student services focused environment.

Interestingly, the director of a Writing Center housed on a prestigious midwestern liberal arts university wrote, “We see ourselves as a place that can connect all students to the kinds of services they need. Our message to parents and students is that they don’t necessarily have to remember which office provides which service. As long as they contact the network of services at some point, we will get them to where they need to be.” The word choice in this response is interesting – “We see ourselves as a place that can connect all students to the kinds of services they need.” This sentiment does not appear to be uncommon in the broader writing center community, as a service-oriented location on the university campus.

In October of 2016, I had a successful and well-received presentation at IWCA, leading to a significant questions and answers portion of the presentation. After subsequent attendance at three more writing center conferences – the Nebraska Writing Centers Consortium (NWCC) conference in September of 2017, the International Writing Center Association conference in November of 2017, and the Midwest Writing Center Association (MWCA) conference in March of 2018, this research regarding writing center texts, training, and accommodations concerning writers with low socioeconomic status is still an under-represented point of scholarship, and as such, deserves further exploration through this thesis.

## Discussion

An important aspect of the discussion surrounding this research study is to recognize the study's limitations. Perhaps the greatest limitation to this study was the very small sample size. Out of the thousands of institutions of higher education in the US, only 153 were targeted, and out of the 153 targeted institutions, only 18 replied. Another significant limitation to this study was the simplistic and basic nature of the research questions. As this study did not have the resources for being comprehensive, nor did I, the study's designer, have experience with Institutional Review Boards or formal education surrounding qualitative research design, the research questions were not very sophisticated.

Yet, even with my small sampling of writing centers around the US, it is still apparent that there is a significant lack of scholarship, and the use of scholarship that does exist, particularly in composition studies, concerning the challenge of class and low socioeconomic status in the higher education writing center. It is critical that the implications involving low socioeconomic status intersecting with myriad other identities in the Writing Center be carefully considered. This is not to say that Writing Center directors are not aware of the added burden of being in college, and struggling with rent insecurity as well as food insecurity. The writing center director of a large, Midwestern, state university wrote, "Unfortunately, our campus does not offer much to assist students who are facing a financial crisis. For instance, a student cannot enroll in courses if he has an outstanding tuition bill, but he also cannot get an emergency loan that would allow him to pay the bill and enroll in classes because he's not currently enrolled in classes—a perfect Catch 22." As Writing Center scholars, directors, and consultants, we must make this concern a priority in our discussions. We must recognize the differences in motivation regarding college writing among all of our writers. As research and scholarship surrounding

writers identifying with low socioeconomic status increases, our understanding of the struggles these writers face will also increase.

Writing center scholarship considering the intersection of class and low socioeconomic status is increasing. At IWCA 2015, Harry Denny, along with Lori Salem, and John Nordloff presented their work, “Understanding the Needs and Expectations of Working-Class Students in Writing Centers,” a grant-funded cross-institutional project studying how working class and first generation writers utilize the writing center. Denny, Salem, and Nordloff hypothesize that, “the students have fundamentally different visions and goals for college-level writing and career preparation, possess different concepts of how writing centers fit into that ideation, and negotiate their place in writing centers in ways that beg for a reconsideration of hegemonic notions of non-directive peer tutoring” (writingcenters.org). Additionally, at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) 2017, Harry Denny chaired a panel presentation regarding the forthcoming reader he is editing, *Out in the Center*, focusing on additional challenges with identity in the writing center. Denny chaired another presentation following up on the CCCC panel at IWCA 2017, this one featuring many of the chapter writers. *Out in the Center* will feature two chapters regarding class and economic status.

However, where there is hope, there is also frustration. At IWCA 2017, out of 403 concurrent sessions, only two mentioned socioeconomic status or class – Harry Denny’s panel, and my own roundtable presentation based on intersectional identity with UNL undergraduate, Grace Stallworth, and UNL writing center director, Rachel Azima. At the Midwest Writing Center Association conference in March of 2018, out of 37 concurrent sessions, only one roundtable focused entirely on class and socioeconomic status – “I’d Like to Buy a Vowel:

Socioeconomic Status in the University Writing Center,” presented by myself and two UNL undergraduate students, Madeleine Moore and Clara Edwards.

It is crucial for writing tutors via initial tutor training, as well as continuing tutor education, to recognize that low socioeconomic status can manifest itself as an identity in unexpected ways. Tutors need to know that more often than not, ignorance of a computer program, a writing style, or a method of citation doesn't come from apathy or laziness, but from a lack of opportunity and/or exposure. In training sessions, conversations regarding the challenges writers with low socioeconomic status in the writing center must be facilitated. Some questions to ask tutors: What educational consequences exist for K-12 students with low socioeconomic status? How do can these consequences affect higher education writing? What literacies are required for higher education? How can low socioeconomic status affect learning higher education literacies? The course instructor, or trainer can also question the different experiences with class the future tutors might have encountered – not necessarily in an academic situation. Part of eliminating the stigma of low socioeconomic status can happen with open and honest disclosure and discussion. If a writing center director/tutor instructor/tutor trainer has experienced the challenges with low socioeconomic status they have experienced, it can eliminate assumptions for future tutors, as well as make a tutor with low socioeconomic status feel more empowered and less marginalized in their tutor experience. In fact, given the amount of students who deal with low socioeconomic status and low income in the broader campus institution, it is likely that more than one tutor in a writing center theory and practice course will identify as having low socioeconomic status.

## **Conclusion**

Once upon a time, the American Dream guaranteed a bachelor's degree would cement one in a middle class status, earning a "good" living. While college graduates still, on the average earn more than those without bachelor's degrees, one million dollars more over a lifetime, in fact, according to CNBC, in an article "What's the Value of a College Education? It depends" from June 2015. Similarly, in a December 2015 article from CNN Money, Heather Long reports on a study regarding the monetary value of a college education. Goldman Sachs, a well-known company where the top priority is the bottom line, and return on investment, completed the study. Long writes, "As the price tag of a college education goes up, it's taking longer for the investment to pay off. Here's what Goldman projects:

- 2015 graduates won't break even until age 31
- 2030 graduates won't break even until age 33
- 2050 graduates won't break even until age 37 "

Indeed, these are disheartening statistics. In fact, Long goes on to clarify, "Nearly 15.5 million Americans are currently enrolled in two-year or four-year colleges, according to Census data. Attending schools like MIT is still a huge resume and pay boost for life, but Goldman questions whether millions of students at lower-tier schools would be better off doing other kinds of training" (cnn.com). Facing this kind of neoliberal critique, it is no wonder that many student writers in higher education are far more concerned with checking a box off for their business credentialing than they are with becoming better writers.

It is critical that the implications involving low socioeconomic status intersecting with myriad other identities in the Writing Center be carefully considered. Writing center scholars, directors, and tutors/consultants, we must make this identity a priority in our discussions. But, we must do more than talk; we must act.

We must recognize the differences in motivation regarding college writing among all of our writers. With tuition costs, and the neoliberal focus on a university education's return on investment, we do need to understand and accept that student writers will have different motivation when attending a university. Judging by the description of the scholars' hypothesis, the research presented at IWCA 2015 could be an offshoot of Denny's chapter regarding class in his book, *Facing the Center*. Throughout the chapter, "Facing Class," Denny discusses intention and motivation regarding working class students, and how it can be critically different from the more middle class assumptions made by instructors as well as peers. "The collective identities and communities that form in relation to economic realities – those related to how much we make but also how we consume culture and signify ourselves in relation to those patterns – signify to me, our class positions" (66). In addition to the different motivations, these students also have different expectations of what a college education will mean for them.

This does raise the difficult questions of what the university writing center can do to accommodate student writers with low socioeconomic status. It is advisable that Writing Centers use an approach similar to strategies for accommodating writers with disabilities – the principles of universal design. If we structure writing centers with universal design, we make things better for everyone. With the humiliating stigma attached to low socioeconomic status, not knowing whom a particular situation will benefit is just fine.

In fact, the greater population of people, not just students dealing with low socioeconomic status are met with humiliation on a daily basis – whether being loudly judged at the grocery store check out line while using WIC or SNAP benefits, or at the ADC administration office, with less than sensitive case managers, the last place someone should feel humiliation is the university writing center. If a writing center is available to offer light

refreshments, like coffee, fruit, crackers, and string cheese, for example, this benefit can make the Writing Center more hospitable for all who enter. A piece of fruit could help a diabetic student writer who is dealing with an incident of low blood sugar. And, this small snack could really help a student writer with low socioeconomic status that is struggling with food insecurity. Considering Writing Center staffing - extended hours that go beyond the regular business day could be a benefit to all student writers who have complicated schedules and jobs, not just the writers with low socioeconomic status. Having a writing center, or writing center satellite location near a campus computer lab, could be an easy opportunity to merge writing tutoring with writers who do not have their own personal laptop computers. Of course, English departments aren't known for large budgets, and writing centers very often struggle with funding issues just to remain open; perhaps evening staffing, satellite locations, and a snack fund are all impossibilities. However, acknowledging low socioeconomic status in the training of consultants has a very low overhead. Prioritizing texts regarding low socioeconomic status in the university writing center as texts that are every bit as important as texts regarding gender, class, and sexuality has no overhead. Encouraging further research to bring to light the very real financial challenges that are faced by so many of today's university students has no overhead. It is time for writing center studies to join these other disciplines and place the same importance on class and socioeconomic status as it does race, gender, sexuality, and all other intersections of identity.

In an interview with Ellen M. Gil-Gomez for *Composition Forum*, Victor Villanueva said,

There is a new generation of compositionists coming up now with backgrounds similar to mine. But their numbers continue to remain few. So, as always, those—the overwhelming majority—who wish to do well by students of color and from

poverty might glean something from the perspective I provide, matters discussed in simple autobiography to theories of culture, representation, and political economies, all ways of coming to an understanding of those folks wishing to enter the academy or wishing to remain in the academy whose backgrounds are not typical (in terms of notions of race, or class as a cultural determinant, or class in the economic sense, or even class in the sense of having served in the military, which isn't always primarily a matter of national loyalties but primarily (I'm not excluding the patriotic) economic. (compositionforum.com)

Some of these compositionists that Villanueva is referring to will become writing center professionals. It is in the hands of current writing center professionals to create brave spaces for these compositionists. Through these spaces, enabling discourse and research spanning all intersections of identity, perhaps these numbers of compositionists/writing center professionals will develop.

As research and scholarship surrounding writers identifying with low socioeconomic status increases, our understanding of the struggles these writers face will also increase. It is crucial for writing center directors, administrators, and consultants/tutors to recognize that low socioeconomic status can manifest itself as an identity in unexpected ways. More often than not, ignorance of a computer program, a writing style, or a method of citation doesn't come from apathy or laziness, but from a lack of opportunity and/or exposure – directly related to class and socioeconomic status. The responsibility of, and opportunity for, giving writers an equitable foundation for successful higher education writing lies in the unique one-with-one peer relationships found in the Writing Center.

## Appendix

### Figure 1

Greetings!

My name is Wyn Andrews Richards. I am a first year Masters student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Rachel Azima, Assistant Professor of Practice in the English Department, and Director of the Writing Center at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. There is much research on the impact of race and gender as intersections of identity in the Higher Education Writing Center. However, there is still a lack of scholarship when considering low socioeconomic status and its impact on Writing Center training and culture. I am interested in learning about the training practices in your Writing Center, as well as the services provided to your student writers, particularly considering student writers with low socioeconomic status. I am part of a panel that will be presenting, (Un)bouded: Writing Centers and the Neoliberal Institution at the International Writing Center Association conference in Denver, this coming October. It is my intention to use the information I receive from the following research questions in my portion of the panel presentation. I am writing to ask for your participation in my research. Any assistance you could provide me would be greatly appreciated. Nowhere in my presentation will your name or institution be mentioned. I will only refer to the institution by type and general location. Example: A small, East Coast Community College. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in my research.

Participation is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinue participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There will be no direct benefits to you, based on your participation. I hope there will be societal benefits to my research, as I seek to add to the conversation of how to better serve writers with low socioeconomic status. The time required for participation in my research is minimal. I will begin collecting data, as soon as my emails are sent, ending on the day of my presentation at IWCA (October 14, 2016). The survey questions should only take 5-15 minutes to answer. If you wish to participate, please reply directly to this email, with your answers next to my research questions, listed below the body of this email.

If you would like to speak to someone regarding research subjects' rights, or to report a problem, please call the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6965 or email [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu).

Please do not hesitate to contact me or my faculty sponsor with any questions you may have. Thank you for your consideration.

Wyn Andrews Richards, [wyn@huskers.unl.edu](mailto:wyn@huskers.unl.edu)  
Dr. Rachel Azima, [razima2@unl.edu](mailto:razima2@unl.edu)

### **Research Questions:**

1. What specific texts do you use in the training of Writing Center tutors/consultants, considering low socioeconomic status/class/poverty as intersections/challenges in the Writing Center?
2. In your Writing Center, in addition to consulting/tutoring, what services are available to writers/clients that are free of charge? Example: Computers, Printing, Coffee, etc.
3. Do you survey writers/clients to ask what services, in addition to help with writing, would be helpful? Are your surveys anonymous?
4. In your Writing Center, do you assist writers - and if so, in what ways - in accessing information regarding campus services and community services that focus on low income, poverty, domestic violence, child care, mental health care, etc.?

Best,

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