

## READING, WRITING, 'RITHMETIC AND RETENTION

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(From: *Rivier Today*, Spring 2010)

The Writing and Resource Center's unusual structure is one of the keys to student success



Graduate assistant Scott Mays provides math tutoring and helps students prepare for tests.

(PHOTOS BY JODIE ANDRUSKEVICH)

**T**he goals of Rivier's Writing and Resource Center mirror the goals of similar support services on campuses around the country. The unconventional ways Rivier has set about accomplishing those goals have proven highly effective.

What sets Rivier's Writing Center apart from those at other schools? "For such a small campus to have established a center in the early '80s is rare," says Leslie Van Wagner, Director of the Writing Center. Established in 1982, the WRC has been helping students for more than 25 years.

Even more than its age, the Center's staffing configuration differentiates it from those at other schools. "Professional consultants are rare in the world of writing centers," Van Wagner explains. Though most of Rivier's writing consultants work part-time, they know Rivier well—most have taught at Rivier or earned graduate degrees here. "We have a steady staff with a lot of experience with the College," says Van Wagner. "That's a real luxury."

Rivier's one-credit tutorial for students is also unique. Van Wagner says she can probably count on one hand the number of schools that offer a similar program, which offers students and writing consultants the chance to develop strong relationships.



Writing consultant Vi Dagdigian enjoys brainstorming with students.

### **Growing popularity**

The demand for tutoring and other writing center services has grown exponentially in recent years. “Last year, we had 85 students enroll in the one credit tutorial,” Van Wagner says. Ninety students enrolled during the fall 2009 semester: almost half of Rivier’s freshmen visit the center weekly.

Vi Dagdigian, who has been a writing consultant since the Writing Center’s early days, says though the Center is serving more students than ever, today’s students have the same needs as those in previous classes. “But some students have had less preparation than others,” Dagdigian says.

Many students become regulars for their four years of study. Often, these students are “very conscientious, but they need support because they’re not confident,” Dagdigian says. She helps students build confidence by showing them what they’ve accomplished. For example, she frequently deals with paper topics. “They’ll come in and say ‘I don’t know where to start.’ As the student’s talking, I’ll take notes. I’ll explain, ‘You’re coming out with ideas as you’re telling me you have no ideas’ and then show them what I’ve written down,” she says.

“You have to know where to draw the line—we don’t do their papers for them,” Dagdigian says. Instead, consultants help students brainstorm, focus topics for papers, better understand how to write summaries, follow the correct format for MLA or APA citations, use proper grammar and punctuation, or write more clearly.

Dagdigian says the Center’s writing consultants have different specialties. Consultants work with faculty teaching First Year Seminar writing courses to understand the assignments and expectations for each course, so they can counsel students more effectively.

### **The power of peer tutors**

In addition to writing assistance, for the last three years, the Center has also offered peer tutoring in various subjects. “It was invigorating and refreshing to fold in the peer tutors,” Van Wagner says.

Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs Regina Shearer says the addition of tutoring was essential: “More and more students were coming to me identifying weaknesses in other academic areas.”

She asked faculty to recommend students who may be willing to tutor in different subjects. Each department managed its own tutors. In 2007, the peer tutors became part of the Writing and Resource Center, an arrangement that has worked well for everyone.

Senior Erin Fagan works with students who need help in general biology, chemistry, and psychology courses. Most of the students she tutors need help with chemistry. “I try to take what I know and simplify it,” she says. Since many students in many general courses already had chemistry in high school, some professors don’t spend much time on the fundamentals. Fagan says she starts from the very beginning, as though students know nothing about the subject.

Fagan also models good study skills and leads study groups. “I show them how I study for tests. I did well in the class, so I try to show them what I did to do well.”

Math tutor Scott Mays, a student in the M.A.T. mathematics program, has worked at the writing center for two years. In addition to one on one tutoring, Mays has led seminars to help students prepare for Praxis tests and the GRE. “I heard back from some people saying it helped, they passed,” he says.

Mays typically helps students understand how to break down word problems or reviews concepts people didn’t understand in class. “Most of the questions are things you see again and again,” he says. Despite that repetition, tutors and writing consultants are patient and give each student personal attention. “The people who work here are very welcoming, very nice,” says Mays. “They take care of you as best they can.”



“When students are using the Writing and Resource Center, I don’t worry about how they’re going to fare academically.”

— Regina Shearer, Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs

Writing consultants (*left*) help students strengthen skills and build confidence in their writing.

### Crossover connections

Many of the students who visit the Center for peer tutoring also work with writing consultants and vice versa. Fagan says she’s gotten tutoring for Calculus II and has used the Center for help on a research paper and a poetry assignment. Fagan says her writing consultant “looked over my assignment, then we talked about my ideas and what I wanted to get out of the assignment. I’d write and she’d offer feedback.”

Shearer says that word-of-mouth is probably the Center’s best form of advertising. “Once students have a successful experience, they tell their roommates and their friends,” she says. Shearer was amazed by the number of freshmen who began using the Center within the first month of the fall semester.

“When students are using the Writing and Resource Center, I don’t worry about how they’re going to fare academically,” Shearer says. “It’s remarkable when you consider that over 400 students are going there for writing and even more for tutoring, yet when I call, they know the students who go there and what subjects they’re working on with tutors.” That personalized approach has helped Rivier significantly improve retention over the last few years and earns the Center plenty of praise from students who use it.

Student testimonials also help dispel the myth that only poor students use the Center. “That’s far from the truth,” says Dagdigan. “We all need extra eyes and ears sometimes.”

“Overall, it’s a wonderful nurturing place for students to come,” says Van Wagner. “We try to foster that.”

The personal attention students get from Writing Center consultants and peer tutors pays off. The Writing and Resource Center adds up to more confidence, higher grades, and better student retention. That’s a winning equation. ■

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