

# REFLECTION ON MENTORSHIP NETWORKS: BUILDING UNDERGRADUATE WRITING STUDIES RESEARCH AS A STEM MAJOR

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Undergraduate research in Writing Studies continues to grow, and recent scholarship has begun to explore how mentorship supports these experiences. The majority of current mentorship research comes from STEM fields, however, the Writing Studies field offers distinctive undergraduate research contexts shaped by collaborative methods, varied outputs, and complex methodologies. Continued attention to mentorship in these contexts can help identify the practices most beneficial for undergraduate researchers and their mentors. Through an autoethnographic review of my own Writing Studies research, I highlight the ways my professional, collaborative, and research capabilities have grown through my use of a mentorship network. I demonstrate how various mentors have aided in each step of my research project and offer suggestions for mentors and students considering their own joint projects. By highlighting the symbiotic nature of my mentorship relationships, I hope to lay the groundwork for the Writing Studies community and other adjacent disciplines to adopt undergraduate mentorship strategies that can support the complex nature of the methodologies employed in the humanities.

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## INTRODUCTION

As a biochemistry major who has ventured into undergraduate writing research, I recognize that my mentorship relationships have been essential in my exploration of the field. I began my undergraduate research (UR) project in Writing Studies at the encouragement of Dr. Hart, the writing center director of my college and my boss. She recognized my curiosity for creative writing usage as a pedagogical tool and introduced me to creative writing across the curriculum (CWAC). From that

moment, my eyes were opened to an opportunity to explore a new division of research. My previous research experiences center my biochemical interests, where I am more familiar with standard research techniques, protocols, and project designs. My extensive background in STEM meant I knew very little about humanities research before this experience. As I reflect on this journey, I am incredibly grateful for the growth I have seen in myself as an undergraduate researcher, tutor, writer, presenter, and professional. Here, I will describe how I have seen my mentorship experiences in

my Writing Studies research fortify these skills within myself.

UR is vital to the continuation of academic pursuits and the betterment of our society because it trains students to critically question how our world and social systems work (Mekolichick and Wirgau). Mentorship is a necessary element in helping young researchers achieve the independence of thought integral to research. Furthermore, mentorship relationships can influence the curiosity, confidence, and complexity in UR projects when these relationships are constructed effectively. However, because UR is a new and fast-growing field in Writing Studies, there are minimal resources available that outline what good mentorship relationships and practices look like when working with the challenging and nuanced methodologies the Writing Studies field employs. A newer style of mentorship is emerging in UR—mentorship networks. These networks allow students to build relationships with multiple mentors and draw upon the knowledge and expertise of each mentor. This article examines the mentorship network I built while designing my Writing Studies research project.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The benefits of UR on undergraduate students are well documented (CCCC; DelliCarpini and Moore; Ervin; Keaton et al.; Kuh). In his report published by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, George Kuh defines UR as a “high-impact educational practice” which pushes students beyond “surface-level learning” into “deep-level processing

that emphasizes both acquiring information and understanding the underlying meaning of the information” (14). Dotterer adds other attributes in top-performing students that are enhanced through UR, such as “collaboration,” “respect for diverse talents and learning styles,” and “out-of-class contact with faculty” (86). Further UR benefits for students may also include strengthened community relationships, greater information literacy, exposure to current topics of interest within their field, the chance to develop their own methodologies, revision experience, and professional networking opportunities (CCCC; DelliCarpini and Moore; Dotterer; Kuh). Additionally, Keaton et al. and Kuh both agree that these opportunities have resulted in higher retention rates and improved academic performance in underrepresented student bodies.

Beyond benefits to students in general, UR can be especially beneficial for undergraduate writing tutors who participate in Writing Studies research. The Conference on College Composition and Communication supports UR in Writing Studies, claiming that undergraduate students “obtain knowledge of writing that can be learned only through direct participation in full-fledged creative or critical inquiries” (1). Keaton et al. also recognize the potential authority student writing tutors have in the field of Writing Studies due to their regular contact with undergraduate writing assignments, both their own and their peers. This exposure to writing prompts provides writing tutors with an inner perspective that allows them to identify gaps in knowledge that may be invisible to their educators and mentors (10). Backing

these claims, Lauren Fitzgerald proposes that writing centers are “sites of Practitioner Inquiry” for writing tutors. Keaton et al., Fitzgerald, and Ervin all argue that Writing Studies investigations prompted by personal experience not only help the field but also develop and augment the capabilities of student writing tutors (22). Ervin also observed improved self-confidence, increased engagement in writing center work, and an expanded sense of audience in writing tutors who completed Writing Studies research (52).

I have noticed nearly all of these benefits during my own research experience, and many of my mentors have commented on my improved research and writing capabilities within the field. However, much of my growth is a result of the guidance I received from all of my fantastic mentors. While it is great to recognize the benefit UR has for undergraduates, it is also important to consider the effect UR may have on the mentors who are the driving force behind many projects like mine. The current literature outlining the benefits for UR mentors in mentorship relationships is sparse when compared to the amount of research that reports the impact UR and mentorship have on undergraduates (Keaton et al.). However, Keaton and colleagues do acknowledge that relationships between student tutors and their mentors can strengthen when they work together on a project (8). Dotterer provides more direct examples in an article where they demonstrate that UR can support and build up the research field of the mentor and contribute stability to a project by supplying different vantage points on the issue or question

being addressed. These examples suggest mentors benefit from UR through greater relationships with students, increased motivation to work on projects, learning new things, increased satisfaction, improvement to teaching strategies, new partnerships and perspectives, expansion of research interests, and support for their ongoing projects (Potter et al.; Nolan et al.; Shortlidge et al.). These benefits may all seem like great support for a symbiotic relationship between undergraduate researchers and mentors, however, some mentors argue that mentoring processes can distract faculty from projects or even prevent them from doing their own research work (Dotterer; Potter et al.). These sparse and sometimes conflicting narratives indicate that scholarship on mentorship can benefit from further accounts of mentor-mentee relationships to outline the key dynamics of these collaborative experiences.

## METHODOLOGY

My goal, in light of these perceived benefits in mentorship relationships, is to highlight my mentorship experiences while designing my undergraduate research project on a small liberal arts college campus through autoethnographic research. Autoethnography provides a systematic approach to research through analysis of personal experience (Ellis et al. 273). I analyze my UR experiences through the lenses defined by Butz and Besio, who describe “two poles” from which autoethnographic research can originate—the “agent of signification,” or the researcher, and the “object of signification” or the research subjects (1665). “The reflexive journey” followed by the research-

er is the narrative that bridges these two poles (1665). Within those poles of autoethnography, personal experience narratives and narrative ethnographies make greater use of the agent of signification as the research source to draw conclusions about the object of signification (1665). In personal experience narratives, the researcher treats themselves as an academic and personal self in their reflection, allowing them to analyze the effect or emotion caused by an interaction with an object of significance (1665-1666). Similarly, narrative ethnographies encourage the researcher to examine dialogues and interactions they have with their subjects and draw conclusions based on those experiences (Butz and Besio 1666-1668).

I approach this work from a retrospective autoethnographic lens where I use personal reflection (my “agent of signification”) to describe my research experience (my “reflexive journey”) and draw conclusions about UR mentorship relationships in Writing Studies (my “object of signification”) (Butz and Besio; Ellis et al.). I hope to merge the specific autoethnographic genres of personal experience narrative to analyze my personal benefits from my mentorship relationship and narrative ethnography to highlight the impact of my interactions with mentors throughout the project (Butz and Besio 1665-1668).

## MY RESEARCH JOURNEY

I aim to provide a roadmap for other undergraduates who wish to follow in my footsteps and mentors who wish to learn more about mentorship practices that are considered most helpful from the point of view of an under-

graduate researcher. Through my reflections, I will demonstrate how my mentorship experiences have provided benefits for both my mentors and myself as an undergraduate researcher.

## TRANSFORMING CURIOSITY INTO A RESEARCH QUESTION

*How do mentors and undergraduate researchers come to a shared research question?* The first step in my research journey was recognizing the potential research interest within myself. As an undergraduate, the idea of designing my own research project was daunting and felt more like an abstract process beyond my reach. The moment my thought process changed was when Dr. Hart reframed my demonstrated curiosity as a place for potential research and encouraged me to find the question camouflaged within my interests. With her gentle nudge, I was able to reorient my perspective and generate a research question that centered my interest in CWAC. From her encouragement, I learned that an essential component of debunking imposter syndrome is realizing that we all have curiosity in one topic or another; research is just taking those interests and channeling them into a defined question. Finding ways for students to explore these interests in discussions with faculty members who have trained eyes and ears for the seedlings of research can open up lines of communication and brainstorming sessions that lead to developed and realized projects.

I did not initially intend for my passion in creative writing to branch into a research topic. My original proposal to Dr. Hart came in my application to be a lead consultant in

our writing center. As part of the application process, we needed to provide topics we would like to see discussed in professional development meetings. These meetings offer further guidance and training to our staff so that they can better assist student writers in our tutoring sessions. As I considered what would benefit our writing tutors, I consistently returned to a challenge that I had faced on various occasions in my sessions where writers lacked motivation or interest in the prompt given by an instructor.

By drawing on insights from my lead consultant application, past tutoring experiences, and my own writing experiences, the pieces of my project began to fall into place. I reflected on moments I grappled with prompts that felt dull or in which I had no interest in writing. I realized that what I would usually do in those cases was ask the professor to take the prompt from a different, more creative angle. Professors were usually receptive, and I was able to dive into a project that excited me. Those experiences encouraged me to begin exploring similar thought processes with students who came into the center feeling unmotivated. With general success in my own experiences and seeing similar approaches work with other writers who visited the writing center, I proposed a professional development where we examined the positive impact creative writing could have on student engagement in their writing assignments.

I had laid the groundwork for a professional development session, but Dr. Hart saw beyond that proposal. She recognized the synthesis of personal experience and interests that had

shaped my suggestion. As a result, she reached out to me after I submitted my application and asked if I would be interested in exploring Creative Writing Studies research based on my ideas presented in my personal statement. If it hadn't been for her acknowledgment of my curiosity and passion for creative writing usage in academia, this project may never have been started. Her initial encouragement began a mentorship relationship that has greatly supported and directed my academic and professional journey these past two years. Dr. Hart's encouragement and close listening, complemented by my enthusiasm and drive to develop a research project, were essential in transforming my curiosity in CWAC into a research question.

## BUILDING THE PROJECT

*What experiences can mentors employ to help integrate undergraduate researchers into their field?* Designing research as a fledgling undergraduate researcher can be challenging, especially when you are not familiar with terminology, methodologies, or general best practices in a field. To help me navigate these challenges, Dr. Hart encouraged me to attend the Naylor Workshop held at York College to help develop the project. The Naylor Workshop is a week-end-long workshop that provides a space for undergraduate researchers in Writing Studies to develop and refine research projects under the mentorship of leading Writing Studies faculty. Excited by this opportunity, I drafted a project proposal that would change drastically over the course of the workshop. The design consisted of two focus groups: one that

would write an essay in response to a standard academic prompt and a second that would receive the same prompt with extra directions instructing them to write in a “non-traditional and creative manner.”

My attendance at the Naylor Workshop presented a unique experience while designing my project because I had the chance to receive feedback and suggestions from over ten different faculty mentors that weekend. What made this experience so different is that many undergraduate research projects are developed between one mentor and one undergraduate student. One-on-one mentorship can be a beneficial framework for students who are still learning to limit the scope of their projects. However, my experience at the Naylor Workshop has taught me that a strong project may also include outside mentorship perspectives because the mentors from that weekend helped me focus my research and shore up gaps in its structure.

I remember the moment the direction of my project began to solidify into a feasible design. Many mentors expressed immediate concerns about finding enough students who would willingly participate in a study that required them to write an essay outside of class. I sat down across from one of the workshop’s mentors and explained how I was struggling to find the best method to test my hypothesis. After listening to my challenges, he proposed that I could collaborate with professors to have them assign creative prompts in class. I had never considered that faculty at my college might be willing to help me achieve a project like this. As an undergraduate, I was unable

to see myself in a place where I could collaborate with professors, but that mentor helped me overcome that mental block.

From that moment, the project snowballed, picking up momentum over the weekend. I had mentors offer to share some of their personal prompts with me so I could gain an idea of how creative prompts could be structured. Others provided further guidance in helping me reform my research question or offered suggestions on resources that could help me build my data collection tools. Over the weekend, the mentors exposed me to academic language I had never encountered because I had never conducted humanities research. While it was initially a challenge to follow some conversations, my introduction into their world gave me the vocabulary I needed to communicate the goal of my project more specifically.

The mentorship relationships I developed over that weekend did more than provide me with technical research feedback. That weekend, I also received an astounding level of support from those faculty mentors. Every mentor I talked to emphasized the importance of the research I had proposed and displayed evident enthusiasm in my work. That source of validation strengthened the exigence for my study and fueled my desire to move the project forward. The Naylor Workshop invited me into the Writing Studies field by helping me establish a strong network of mentors who validated my work and introduced me to disciplinary methodologies, concepts, and questions that I could begin to explore in my own budding research.

## REFINING THE PROJECT

*How can undergraduate mentors help their students navigate the development and revision of their projects?* After returning to school with all the amazing suggestions and encouragement from the mentors at the Naylor Workshop, I was ready to dive into the research project. Dr. Hart and I set up a weekly meeting to discuss project progress and the next steps for each week. Having her there to guide me was integral to my ability to see the project through because she broke down exactly what I needed to do into manageable pieces.

She encouraged me to complete my Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification, an ethical research training, so that I would be set to submit a proposal to our internal review board (IRB) for them to approve my research. After the training, she encouraged me to do some research into the creative writing research field and explore the pre-existing literature on writing pedagogy. During our weekly meetings, I would bring a handful of papers that we were able to discuss, and our conversations helped build my knowledge of CWAC, as well as other Writing Studies-related topics. As new subjects and ideas arose in conversation, Dr. Hart further supplemented my background knowledge of Writing Studies by introducing me to the related work of prominent researchers in the field.

Finally, after strengthening my background in the field and developing my collection methods, I drafted an IRB proposal with the help of Dr. Hart. She recognized the challenges IRB provided for even experienced researchers, and as a result, provided me with examples of

language from her own IRB-approved projects so that I could follow her design. Her guidance allowed me to write a proposal that required minimal edits, keeping my project on track to start in the following semester. Dr. Hart supported me through the methodological development and revision process by holding me accountable with weekly meetings and providing materials designed to prepare me for the places she anticipated I might need extra support.

## RECRUITMENT PROCESSES

*How does self-advocacy and partnership in UR help students take greater ownership of their work?* The professors I inquired about potential assignment collaborations were another source of unexpected mentorship. Some of the professors had their own creative writing research in the works, but were on sabbatical the semester I was planning to have my prompts assigned and completed. These professors did offer resources to enhance my growing knowledge of the field.

The other professors I spoke with were happy to have conversations with me about my research. My interactions with them required a more profound understanding of my research. Many of the professors asked questions about the relevance of my work to their classes, and some even sought deeper philosophical questions that sent me back to the literature to develop my understanding of the Writing Studies field further. Although some professors turned down my invitation for a collaboration, each of those experiences encouraged me to find the answers to the questions they asked.

The most rewarding part of the experience was the faith that faculty members placed in me to design the writing assignments for their class. Their trust in me signified that they recognized my expertise in the field of Creative Writing Studies. Through the edits faculty proposed to the projects I designed for their classes, I gained insight into how faculty approach their assignments and what they consider to be the most important factors to assess in their students. Through collaboration with these faculty members who treated me as a researcher and partner, my confidence in my work increased dramatically.

#### ACCEPTING SETBACKS AND FINDING NEW DIRECTIONS

*How can mentors help guide undergraduate students and encourage resilience through unexpected changes?* I returned to the Naylor Workshop with a work-in-progress. There, mentors recognized the scope of the project I had built, and many recommended that the project could be split into smaller pieces. Part of the mission of my research is to generate discussion about CWAC and encourage other faculty to explore the potential benefit of using creative writing as an educational tool in their classrooms. Recognizing this goal, the Naylor mentors encouraged me to start considering genres outside of a full research paper that would allow me to share my ideas sooner, such as opinion pieces, methodological reflections, or case studies. Their advice led me to write this piece that analyzes my experience designing creative writing research and how mentorship has shaped that process.

As my current project stands, professors and students have mostly opted out of taking the short survey and participating in the semi-structured interview I had designed for data collection. I was greatly disheartened by the lack of data I collected, but the Naylor mentors redirected my focus and encouraged me to write about my experience and take advantage of the results I do have. That advice shifted my focus to the larger number of students who elected to share their writing submissions with me through informed consent. By reading through their submissions, I hope to write a case study analyzing the critical thinking and creativity displayed in their writing samples. The support provided by the Naylor mentors ensured that I shared my work with others and contributed my voice to the Writing Studies field.

The advice I received from the second workshop is what encouraged me to submit this piece to *Young Scholars*. I drafted and submitted a methodological reflection outlining each of the steps I took to reach my final research design. Upon reading my draft, peer and faculty reviewers pointed out the recurring themes of mentorship in my manuscript, in addition to the description of my Writing Studies project. They suggested that the work had taken on two different narratives and that I would need to select one objective to elaborate on fully during the editing process. By following their advice, I was able to redesign the manuscript as a reflection of my mentorship experiences. With the help of a journal editor, I considered how my mentorship network could serve as an inspiration for other

undergraduate researchers and mentors just beginning their collaborations. My editor has significantly strengthened my draft by posing questions to me as I reworked my narrative and highlighting the places in my draft that could be improved. The editors and reviewers recognized my ability to take two different paths and highlighted those options for me in clear terms. I appreciated that they left the decision-making process to me but outlined the necessity of a more defined scope. Mentors can contribute stability to projects with unclear goals by following a similar strategy of revealing the potential options and allowing their students to choose which direction they want their project to follow.

My mentors have been integral to my self-confidence and belief that my work provides valuable insights in Writing Studies. Through my own experiences, I have learned that mentorship is the underpinning of UR. Therefore, development, study, and reflection of mentorship practices is a necessary investment for the future of Writing Studies and the humanities as a whole.

## DISCUSSION

As I reflect on all of my experiences with mentors, I am awed by how my research has been shaped by those relationships. My primary research mentor, Dr. Hart, opened the world of Writing Studies research to me, not only by recognizing my interests, but also by encouraging my attendance at the Naylor Workshop. There, I experienced the mutual-mentoring strategy recommended by Moore, Abbot,

Bellwoar, and Watts in their chapter of the Naylor Report on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies. I appreciated speaking with various mentors and hearing their advice because it strengthened the basis of my research and revealed places in my project that needed reinforcement or refinement.

I encourage my fellow peers in undergraduate Writing Studies research to seek out multiple perspectives in their own projects because different mentors will bring different insights to their projects. The initiative an undergraduate researcher takes to search out these collaborations can increase the general success of a project (Dotterer 86). Recognizing the benefit of the mentorship network at the Naylor Workshop, I began building mentorship networks in my biochemical research, too. While designing my senior capstone, I have sought out the perspectives of a wide range of faculty members, each of whom has contributed their own perspective to the project. New insights from different mentors will give you a variety of options to explore and a steadier grounding in your research. Additionally, I encourage mentors to consider asking their undergraduate researchers to search for feedback and mentorship from others beyond themselves. Additional perspectives may come from greater experience in a given field or topic that could enhance a project.

My mentorship network expanded even further as I began to seek out collaborations with professors at my institution. The initial meetings I had with those professors cemented my belief that even as an undergraduate, I could be seen as a partner in research alongside

faculty members. Many collaborators deferred to my expertise and goals within my study design—allowing me to craft prompts to assign in their classes. The first chapter authors of the Naylor Report explain that students who are viewed as partners experience greater levels of co-inquiry and reciprocal feedback (Moore et al.). Shifting mentoring relationship dynamics from mentor-mentee to partners is an empowering experience that helps enrich the research experience for both investigators.

Undergraduate researchers achieve their greatest potential when they are offered the chance to grow alongside their faculty mentors. It has been rewarding to have Dr. Hart tell me throughout this process that I am allowed to take my research in the direction I want. While training autonomy in research, there is a necessity for undergraduate researchers to take ownership of their work and study design. Self-directed research sets a clear path to the self-confidence Ervin found present in undergraduate researchers after completion of a research project (52). Recognition of mentorship experiences as more than a unilateral relationship in which undergraduate students receive directives from mentors is critical to ensuring the benefits of the project are obtained by everyone involved (Moore et al.). This mutual gain can be achieved by the undergraduate researcher's active questioning and curiosity, and a guiding role filled by the mentor in place of a managerial one.

Writing Studies is a field with vastly different methodologies from those I have encountered in my biochemistry research projects. Due to my unfamiliarity with many of those

methodologies, I had to rely on a network of mentors to introduce me to the options available. Cope, Peck, Johnson, and Makmillen also recognize the need for mentorship because of the lesser transparency surrounding Writing Studies research methods when compared to those found in STEM fields. The scientific process is well known and has a structure that is followed strictly. My many experiences in that rigid study design limited my ability to explore further opportunities because I was unaware of the other available options. It was only once I had immersed myself in the Writing Studies community that I found possibilities beyond the randomized controlled trials my mind was pre-set to include in a research study design. This breakthrough was a critical moment in my research, but also my development as a writing tutor. Keaton and colleagues share that Writing Studies research has the potential to introduce consultants to new communication and writing styles, as my research has done for me (1).

Undergraduates considering research in Writing Studies should examine their options for methodologies before settling on a specific study design. I benefited greatly from giving up my original project design and hearing out other perspectives, which allowed me to learn more about the Writing Studies field. Here, mentors can play a critical role by exposing their undergraduate researchers to a broad range of methodologies. Not only will this help the undergraduate begin to feel a sense of belonging in the community, but it will also open avenues for them to make the project their own (CCCC; DelliCaprini and Moore).

Writing Studies research as an undergraduate can feel daunting. Mentorship relationships can support students from the first step of recognizing and outlining a research question to the distribution of results (DelliCaprini and Moore; Cope et al.). Along the way, the process will open opportunities for the student to claim a place within the research field as they establish mentorship networks and grow into

partnership roles that mirror the multilateral directionality of learning and inquiry central to the research process. Through those collaborations with mentors, undergraduates become more equipped to situate themselves within the broader Writing Studies community, while mentors gain partners who can inspire novel ideas and provide new perspectives in their work.

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