Maximizing the Student Success Center

00:07–00:34
Andrew Coletti: Hello and welcome to this episode of The T in Teaching. This episode is focused on Temple University Student Success Center and how students can best leverage this tool for greater success. In this episode, our host Laura Izzo interviewed Stephen Kelly, the Assistant Director of Writing Services, where he has worked since 2018. Thank you for listening and please enjoy.

00:34–00:36
Laura Izzo: Hi, Stephen. Thank you for being here today.

00:36–00:37
Stephen Kelly: Yeah, thanks for having me.

00:37–00:51
Laura Izzo: So, you know, we want to talk about the Success Center. But before we get to the nitty-gritty of that, let's talk about the experiences. You know, the students have when they come to you. So, I'm going to start with the quotes first, and we'll go through them, and we'll unpack a little bit to do a deeper dive.

00:51–01:16
Laura Izzo: So, you know, from inside of higher ed, writing and tutoring has a negative stigma associated with us, which you can come to fear of judgment from peers or tutors for poor academic performance. Reframing academic services as a benefit to the students and not a consequence can be particularly beneficial for our students. Is that something you feel like your experience is something you maybe have come across in your day-to-day job?

01:16–01:49
Stephen Kelly: Yeah, that's the perception of writing, tutoring especially, is that your even professors, I think, have this perception that the writing center is here for a student who doesn't know grammar, doesn't, you know, have basic writing skills. You know, the instructor will give the content-based feedback, the stylist feedback, and then send be like, oh, we'll go to the writing center and the tutor will proofread your paper.

01:49–02:12
Stephen Kelly: That's not what we do. We do help students with those kinds of basic proofreading strategies. But our main message is trying to get students and professors and everyone to be aware that we're so much more than that. So, it's not just students who are struggling with their writing. It's not just students who are taking first or writing English.

02:12–02:43
Stephen Kelly: At OSU, we have students who write up in the final stages of their dissertations for their PhD years and the math department. When I was a tutor years ago, I worked with a student who brought me what looked like an actual published academic journal article that she was getting published in the next few months. And she just wanted one more set of eyes to kind of look at it.

02:43–03:09
Stephen Kelly: And it was material that was like, completely beyond anything I knew. Then the, the research field that she was working with then. But I was still able to kind of tell her where her sentences could be clearer

and where her grammar could be improved. This was somebody about to be published, who had been like, approved by an actual publication because her writing was so good.

03:09–03:36
Stephen Kelly: And yet, like she was still benefiting from our tutoring. And that goes for lots of different students. We have grad students who come in, and we have creative writers who bring their poetry, their short stories, and their lyrics. We work with students, like anybody and everybody who is writing something, they tend to be writing it for an audience.

03:36–03:59
Stephen Kelly: They want to sort of communicate something to somebody else, and that's something that a tutor is an audience. It's a stranger, perhaps, who can tell you how they respond to your writing. And that's something that any writer could benefit from, not just somebody who's at this kind of what you might call remedial or basic level.

03:59–04:06
Laura Izzo: Right. So really, it's a there's a through line of no matter what the topic, there is an audience there. Is it the tutor? There are benefits too.

04:06–04:07
Stephen Kelly: That. Yeah, absolutely.

04:07–04:17
Laura Izzo: Yeah. So, you know, along those lines, what measures do you try to take in terms of combating that to approach that stigma that students have?

04:17–04:40
Stephen Kelly: If you could give us some tips on marketing and so forth, you're maybe the expert on that. But we tried to send, you know, different messages out to classrooms, to advising groups, to orientation fairs and so forth. We have experienced student staff who work for us in the various programs writing tutors, Stem tutors, academic coaches, and so forth.

04:40–05:14
Stephen Kelly: After they've been with us for a while, the students who are really passionate about what we do and who have good public speaking skills, so to speak, can become Student Success Center ambassadors. And their basic job is to field requests from mostly instructors but other groups as well. And they give this individualized presentation on what it means to be a student worker at the SCC, what it means to be a student who takes advantage of our services.

05:14–05:44
Stephen Kelly: And I think what is surprising to many of the students and the audience for those presentations is just knowing that this is a different kind of space, a different kind of interaction that they can take advantage of. Like, it might be intimidating, maybe to go to your professor's office hours or to go to a TA who has like some control over your grade to reveal to be vulnerable and reveal like, I don't understand this at all.

05:44–06:16
Stephen Kelly: I don't know what I'm doing. I don't think I understand the instructions. That's something that I feel like students, when they're talking to other students who have maybe taken that class, who have been where they have been, which is what our tutors are. It's a lot easier to kind of have that vulnerable conversation. And I think once you're able to, like, open up about what you need and to learn from someone who's like your peer, then like that just opens up a whole lot of opportune entities for learning something new.

06:16–06:32

Laura Izzo: Well, you know the rules nicely into my next question. And you touched on a little bit with ambassadors. But we know when students attend, when students come, you know, and have positive experiences, do they become regular customers for lack of a better term? Do they become frequent visitors?

06:32–07:01

Stephen Kelly: Yeah. So I don't know what the data term would be, but if you look at the sort of the statistics, I spend a lot of time looking at the statistics of, of our usage. There are, you know, a lot of people who do just come once; maybe they have like a very specific thing that they need to accomplish, like a very specific question about a draft, a very high-stakes assignment they're working on.

07:01–07:33

Stephen Kelly: And so, there are a lot of students who just come one time and never come back. But there's also like the scale that drops and goes up. So, it's like the students who do come more than once, they come way more than once. So, they come five, six, seven, eight times. It's very common for a student to kind of find a tutor that that they can connect with, that they feel like they're getting, like, just the kind of personalized service that they need.

07:33–07:47

Stephen Kelly: And then to become like a repeating weekly, more than weekly, like a visitor to that tutor, if that makes sense. So, yeah, we do have a lot of repeat users, which I'm always happy to see.

07:47–08:14

Laura Izzo: Great, great. Is this a sign of success? Yeah, it's a sign of a successful outcome. I'll introduce new, you know, quotes moving towards outcomes. And this quote comes from the L.A. Review of Books. Tutoring and writing centers are often the college's best-kept secrets. Those who attend regularly benefit through better grades, higher self-confidence, lower dropout rates, and deeper community embeddedness.

08:14–08:22

Laura Izzo: Do you feel that you were a secret on campus? You know, you've alluded to it a little bit. Do you feel like students are really fully utilizing you?

08:22–08:44

Stephen Kelly: Well, we're not a secret. We're certainly, you know, don't want to be considered a secret. We're doing everything we can to kind of shout from the rooftops that we're here. And we we're free of charge also. That's something we said were free with an asterisk. The students have already paid through their required student fees to take advantage of us.

08:44–09:16

Stephen Kelly: So it's like you're already paying for this. Come take advantage of it, please. So, yeah, we're definitely not trying to be a secret that said, like, we could have more students, more appointments on the schedule. There's room for more usage. Generally, the only time that we're completely maxed out is actually right around right now, like midterm season and also like the last maybe two weeks of this semester before exams.

09:16–09:39

Stephen Kelly: But throughout the rest of the semester, it's like, yeah, there's so there's so many appointments that are going unfulfilled. And I wish, I wish people, you know, could plan and start working on, you know, if they're applying for grad school and they have to write a personal statement like they could get so much help from writing an early draft, like really early on and revising that.

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Stephen Kelly: And so that's something that, you know, isn't down to like the exam schedule, you know.

09:44–09:53

Laura Izzo: Right. So, maybe not necessarily a secret, but you know, the calendar is open. The calendar exists. You go beyond just the midterms and the finals.

09:53–10:18

Stephen Kelly: Right. And we have we have; I think, 42 writing tutors. Most of those are undergraduates, but also some graduate student tutors. And they work, let's say, an average of like eight hours a week, where we're open 12 hours a day, Monday through Thursday, plus hours on Friday and Saturday late, where we are, we are here, throughout the week for students' grades.

10:18–10:26

Laura Izzo: Now we'll adjust slightly to, you know, strategies. What are some writing strategies and practices that you typically use to help students?

10:26–10:50

Stephen Kelly: Right. So when we're training the new tutors, we kind of differentiate between two basic types of sessions. And one of those is kind of like the content-level tutoring session. One of them is like the sentence level tutoring session. And of course, there are different strategies that we that we teach our tutors to use for for those different types.

10:51–11:25

Stephen Kelly: But yeah, so a content level that would be your organization is your argument persuasive? Are you responding to whatever the prompt is, whatever you're supposed to actually be doing, is your research well-integrated? That would be a content-level thing. And for those types of sessions, one of the most helpful strategies that a lot of tutor's use is what we call a reverse outline, which is when you normally think of an outline, that's something you're doing before the first draft.

11:25–11:44

Stephen Kelly: Your kind of mapping out what it is that you want to write about. But when you actually write the draft, sometimes you find that you go off on these tangents, these detours. You get distracted. You include a bunch of research that you really liked, but then, really, it shouldn't necessarily be in the final product. It's not that relevant.

11:44–12:10

Stephen Kelly: So, a reverse outline is basically reading through the draft that's already been written and kind of reverse engineering what the outline for that looks like. And when you do that, and once you start paying attention to, okay, I've got three different ideas in this paragraph, maybe this should be actually three different paragraphs. One of the ideas in this paragraph is very similar to something that comes pages later.

12:10–12:36

Stephen Kelly: It starts to reveal like where the puzzle pieces maybe aren't properly fitting together. And I think that's really eye opening for a lot of students to kind of do that reverse engineering work. And so that's probably the most helpful, like content level strategy in terms of sentence level strategies. We like to do what in, the writing pedagogy industry is called minimal marking.

12:36–13:25

Stephen Kelly: So we're very we're very focused. We're all about we don't do the writing for the students. We're not here to write your paper for you. We're here to help you to be the author of your own writing. And so minimal marking is basically a way of, of kind of identifying a pattern, maybe of, of grammatical mistakes or, you know, instances where you're being redundant or you're not being as concise as you could be and kind of pointing out one of the first examples, the first 1 or 2 examples of that, and fully explaining, you know what, what you're seeing, what's going wrong, how it should be fixed, and then gradually pulling back so,

13:25–13:49

Stephen Kelly: you know, eventually you're looking at a paragraph and you're saying, okay, in the first half of this paragraph, I see another instance of that. Can you as the student, as the writer, can you notice what it is that I'm talking about? And then taking a moment to give the student time to be like, oh yeah, there's another, another grammatical mistake just like that here.

13:49–14:10

Stephen Kelly: And then eventually, like, once you've kind of pulled back as a tutor and let the student start to identify and diagnose the mistakes themselves, then usually we feel pretty confident that the student can take the rest of the paper home with them and, identify those mistakes. And maybe the part that you didn't have time to look at.

14:10–14:15

Laura Izzo: Right? So it's another level of recognition for learning and building on what you have.

14:16–14:34

Stephen Kelly: It's all about helping the student to be able to to identify what might be considered a weakness in the writing, for them to be able to identify that themselves and be able to apply that not only to whatever the current writing project is, but also their future writing.

14:34–14:57

Laura Izzo: Yeah. Got it. I wish I had learned that my college would have helped me quite a bit. So, you know, you do talk about, you know, those strategies. Every student is going to be different in terms of their experience of tutoring, their pathways of achieving, or even how you adjust that with students and meet them where they are and help them.

14:57–14:59

Laura Izzo: You know, at that moment, right?

14:59–15:25

Stephen Kelly: So every one on one session at the Student Success Center, and that goes for writing, tutoring, it goes for Stem tutoring. It goes for we have conversation partners who help to learn English or to learn other languages taught at sample for every one-on-one session. It is all about what the student is bringing in as the focus.

15:25–15:54

Stephen Kelly: There's never going to be a canned session where it's like, I'm a writing tutor, and I just read a bunch about semicolons. I just want to teach everyone about semicolons today. That's never going to happen. It's going to be the student comes in, and they're like, I'm really concerned about whatever. And then the tutor, well, you know, reviews the draft or whatever it is and is like, I agree that that does seem like a concern.

15:54–16:19

Stephen Kelly: Or sometimes, you know, the students come in and they're concerned that they're not doing something right. And then the tutor reviews it and it's like, no, like, actually you're doing a very good job. And sometimes the session is just about that kind of confidence building and, and getting the student to recognize their own success and keep doing what they're doing.

16:19–16:38

Stephen Kelly: You know, sometimes students come in, they don't even know. They're just, like, there's they're overwhelmed, perhaps, and they don't even know where to start. But they know they probably need help. And in that case, sometimes the tutor will probably, you know, prioritize. I was about to say triage, but,

16:38–16:41

Laura Izzo: Very applicable to the diverse. Yeah.

16:41–17:10
Stephen Kelly: That's suitable in that case. Use their expertise, if you will, to kind of be like, okay, I think the most important thing is that you probably work on this right now. And, you know, when they make that consideration, they're also taking into mind like, okay, is this do like two hours from now? Like, is this something that you can actually do in the next two hours if it's due a week from now, that that conversation might look a lot different?

17:10–17:10
Laura Izzo: Sure.

17:10–17:11
Stephen Kelly: Yeah.

17:11–17:30
Laura Izzo: Well, I do think that semicolons need to be addressed. I think that was more I appreciate the, the approach. So on that note, you know, we'll finish this conversation. Success stories. Can you share a time, you know, students come in and the in support and not only has received it but has been able to excel.

17:30–18:02
Stephen Kelly: Yeah. So what is one particular success story? We get it's always nice to get emails from students who have just graduated recently. And these just come out of the blue where, where somebody is just pouring out their appreciation for a particular tutor that they've worked with many times. These come through my email inbox pretty frequently, and it always just fills me with joy.

18:02–18:28
Stephen Kelly: And, of course, I share it with the tutors, and I'm sure it makes them feel a lot better about what they're doing. Sometimes, it's hard to tell. I have to tell the tutors, you know, it's hard to tell in the short term, like how effective what you just did. Maybe words on a student, you're not going to necessarily get that instant feedback, instant gratification.

18:28–19:06
Stephen Kelly: Like you might never see this student again, perhaps. But yeah, we do have like every tutor who works for us, and every program has a story about someone who came in and they were just, you know, at their wit's end and they were falling behind. They were thinking about dropping the class, maybe. And then the, the, the tutor, you know, calmed them down, kind of gave them some perspective on how all was not yet lost and then help to kind of build them up and get them back on track.

19:06–19:42
Stephen Kelly: Like every, every one of our tutors has told me stories about these types of students. When I was a tutor myself, I remember especially working with students who were, like I said before applying to grad school and working on their applications and personal statements, and that that is such a tricky type of writing assignment because usually the instructions are just like a sentence, but they want like very specific things.

19:42–20:02
Stephen Kelly: They're looking for a lot, and it's a very high stakes document. A lot is riding on it, and students will come in. I remember when I was writing my statements, I didn't realize all that. I just, you know, wrote whatever personal statements about me. Like, what difference does it make? How could I screw this up if it's about me?

20:02–20:29

Stephen Kelly: But just working with those students over and over again to kind of fine tune exactly how it was they were presenting themselves with what it is they were trying to communicate to, like this potential school. And then it would just be so nice when, you know, towards the end of the semester, it was like I got into this school, in the school, just that that success was very enjoyable.

20:29–20:33
Stephen Kelly: Yeah. And so exactly like one particular success story.

20:33–20:41
Laura Izzo: But it speaks to many, many both with you and everyone there. So, it's always a good thing. So thank you so much. And thank you for being here today. Yeah.

20:41–20:42
Stephen Kelly: Thank you so much for having me.

20:43–20:43
Laura Izzo: I appreciate it.