

Shelly Laurenzo: Hello and welcome to the Decipher Podcast. This podcast is hosted by William & Mary staff members who are committed to student success. We all know that this year has been unlike any other. And our hope is that this podcast provides a fresh perspective on the challenges our students are facing.

Speaker 2: Navigating college life is no walk in the park and being a William & Mary student in 2020 is no different. Join experts from around campus as they discuss ways to decipher common college experiences.

Shelly Laurenzo: [00:00:30] On today's episode, I will be interviewing two consultants from the writing resources center on campus. Enjoy.

So, yeah, to get started, I would love for you two to introduce yourselves. What year are you at William & Mary? What's your major? And what do you like to do in your free time? Aria, do you want to get us started?

Aria Austin: Hello, everyone. My name is Aria [00:01:00] Austin. I am a senior at William & Mary. I'm a Government Major, English Minor, on the pre-law track. And I'm from Gainesville, Virginia. What I like to do in my free time? Well, I'm a singer songwriter, so I love playing songs on my guitar, writing songs on my guitar. I also am a really big fan of poetry. So, I also read a lot of poetry in my free time. And working out, I think that's so important. I often go to the rec to clear my mind, a couple pushups, body pump. That is a [00:01:30] great way to let us from steam after a long day of studying.

Shelly Laurenzo: Oh, my God, Aria. I love that. I'm so jealous. I don't... I'm too tired, I'm too tired to do any of that stuff, but I love it. I love the energy. All right, Sydney.

Sydney: Hi, everyone, my name is Sydney. I am also a senior here at the college. I am studying linguistics and English, and I'll be going to the William & Mary School of Ed next year for, to get my teaching degree. So, that'll be fun, [00:02:00] exciting, another year of school. And I'm from Centreville, Virginia. And in my free time, I love reading. And lately, I have been very active on Duolingo, I think partially out of boredom, with not many social activities going on, but I've been studying French. And also, I recently randomly watched a video about learning the Korean alphabet. So, I've been really getting into languages and doing a lot of Spanish conversation hours too. So, that has been what [00:02:30] has been occupying my free time lately.

Shelly Laurenzo: That's awesome. I will say too, if you haven't checked this out yet, if you are a member of the Williamsburg Regional Library, which all students can join the Williamsburg Regional Library, they have a paid subscription to Mango, which is another language learning app. So, that's one that I always recommend to folks because it's same concept of Duolingo. It's very, user-friendly, it's making it a game, but Mango. So, if you're of the Williamsburg Regional [00:03:00] Library, you can get access to the paid version of Mango.

Sydney: Oh, good idea. Good to know. Thank you.

Shelly Laurenzo: You're welcome.

Sydney: Guys, any language help I can get. [crosstalk 00:03:10].

Shelly Laurenzo: Yeah, it's hard. It requires consistency.

Sydney: Yes. Right now, I have an 87 days, three [inaudible 00:03:18] lingo, which I'm just going to brag about.

Shelly Laurenzo: That's awesome. You should brag about it. That's really far.

Sydney: The longest [crosstalk 00:03:22] ever, maybe for anything.

Shelly Laurenzo: That's awesome. I get three days and then I'm like, "Nope, [crosstalk 00:03:28] tired." That's great.

Sydney: I'm very surprised [00:03:30] with the result as well.

Aria Austin: Sydney is just skilled at languages.

Shelly Laurenzo: Yeah, that's what I hear.

Aria Austin: I mean, she can [crosstalk 00:03:35] in Spanish. After [inaudible 00:03:37] Spanish, I still don't know Spanish. So, I just really admire Sydney for her love for learning languages, but I'm not good at it.

Sydney: Oh, my goodness.

Shelly Laurenzo: That's awesome. I love that...

Sydney: Working on it, working on it. Practicing.

Shelly Laurenzo: Yeah, practice is key. So, I'm hoping you both can... Both of you work as consultants at the Writing Resources Center, [00:04:00] so I'm hoping you both can share what got you involved with the Writing Resources Center. What spoke to you there? Why did you decide to become a consultant?

Sydney: I can go first for this one. I was actually a Writing Center Consultant in my high school. We were one of the few high schools in our county that had one and it was... And when I was in high school, it was slowly building, I think. So, I think now there are many more writing centers at the high school level. But... So, my Writing Center Director in high school [00:04:30] basically pumped me up to apply to a writing center wherever I ended up for college. So, I had always had it in the back of my mind that I wanted to look into that.

And then when I got to William & Mary, I met a few of the consultants both by using the writing center myself and at tabling events throughout the first semester of college. And everyone seemed so lovely who worked there. And they are so lovely, now that I work here, I can confirm. So, I... It was mostly from just being asked to [00:05:00] work there from being a decent, I guess, a writer in high school. And so... And I loved it. I love working with students and everything.

Aria Austin: Same, actually, I had a writing center at my high school too, and it was just starting. It was my senior year, is when we first got a writing center and it was attached to the English Honor Society at my high school. So, when I came to college, I wanted to still do that because I think that working at the Writing Center also helps you become a better writer, too. You're thinking more about [00:05:30] how... What do you say when you're writing or you're more aware of your grammar and you have to understand these things even help other people write better. So, I, especially coming to some place like William & Mary, I think it was good for me to start working at the writing center right at freshman year. Because it's definitely helped me become a better writer here as well.

Shelly Laurenzo: That's awesome. So, I'm hoping you both can also share a little bit about, what happens in the Writing Resources Center? I know there are so many [00:06:00] students that would benefit from working with a consultant and strategizing with you all. But I also think some students might just not fully understand what the Writing Resources Center does. So, I'm hoping maybe you all can explain a little bit about what you all do as a consultant in the Writing Resources Center? And how can student students access your resources?

Aria Austin: Well, first and foremost, it's a conversation. I definitely think coming into Writing Center it can be a bit daunting because writing is a [00:06:30] really vulnerable thing. So, when you're bringing a piece of writing and you can be like, "What is this person going to say about my paper, or whatever", and it can be scary, but I promise you, the Writing Center is a very friendly place. We're really welcoming. And we're just going to talk to you. We're going to ask you a lot of questions about why are you writing this? Or what do you think about this? To help you think through the process. Because we're not going to write your paper for you, but we will help you think through what you're writing. We can also help you through grammar. We can walk you through citations.

We help with [00:07:00] all forms of writing too. So, it can be speeches, cover letters, it can be personal statements. I've even helped people with captions to photos, which I think is a really niche thing, but we help with any when we're writing and rhetoric. And I know Sydney is one of our admin, so she definitely can speak more to what we do at the Writing Center.

Sydney: Yeah. I agree with everything that you said, Aria. It's definitely a conversation there. As weird as this sounds there have been consultees that I've worked with where we don't even look [00:07:30] at the full draft that they have written

because they really just almost word vomited a draft out and really just need to talk about their main ideas. And so, when the conversation gets started, we just keep talking in the whole hour about expanding upon their ideas and organizing their ideas. And we don't even look at what they already have written. And that's not every consultation, a lot of consultations we look at the writing, most of them probably, but there have been times where we really just talk it out the whole time. And I think that's really, [00:08:00] really helpful more than people realize. Another thing I would say, and one of my tips for how to use the Writing Center, is you can come in at any part of the writing process.

So, you can come in all the way from almost not having any idea what you want to write and really just coming in with the assignment and maybe an initial thought, or even just saying, "I'm confused about the prompt", and really can come in from there all the way to when you have a more final, fully formed draft of your paper and you want it to just get [00:08:30] final edits. So... And I would say my suggestion is experiment for you personally which part of the writing process is most helpful for you to come in.

So, me personally, I get the most help from other consultants when I've written about a paragraph, like my, maybe my intro paragraph in thesis, and then have outlined the rest of my paper because then the consultant can see, "Okay, how am I organizing my ideas? But also what is?... How's my writing coming out with these ideas in the first paragraph? [00:09:00] And how's my thesis working?" Or maybe even writing the first paragraph, your intro paragraph, and then a first body paragraph, would be a good place for me. But for other people, I don't know, like Aria, if you want to speak to when your favorite time in the writing processes to get help. But I think definitely, as a consultee, thinking about that and trying out different points, would be a really helpful tip.

Aria Austin: I, personally, like coming in when I'm almost done. I overthink a lot of what I say. So, it's good to have someone else to talk to. And [00:09:30] for them to maybe instill a little bit more confidence in you and I'm thinking... Or to be just a second pair of eyes in case I made a mistake. I think it's really important to walk away from your writing too. That's a tip. If you can't make an appointment at the Writing Center, just stepping away and then coming back to it later because you can... It's completely different when you come back the second time, you're like, "Oh my gosh, did I mean to say that?" And so, probably at the end is when I come to the Writing Center for help.

Sydney: Yeah. I definitely agree with that. I think as much as college students resist [00:10:00] the editing process, myself included, where we joke about, "Oh, I wrote this paper all in one go last night", it just is better to write it fully out and then step away for a day and then come back to it. It helps so much and takes away a lot of the stress of having to write something perfectly the first time around.

Shelly Laurenzo: And, honestly, I still do that with things that I have to write. My supervisor has asked for some feedback for these [00:10:30] different questions. And so, I've written my first draft today and I'll look at them again tomorrow, right? You have to build that into the process because you're not going to write something perfect the first time, it's going to take time to go back, and to review and edit, and see if things make sense. Right? Sometimes it... When you first type it or write it out, you're like, "Oh, this is perfect." And then you go back later and you're like, "I have no idea what I was trying to get across. It doesn't make any sense."

Sydney: And I think you, like [00:11:00] some students, use the Writing Center as external motivation for the editing process. So, at the beginning, when they say, "Okay, I really don't want to write this last minute." They'll make an appointment for a week out before they have anything written. And then they'll use that as a first deadline, almost like, "Okay, by the time I have my Writing Center appointment, I have to write a first draft or I have to write an outline". And then they have the appointment, even if they didn't get to where they wanted to get to, it's at least a way to get started on a paper or an assignment. And then after [00:11:30] that appointment, they'll finish it up for the real due date.

Shelly Laurenzo: Yeah. I liked that idea of just like, maybe that's part of your writing process, right? As you know, you're going to meet with a writing consultant on this day. And so, I need to... Because it sounds like different folks might have different preferences in terms of when that consultation is most useful. Right? Whether it's early in the writing process or with a draft, or wherever that is, so plan to be at that sweet spot when [00:12:00] you make the appointment. And then that can be another motivating factor to get things done and to get things reviewed. I really liked that idea. What would be your advice to maybe... I'm thinking specifically about a first year student or a new William & Mary student, what is your advice to them? Or what would you say to them if they were on the fence about going to the Writing Resources Center? How would you convince them like, "No, you should come."?

Sydney: I think one [00:12:30] thing to say is just no pressure. I mean, it's not a... It shouldn't be a stressful, "Oh, I'm so nervous." Because we like to think about it as a peer consultation, right? So, it's not, you're not meeting with your professor in office hours. A lot of the repertoire that we try to build at the beginning of a conversation is just student life thing. So, "Hey, where are you living this semester or this year? What kinds of things are you involved with? What were you up to this morning? Oh, the weather today, it's great, have you been [00:13:00] outside?" Just developing that student to student conversation before you even talk about the assignment. And then also, being there for the student as like, "Oh, yeah, that professor is a really tough grader", or, "Oh, yeah, this assignment is pretty difficult, let's talk it out, let's work through it." I think it can actually be very comforting to talk to another student, especially if that student is older than you, as a first year consultee, coming in.

Aria Austin: I [00:13:30] also think now that we have virtual consultations, if you're a little nervous, it's the perfect time to try out the Writing Center because you're in the comfort of your own home and you can talk to your consultant online. So, I think that also is a really encouraging way to try out the Writing Center, so you can get a feel for it. Because truly, it's not that different. I think virtually, than it is in person, of course, you don't have that in person to personal thing going on, but we're still doing the same thing essentially that would be doing in a consultation in person. So, [00:14:00] I think try it online, and then in come person, when you can, it's really helpful.

And Sydney and I are both consultants, but we still make appointments ourselves to [inaudible 00:14:11], "Why are you a pro?". I like to think so, but it's always good to have other people help you with your writing because I also think that no piece of writing is ever perfect. And that might be encouraging for some people, because I know a lot of people, especially at William & Mary, tend to be perfectionist. And I think anything can be continually edited. You just need to get to [00:14:30] the point where you feel confident in that piece of writing and you think it can communicate clearly what you want it to.

Shelly Laurenzo: I love the fact that both of you talk about the fact that you still utilize consultants, right? So, yes, you are trained consultants, ready and available to help your peers, and you also help each other, I think, in some ways, that take some of the... Maybe some of the fear of vulnerability out of the process, right? Knowing the fact that you all are still [00:15:00] committed to perfecting your own writing craft, and that means using writing consultants to continue to help you. So, I think that's a really comforting thing for other students to know. I'm hoping as we wrap up our time together, if you all, if you both could share one piece of writing advice. So, what's one piece of universal writing advice that you have for students?

Aria Austin: [00:15:30] Mine, definitely, would be begin early. And I know, I say it and I definitely procrastinate all the time, but you should begin early because, as we mentioned before, you get that time to revise or come to the Writing Center. So, I think it's important and you just feel a lot better and less stressed out when you start a paper the day before it's due. So, yeah, that's my advice, begin early when you can.

Sydney: I think one thing for me that has been helpful is [00:16:00] to just talk about your ideas with anyone and everyone. Even if you're talking to someone who's not in your class who doesn't know the material necessarily, that's honestly sometimes more helpful because then you can ensure that what you're saying is a clear idea. So, talking it out with your roommate, with a Writing Center consultant, with your professor in office hours, with your mom on the phone, when you call home like, "Hey, does this idea even make sense in the way I explain it?" I think just, honestly, taking your ideas [00:16:30] away from the paper for a second takes away some of that stress too, of like, "Let me just even first think about what my idea is, what is my argument? How am I supporting

this? How would I?... If I was arguing with my roommate about this topic that I'm really heated about", like pretend you're heated about a literary analysis paper. I don't know. It's like, "How would I argue it just in person even? At before I even put words to paper".

Because sometimes, I think, the idea of writing something down makes it so much more permanent and stressful. [00:17:00] And so, the idea of speaking at first is like, "Okay, I can workshop this. This is not a permanent statement that I'm saying a loud because it's not written down for all eternity." So, I think that that would be my advice.

Shelly Laurenzo: And honestly, I think those are both good pieces of advice for writing, but also really for any project, right? Like you said, Aria, the sooner you start the better off you're going to be. You're not going to be stressed about it. You have time built in to make changes or adjust [00:17:30] as needed. So, I think that's really important. Something that we talk a lot about in my office in academic advising is just the importance of students finding whatever calendaring or assignment tracking system works for them, whether that's on their phone or a paper planner, whatever that is, you need to figure that out early. And then you can build in time like, "Okay, if you know this paper is due this date, how long do you need to prepare?" So, I think preparing early is always helpful. And then Sydney, I had to laugh when you were [00:18:00] talking about voicing your idea and getting out there to whomever.

I... There were so many times in college, my undergrad had a large campus and I remember walking from one side of campus to the other and I would call my mom and be like, "Okay, mom, this...", I was a Philosophy major, so I'm like, "This is what I'm thinking, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And just during the 20 minutes it would take me to walk back to wherever I was going, I had time to flesh out my ideas and my mom would ask questions, and I would just feel more prepared.

Sydney: Right. And especially, with any of them, like your mom and your dad, [00:18:30] they're probably pretty far removed from the academic world, depending on what they do for work. But it's helpful for them to be like, "Wait. What is this that you're saying? I don't understand. You totally skipped a step here from idea A to idea B", and like, "Walk me through how you even got there." I think that can be really helpful.

Shelly Laurenzo: Yeah. I think just forcing yourself to think about someone who doesn't have the same background or understanding of whatever that topic is, could be really, really, really useful part of the process.

Sydney: [00:19:00] Yeah. And that's especially important for all of our students who aren't English majors or writing, necessarily writing heavy major. We... We're great for that too, for [inaudible 00:19:11] majors. If you have a paper or even a presentation, a lot of people don't know they can come in with a presentation, a

podcast, a poem, anything. And having an ear that isn't familiar with your field can sometimes be more helpful for clarity because you have to explain the things that are a given for [00:19:30] people in your field. Because usually, in a student paper, your professors want you to explain what is considered a given, but they think about why it's a given I guess.

Aria Austin: And in connection to what Sydney said, although not really, I will say that read your paper out loud, because when you come in, we're going to ask you to read your paper out loud and you often catch your own mistakes by doing that. [inaudible 00:19:52] you're reading in your head and sometimes you skip over, like you said "The" two times in a row, but when you're reading it out loud, you will catch that. So, I think it's really important as [00:20:00] another piece of advice to think through your idea out loud, and also when you have something written down to read it out loud too.

Shelly Laurenzo: I love that. That's a great idea. So, I want to thank our guests, Sydney and Aria, for their time today. I really appreciate you all talking to us about the Writing Resources Center and how students can take advantage of that, and also sharing some tips and recommendations for writing papers. So, thank you so much.

Sydney: Thanks so much, Shelly. We had a great time talking about our job here.

Aria Austin: Yes. Thank you so much for having us [00:20:30] and also shameless plug. If you would like to become a writing consultant, you can definitely check out the William & Mary Writing Resources Center page which is WM dot EDU slash AS slash WRC slash. And you can find out how to become a consultant if you want to. And this really excited you, because Sydney and I love being consultants and it's a great time.

Shelly Laurenzo: Thank you so much for tuning into this episode of the [00:21:00] Decipher Podcast. For our show notes, please visit our website, Decipher dot blogs dot WM dot EDU. Take care.