

By Our WTS

The Indiana University Writing Tutorial Services Alumni Newsletter

Writing Tutorial Services
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The State of WTS

Mid-way through her second year as WTS Director, Jo Ann Vogt reflects on the changes she's made and those still to come.

Jo Ann Vogt

As I begin my second year as director of WTS, I am much more comfortable. I have the luxury of knowing all the WTS tutors, of being able to call them by name and chat about shared experiences. On top of that, I'm more conversant with the policies and procedures that keep a big organization like WTS running smoothly from day to day. I'm less likely now to have to ask tutors to explain to me how we do things and why.

Another change this fall is a concerted effort to increase demand at our satellite locations. To bring WTS to the attention of more students, I plan to expand—with tutors' help—efforts to advertise WTS to undergraduates in the residence halls and elsewhere. Even as tutors and I work to increase traffic, I have to acknowledge that the WTS staff is smaller, in part, because

a number of long-time peer tutors graduated last spring. (We miss you!) It is also smaller because I am intent upon balancing supply and demand at WTS.

I don't want WTS tutors to be overworked, and I value the informal tutor training that often happens as tutors talk when they have a free hour as a result of a no-show or open slot. At the same time, I don't like tutoring hours to go unused. I see myself as a steward of university resources, obligated to use those resources wisely. As a result, I will continue to monitor demand at the various WTS locations, and I'll ask for feedback from tutors concerning the workload. Eventually, I hope to reach a happy medium, a point of equilibrium between the number of students who seek help and the number of tutors prepared and eager to serve those students.

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From IU to Omaha

Last May, former peer tutor Erin McGuan packed up her things and began her life as a teacher in an under-resourced school in Omaha, NE. Read on to find out how her journey has been and how she's faring so far.

Kelsey Nash

Following her graduation from IU in May 2008, former peer tutor Erin McGuan took her life in a whole new direction (and to a whole new city) to pursue her interest in teaching.

McGuan, who studied Spanish and English as an undergraduate, learned that she enjoyed teaching during her days as a WTS tutor. Today, she is a participant in the Magis Catholic Teacher Corps at Creighton University in Omaha, NE, a program she said is similar to Teach for America.

Last May, she committed to

spending two years teaching at an under-funded Catholic school in the Omaha area while simultaneously working toward obtaining a master's degree in education and earning her teaching certification through online courses.

Since she didn't study education at IU, she was given a provisional teaching license, which she will have until she finishes the requirements for her actual license.

Prior to starting her stint as a teacher this fall, she took courses in classroom management and methods

to prepare her for the upcoming year. Despite having never been in command of a classroom on her own and being the only Magis teacher in her entire school, she said she felt "pretty prepared" for the first few weeks of school.

Nineteen master's students take part in the Magis program, some of whom, like McGuan, live in Omaha. The other participants teach at schools in Nebraska, North Dakota and on a Native American reservation, she said.

She currently lives with nine other Magis participants in a convent, which she said is like "a nice, big house," and works at Assumption-Guadalupe Catholic School in downtown Omaha, where she teaches Spanish to students ranging from pre-school through eighth grade.

Ninety-eight percent of her students are Hispanic, and although they grew up speaking Spanish, she said many of them don't how to spell correctly or write professionally. She said it's difficult to get her students to keep from writing in the "Spanglish" they have learned at home.

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The Creighton University mascot, the blue jay (photo donated).

Though she enjoys teaching, she said that it's more of a challenge than she expected.

"[Teaching] is chaos," she said. "It's not what I thought I was getting into."

She teaches sixth, seventh and eighth grade students every day and pre-school through fifth grade twice a week. She also teaches art to her middle school students.

McGuan said middle school students are the hardest to work with because "they don't want to be in school, and they hate everything." But, despite the challenge of keeping them in line, she said she enjoys teaching middle school students because they have a good sense of humor and she can joke around with them.

"Middle school is the purgatory of teaching," she said.

Though she spends the majority of her time at school with middle schoolers, she said that third grade is her favorite to teach and that she's starting to enjoy the earlier grades more than she thought she would.

"Young kids soak things up. . . . They're like sponges," she said. "Preschoolers never cease to amaze me. You've got one attached to one leg, and another's hanging off your arm."

McGuan added that her work at WTS has helped her tremendously with teaching.

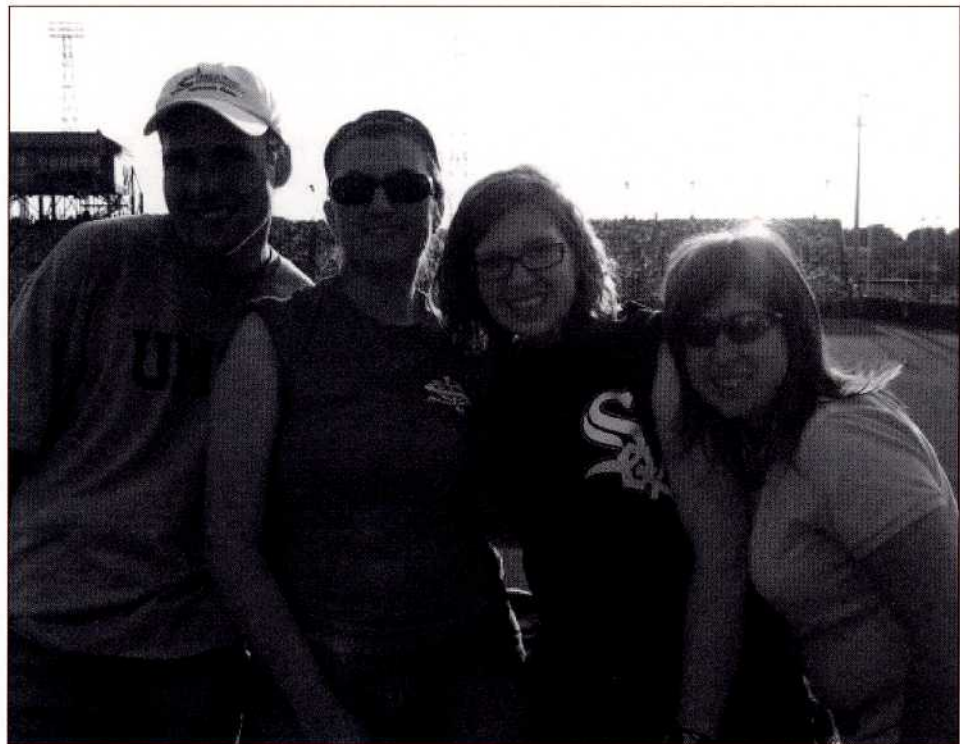
For example, she said she was working after school with two third graders, one of whom is a special needs student, at the beginning of November when she felt her "WTS instincts kick back in."

The ease with which she worked one-on-one with those students led her to receive a compliment or two from her principal.

She said that working at WTS has helped her learn to adapt to students' diverse learning styles and allowed her to be a flexible teacher.

Although McGuan doesn't know where she's headed after she finishes the Magis program, she said she can see herself staying in Omaha and earning money for a few years before starting work on a doctorate degree.

"Omaha's a nice town," she said. "It's a mid-sized city, and the people here are very hospitable. It reminds me of Indy."



Erin McGuan (second from right) and some friends from the Magis program at the College World Series of Baseball (photo donated).

More Choices at the ASCs

Starting this semester, students can sign up for tutorials twice as long as the maximum length in previous years, but is this new policy reaping results?

Sri Chatterjee

There was a new option available to students who walked in to the ASCs this fall. They could choose between the traditional 25-minute tutorial or sign up for one that lasted 50 minutes, similar to the tutorials offered at Ballantine. The idea of adding a 50-minute tutorial option at the ASCs was put into practice at the beginning of the fall 2008 semester, and so far, it has garnered largely favorable results.

But for all of its potential benefits, many tutors might be wondering why these changes have been implemented.

"Really, there are three reasons we started the 50-minute tutorial," said Jo Ann Vogt, director of WTS, while discussing the brainstorming that went on behind the scenes of this change.

The biggest factor was the dwindling numbers at the ASCs, she said. Demand at the ASCs for spring 2008 had gone down significantly from previous semesters, and she felt this shift merited some looking into.

"I was thinking about it, and I figured that maybe the students perceived Ballantine to be better, [than the ASCs]" Vogt said.

The second reason came out of this realization. Students got more bang for their proverbial buck by going to Ballantine, where tutors had longer amounts of time to work with students and more resources available to them (the only inconvenience with Ballantine being the need to make an appointment ahead of time). Students seemed to have figured this out, and their behavior indicated that they likely preferred coming to Ballantine.

The third reason came out of Vogt's analysis of the pitch she was using during her classroom visits. She constantly found herself saying that students had to either put in a lot of work to be able to understand exactly what they wanted out of the 25 minutes at the ASCs or have something really short to work on. The odds were that students wouldn't be able to get through a four-page paper in 25 minutes at the ASCs.

Having to mention all this in her pitch, Vogt found herself playing Ballantine up as the preferable option.

"I was undercutting my own pitch!" she said.

The change was discussed, developed and implemented over the

summer so it would be in place before school began in September.

"I would have liked to talk to all the tutors about this option before starting with it, but that would have made it very difficult for everyone else, as it needed to be in place before the start of fall 2008," Vogt said.

Mid-way through the fall semester, most tutors said they liked having the option of a longer, more relaxed tutorial, and they thought it benefits both them and the students. There is also the chance of a longer tutorial running shorter than 50 minutes, which gives tutors some respite on very busy nights.

The biggest concern, however, was the fact that the decision between the 30- and 50-minute tutorial was left up to the students. A common problem tutors expressed was that sometimes students with two-page papers would sign up for an hour simply because it was available, thus causing people with longer or more complex papers to be turned away.

Overall, this new option seems to be a hit with both the students and the tutors. And judging by the busy nights tutors have been having at the ASCs, it is having its intended effect.

