

**Sabbatical Leave Proposal**  
Beth Gillis-Smith  
English/Writing Center Faculty

Proposal date: Fall 2021  
Proposed leave time: Fall 2022  
Seniority of service: August 2004-present  
Previous Sabbaticals: 1 in Spring 2016

**Overview and Background of Sabbatical Proposal**

Since 2015, the Writing Center team, as a part of the Teaching and Learning Center at Moorpark College, has infused the program with Dweck's Mindset Theory. The Writing Center team (English Professor Tracy Tennenhouse and I) has been involved in developing growth mindset in tutoring through re-designing tutor training, branding the center with motivational signs, and attending conferences. Cook and Artino (2016) found that Dweck's growth mindset theory has empirical evidence to support important connections to motivation outcomes. Mindset is considered a non-cognitive characteristic; these characteristics can provide adult learners with added support as they face learning challenges. Dweck and Leggett (1988) identified that students who describe themselves with fixed mindsets are fearful of failure when they must use their skills to work on academically challenging assignments whereas learners who identify their intelligence with a growth mindset see challenges and setbacks as an opportunity to grow. At the TLC, we believe that as students put forth effort and are given positive feedback, this can lead to mastery, success, and completion. My project will work to study this phenomenon, supported by my continuing studies in the dissertation phase of an EdD program at Grand Canyon University, an accredited institution of higher education. Currently my release time for the Writing Center is 17.5 hours a week, which allows for training tutorial staff, observation of both online and on ground tutoring, and continuous program development. A sabbatical would provide me with the opportunity to complete quality research for both the Writing Center and Math and Science Center, time to reflect and write up the findings for the dissertation, develop other informational and training materials for use at the TLC and for faculty, staff, and administration at Moorpark College, and the other two colleges at VCCCD.

**Summary of Growth Mindset**

Dweck (1999) and the early work on mindset theory has started a significant movement in helping students and educators develop new ideas about intelligence and capacity for learning, identifying the implicit theories about abilities that influence unconscious goals when tackling challenging learning tasks that adult learners face when the return to the school environment. TLC tutors are trained in the power of "Yet" and trained to help students by using strategies to become better learners, thinkers, and communicators. By connecting students to peer tutors--expert learners who have a positive outlook on participating in productive struggle and incremental successes--our center is supporting Moorpark College students in their success and persistence. Dweck and Yeager (2019), seminal mindset theory educational researchers, proposed that creating an "environment with instructional tasks and practices that foster a growth mindset...to affect motivation and learning...whole organizations, can embody a mindset...a potentially powerful force in shaping the beliefs, values, and behaviors of the people in those

environments” (Dweck & Yeager, 2019, p. 490). Dweck and Yeager (2019) also proposed that mindset theory may influence the concept of effort beliefs, believing that effort in student behavior is a positive activity that helps grow and strengthen ability in students.

### **Justification for Project**

Data from 2018-2019 reports from the Moorpark College Institutional Research office shows that students who attend tutoring sessions persist at a higher rate than those students who do not, which supports them on their academic pathways. Additionally, this is also reflected in the persistence rates of Hispanic and African American student community. Even as we moved tutoring online during a worldwide pandemic, tutoring sessions continued and grew in numbers. The quantitative data indicates what we do at the TLC is working to support students; we want to further expand our qualitative understanding of student experience at our center as we continue to collaborate and work with the IR office to strengthen the program.

Assembly Bill 705 mandates that students are not offered developmental prerequisites before enrolling in transfer-level courses, which means many of our students are under-prepared for their courses. This research project will explore the non-cognitive practices that can be used to support the work of the English department, adding to the current research on this topic. Moorpark College students are facing increased academic challenge, and this project at the TLC is an important service to our students in light of AB 705.

### **Project Plan**

To support the ever-growing work at the Writing Center, I returned to graduate school to complete an EdD in Teaching and Learning for Adult Learners. I am currently in the dissertation stage, taking a 3 unit course every 8 weeks, and I will use this sabbatical to complete the research and written portion of my study on *Peer Modeled Learning and Mindset Development in Community College Students* with a focus on academic writing. I will also expand the surveys to include students using the Math and Science Center as well.

I will complete the following tasks that support my doctoral research as well as TLC research:

1. Create and deliver an electronic survey to students in our English 1A (to begin) courses as well as those who have used the Writing Center and the Math and Science Center about their mindset towards academic writing, evaluating their fixed or growth perspective. Survey will include questions about their attitudes toward effort and evaluation of skills used to complete academically challenging assignments and attitudes toward setbacks as opportunities to grow, and attitudes toward effort and feedback.
2. Hold interview and focus group sessions with Moorpark College students who attend tutoring sessions to gain descriptions of their experience with tutoring. These can be held via Zoom and will also be recorded and transcribed. By understanding the experience of students who describe themselves with fixed mindsets to see if their fear of failure is changed when they have assistance to learn to use their skills to work on academically challenging assignments.

3. Find learners who identify their intelligence with a growth mindset to understand how they see challenges and setbacks as opportunity to grow.
4. Explore how peer-tutoring supports effort and feedback lead to mastery for students with a growth mindset.

### **Value to VCCCD**

This project supports the mission statement of the Ventura County Community College District and Moorpark College in their commitment to being leaders in the “development of high quality, innovative educational programs and services” and “supplemental learning services that contribute to student success.” The survey and results can be shared with learning assistance centers in the district to support student success at all the colleges. The project plan can be shared with VC and OC to explore their students’ experiences. I can also offer assistance to collect qualitative data on a district level. The project will also directly support the Moorpark College mission statement and vision which promises to “empower its diverse community of learners” provide “robust student support services.”

### **Value to Moorpark College**

The project also directly supports the Moorpark College Educational Masterplan, Strategic Direction #3, Student Success. One of the stated goals is to Improve and expand educational support programs for all students, with an increase in student visits to the Teaching and Learning Center as the first identified metric. This project will allow the Writing Center to support faculty and tutors in understanding the experience of our students who visit our services, which will lead to knowledge that will support future student success. By including the current research on Mindset Theory and Peer-Assisted Learning, I plan to help us understand what works best in supporting students as they face academic challenge in a community college environment where fewer developmental courses are offered. This can be shared to benefit Oxnard and Ventura Colleges as well. As the MC Masterplan also calls for increased tutoring, we want to strengthen our service by creating a deeper and richer understanding of student experiences with peer tutoring at the TLC.

### **Faculty Background**

During my nine years as adjunct faculty and seventeen years as full-time English faculty, I have been granted one sabbatical. Since 2016 four sabbaticals have been granted to English department faculty, all working to strengthen our teaching and understanding of students. My previous sabbatical, designed to learn more about ways to integrate tutors into our college community, has supported our work at the Writing Center in expanding the program by including writing tutors as coaches in composition classes focused on providing extra support to students as well as supporting courses with special populations (Men of Color, LatinX, first generation college students) with tutors during class time to support student learning. That project also resulted in including more Growth Mindset Theory and related research in this area into our tutor training. I have been involved in campus committees (SEA, LSAC, Professional Development, TMWOCA) focused on creating a college learning environment that supports student success. I plan to continue my involvement in student success and equity issues at Moorpark College; this project supports these activities as well.

Professor Tracy Tennenhouse and I have been involved in actively sharing our experiences with Growth Mindset and tutoring at a variety of conferences over the past few years. In spring 2019 we presented on “Using Growth Mindset to Brand the Teaching and Learning Center” at the Association of Colleges for Tutoring and Learning Assistance. In 2019 we also attended the week-long Basic Skills Initiative Leadership Institute: Leadership for Curricular & Institutional Transformation and created a plan to bring a Growth Mindset event to Moorpark College. Along with the help of math Professor Rena Petrello, in fall 2019 we developed a well-attended regional 3CSN event, “Growth Mindset for STEM” at Moorpark College. We also presented a virtual 3CSN LINKS workshop in spring 2020 on conducting Growth Mindset workshops during social and environmental crisis (fires, shootings, worldwide pandemic). Other organizations have included our presentations on Growth Mindset in the Writing Center at regional conferences including the SoCal Writing Center Association Director’s meetings, SoCal WCA Tutor Conference and the 3CSN Tutor Expo.

### **Timeline for Sabbatical project:**

#### Weeks 1-5

1. Collect student email addresses from TLC database and faculty student lists
2. Electronic questionnaires from classes with informed consent questions to be completed by participants
3. 40-60 electronic questionnaires collected from students who have attended one or more tutoring sessions
4. 15 individual interviews set up (at 45 minutes each) to ask follow up questions on academic writing, challenge, effort, and use of feedback collected
5. Each interview reviewed for themes and patterns then data from questionnaires and interviews cross-referenced

#### Weeks 6-10

1. Create transcripts of qualitative results of interviews
2. Create codebook of themes and patterns in interviews
3. Conduct follow-up interviews; continue coding of data

#### Weeks 11-18

1. Write summary of findings
2. Write implications for Writing Center
3. Write recommendations for TLC
4. Write ideas for further research
5. Write suggestions for faculty use of tutoring

### **Post-sabbatical work/Implementation of project**

- Conduct workshops to present professional development at Flex activities, department meetings, and conferences
- Share Literature Review (current list included below)

- Use information to expand and strengthen tutor training material in College M02, Tutoring Methods, Coaches training (they work with students who need extra support), and faculty professional development on student experiences with writing
- Present findings at International Writing Centers Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring, Association of Colleges for Tutoring and Learning Assistance, 3CSN, Conference on College Composition and Communication, and National Council of Teachers of English
- Write research article for publication

## References

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## Sample Literature Review

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October 2021

To the Sabbatical Committee,

It is a great honor and pleasure to work alongside Beth Gillis Smith in the Teaching and Learning Center, and we fully support her sabbatical project--even though it will take her away from us for a semester!

The TLC team (Rena Petrello, Esther Kim, Deb Brackley, Emmanuel Guerrero) and I are very excited about Beth's sabbatical proposal because we are always looking for qualitative and quantitative evidence for what we know in our gut is true or works or helps students. As a support service, it is very hard to know the secret ingredient, that recipe for success which will help a student who comes into the TLC. This is why we support Beth's project: she is aiming to figure that out! By researching our core belief in Growth Mindset theory and how it impacts our students in the tutoring center and across campus, we will have evidence (or not!) that this is indeed a valid core value under which to operate. The TLC team has been regionally recognized as champions of the Growth Mindset concept and has spoken at various educational conferences, even hosting a regional STEM conference on this topic. Mindset and Effort are topics well worth researching on a deeper level.

So it is with bittersweet feeling that we encourage Beth to take a semester away from us on a daily basis in order to study these very important theories and practices--and we look forward to what she will share with us in the TLC and throughout the entire campus. If we can determine the impact of non cognitive aspects on student learning and success, then we can continue to infuse these approaches into best teaching practices.

Sincerely,

The TLC team

Deborah Brackley  
Emmanuel Guerrero  
Esther Kim  
Rena Petrello  
Tracy Tennenhouse

Please accept this letter of support for Beth Gillis-Smith's sabbatical. The English department is interested in the results of this close, qualitative look at student experience at the Writing Center. As we work to support students after the institution of AB 705, we need to know what works best in supporting students as they face academic challenge in a community college environment where fewer developmental courses are offered. We know that our students are supported not only by good writing skills but there is also evidence that it isn't only skills, necessarily, that our under-prepared students need (e.g. writing workshops aren't going to solve the issues of food/housing insecurity, stereotype threat, etc.). The non-cognitive supports are also important to our students' success, and this proposal works to uncover how students experience this kind of support. This project will also provide much needed faculty professional development to provide more awareness of feedback language, and while many of us believe in growth mindset, many of us also don't know how to implement the teaching of it through our assessment practices. This work would also create a through-way between tutoring and courses.

Beth is involved in SEA, LSAC, FIG, Professional Development, and many other campus initiatives focused on creating a college learning environment that supports student success. This project will support her work at the Writing Center, in the English department, and in departments across campus who send students to tutors for academic support.