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From the Editors

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The Writing Center Journal
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From the Editors

The question is both inevitable and fair: “Why another journal in the teaching of writing?” Surely we, as the editors, have asked ourselves that very question many times. The work of getting such a thing off the ground—begging for funds, chasing printers, mailing flyers, reading manuscripts, even typing the copy—threw us back on the ‘why bother’ issue pretty regularly. Must someone really create a new publication to do whatever it is we think needs to be done?

Obviously we think so, and for two reasons—one scholarly, the other political. As scholars, as teachers and researchers in composition, we recognize in writing center teaching the absolute frontier of our discipline. It is in writing centers that the two seminal ideas of our reborn profession operate most freely: the student-centered curriculum, and a central concern for composing as a process. And it is in these centers that great new discoveries will be, are being, made: ways of teaching composing, intervening in it, changing it. Writing centers provide, in short, opportunities for teaching and research that classrooms simply cannot offer. *The Writing Center Journal* fills the need for a forum that can report on and stimulate such work.

Our second reason, the political one, derives from our experiences as writing center directors, experiences we know are shared by thousands of other directors and writing center workers. As clearly as we see the potential of writing centers, our profession as a whole—that slow, conservative creature—lays our past and their sins heavily upon us. In their eyes, writing centers are still correction places, fix-it shops for the chronic who/whom confusers, the last bastions of bonehead English. And since administrations generally follow the profession’s lead, there is real pressure, economic pressure, to turn what ought to be writing centers into useless, deadly things: remediation labs, schoolhouse grammar clinics, drill centers. *The Writing Center Journal* will help combat this political inertia by serving as an outward sign of a growing professional legitimacy.

In short, writing centers are at crucial junctures in both their political and scholarly growth. Perhaps it would be most apt metaphorically to say that in both contexts writing centers are adolescent, and that while

the future is bright with promise, it is full of deadly threats as well. The life expectancy of academic support services—of pedagogical movements in general—is far shorter than those of the students they serve. If writing centers do not mature, do not establish themselves as part of the academic establishment (even as, perhaps, they maintain their anti-establishment posture), they will surely, deservedly, wither away.

The Writing Center Journal is not, of course, alone in this mission. Both *College Composition and Communication* and *College English* try admirably to give writing centers their due. (The September 1980 issue of *CE*, for example, has fine articles on tutoring by Thom Hawkins and Richard Gebhardt.) Still, the focus of these journals is necessarily broad, too broad to give the unique writing center pedagogy enough room; that would require a couple of issues per year. Muriel Harris' *Writing Lab Newsletter*, as most of you know, is the best, most consistent voice of writing center folk. We think *The Writing Center Journal* will serve as a useful complement to the *Newsletter*—a sort of bi-annual reunion to go along with the *Newsletter's* monthly gatherings of the writing center family.

So you know why we have begun. The natural next question is: "What are we looking for?" Let us be honest. To some extent, we are testing the waters, waiting to see the sorts of things writing center people are writing. So far, the response—in terms simply of quantity—has been exciting. We've gotten some fine work.

We can offer, though, our developing sense of what the *Journal* needs. Basically, we are looking for articles of three kinds. The first, and so far the rarest, are essays that are primarily theoretical, that explore or explain the *whys* of writing center instruction: Exactly what is the nature of the tutorial relationship? Out of what traditions—pedagogical, psychological—does it arise? What sorts of research do we need to examine our teaching practices? Such essays include those like Lou Kelly's in this issue, in which she describes—from an historical perspective—the evolution of a pedagogical theory.

Second, we need articles that connect theory with practice, that take the findings of research (in composition or related fields) and put it to work in writing centers. We especially look for theory-into-practice articles that carefully evaluate the success of such practices: How, for example, do specific discovery procedures compare in effectiveness in tutorial instruction? How do training techniques borrowed from psychotherapy or counseling work in training tutors? How does the systematic teaching of editing by, say, the Comp-Lab Project (York College, CUNY) compare with less systematic, in-the-text teaching of editing? In this issue, William Stull's discussion of the use of sentence combining in Hartford's writing program is a fine example of a theory-

into-practice essay.

Finally, we look for essays that draw upon experience in writing center teaching and administration to offer insights and advice that the rest of us can use. So far, this sort of work makes up the bulk of the manuscripts we've seen, and unfortunately the bulk of those we've been unable to use as well. The weakest of these manuscripts are those that recount the history and/or describe the particulars of a given program. They consistently fail to draw from these particulars one or two key lessons that could be readily used by others. Other essays which *did* focus on some specific issue tended to spend far too much time explaining the problems and too little offering fresh or well-tested solutions. In other words, if you write about specific experiences, (a) focus on one or two specific, widely shared problems (tutor initiation, record keeping, getting tutees to be active learners) and (b) spend most of your space offering either fresh or well-tested solutions. Again, we offer a model in this issue: the collaborative effort of Mickey Harris and Kathleen Blake Yancey, "Beyond Freshman Comp: Expanded Uses of the Writing Lab."

A word about style and procedures. Since we are a co-edited journal, we ask that all submissions come with two copies, and be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope with return postage attached. In general, we expect manuscripts to conform to the standards set by the *MLA Stylesheet*, although we are reasonably flexible. We have already noticed, for example, that *MLA* does not expect so many instances of student-tutor dialogue as writing center articles call for.

We also hope to remain flexible on the matter of style. Writing center people are characteristically less formal, less stiff in their prose, than some other members of the English teaching profession. Whether this is a function of personality, or an open-mindedness derived from work with so many struggling writers, we think it an admirable trait, and encourage it. We are, after all, in the business of introducing people to prose; nothing is better suited to that task, or to writing about it, than a plain, humane style.

We leave you, then, in the hands of our first contributors. Please let us hear what you think—about the first issue, about our policies, about things you'd like to see, about the journal in general. And if *The Writing Center Journal* does nothing else, let it offer the not insignificant comfort of company: None of us is in this alone.

Lil Brannon
Stephen North