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Expanded Roles/Expanded Responsibilities: The Changing Nature of Writing Centers Today

Diana George and Nancy Grimm

We first discovered the Writing Centers Association in the late seventies at an Eastern Regional meeting in Ada, Ohio. At that meeting, none of the participants seemed worried that their centers would get too big or that they might eventually have to turn some programs away. The people gathered together at the end of that warm spring weekend seemed relieved to be away from campus for a day or two and excited that they had found others like themselves—people working daily in large and small writing centers run by untenured faculty and part-time faculty and sometime staff and full-time graduate and undergraduate students. Their aim that weekend was simply to build a network, begin a professional association, and learn from others so that they might strengthen their own programs.

Many of the papers at that conference had to do with the very fundamentals of running a writing center. Participants spoke of how to get funding, they asked where the writing center belonged in the university system, they modeled tutor training programs, and a few even struggled with the question of how to get students to come to a center for help. Of course, center directors continue to ask such questions periodically, but today our conferences have taken on a slightly different tone. Instead of story after story of frustration and marginalization, our writing center conferences are now filled with stories of success, expansion, and the development of new programs.

We will not linger long in our own center's history, but a short personal history might help to remind us all of how we began this business. Like many

others around the country, our center started small. We opened a tutoring program in 1978 with one-quarter release time for the director (based on a 4-4-4 teaching load) and with five professional tutors, each working ten hours per week. The primary function of the center at that time was to serve as an adjunct to a limited number of students designated as “other” by their placement in “B” sections of composition. Our tutoring program had simply been added on to an already existing writing lab comprised of autotutorial tapes and the mandatory completion of grammar and punctuation modules. Back then, it seemed that our most difficult job was to convince our department that tutoring had to become the primary instruction in that lab. We wanted out from under the tyranny of those tapes, so we spent much of our time at professional conferences consulting with people like Mary Croft and Nancy McCracken who gave us the courage of our convictions. It was a humble beginning.

Today, our writing center employs fourteen people, half of whom work at least twenty hours per week. We support students in all sections of first-year English as well as students in writing-intensive courses in several other disciplines. In addition, we have developed expertise in supporting special population groups such as adult learners, students who speak English as a second language, and learning-disabled students. More recently, we have developed and piloted a student success course, we have served as consultants for the Mathematics and Social Sciences departments, and we contribute to training graduate teaching assistants in our own department.

As much as we like to narrate our own history, we realize that our center is not unique in its growth and influence on campus. Other centers across the country train teachers, run writing-in-the-disciplines workshops, prepare students to take competency exams, develop community outreach programs, and design research programs. Other centers have fought for autonomy, helped to determine the direction of whole-campus writing instruction, and struggled against the university’s penchant to identify them as holding tanks designed for students no one else wants. Thus, our purpose in this article is not simply to describe growth but to reflect on its meaning, to call up memories of our beginnings, to speculate about the next step, and to offer a cautionary note for the future.

As Muriel Harris reminded us in a recent issue of *Writing Lab Newsletter* (February 1989), one look at the people who run writing centers could easily explain this growth. Writing center administrators, she reminds us, are energetic, dedicated people who seek growth opportunities. More to the point, Harris reminds us, writing center administrators have developed a paranoia born of too many years of living on the fringes, scrambling for whatever soft money we could find.

Other forces are also at work on campuses and in the writing center to explain the new roles of writing centers today. The most powerful of these forces is

economics. Until recently, university administrators had no difficulty finding students to fill available slots. Now, however, the college-age population is in serious decline. University administrations, once concerned with attracting the “best and the brightest” must scramble to attract as many college-bound students as possible. More important, those administrators must work hard to keep those students enrolled. Administrators can no longer be complacent about college dropout rates. Therefore, services that support learning and that were once perceived as marginal, are now considered central to the “retention effort.”

In addition to the change in student populations, there has been a change in the way that writing is taught on many campuses. The writing-in-the-disciplines movement has had the effect of moving the concern for teaching writing and thinking to many departments besides the departments in which writing would traditionally be taught. Writing centers have thus become major support programs for these campus-wide writing projects.

The growth in writing centers may also reflect yet another shift in the way the profession talks about writing and thinking. Learning, thinking, and writing skills, which for several years had been studied as individual cognitive acts, are again being spoken of as having social foundations. There seems to be growing institutional recognition of the value of the social, messy, and complex work of tutorial programs. Lisa Ede sees this “fundamental epistemological shift” as an opportunity for writing centers to ground their work in theory and to move, in administrators’ eyes, beyond the “nice-to-have-if-you-can-get-it-but-not-essential category” (Ede 5). That same shift is reflected in Richard Behm’s response to a colleague’s questioning the ethics of tutorial assistance. Behm argues that “the truly unethical act is *not* making collaborative learning available to students . . .” (10).

So, What’s the Problem?

Why, then, if everything seems to be right on track for programmatic expansion and possibly healthier writing center futures, do we raise questions about expansion? Why not, in an anniversary issue of *Writing Center Journal*, simply celebrate growth and be quiet about it? Our answer is simple. An anniversary issue provides the opportunity that the daily workload does not—to take the time to think carefully about what we lose even as we gain additional responsibilities and programs.

What we are in danger of losing as we move into a more centralized position on our campuses is the dialogic relationship that is characteristic of one-to-one instruction. Increased visibility, power, and responsibilities can serve to distance us from those student voices that changed our teaching in dramatic ways not so long ago. Our classroom language, our assignments, our pedagogy, our selection of texts are all profoundly affected by tutoring. Without daily contact

with students, we are more susceptible to the dominant explanations for inadequate performance. Mike Rose sums this point up quite well in *Lives on the Boundary*:

We seem to have a need as a society to explain poor performance by reaching deep into the basic stuff of those designated other; into their souls, or into the deep recesses of their minds, or into the very ligature of their language. It seems harder for us to keep focus on the politics and sociology of intellectual failure, to keep before our eyes the negative power of the unfamiliar, the way information poverty constrains performance, the effect of despair on cognition. (222)

All of that tutoring that we did in our basement offices on worn and torn couches and chairs did keep us honest. It helped us focus on the politics and the sociology of the institution and its people. If we can preserve the radical quality of that history as we move our offices to the center of campus, then we may be in the position to change the institution rather than be swallowed by it. The danger of becoming co-opted by the larger system is a very real one that must be of concern to all writing centers whose programs have expanded to meet university needs.

With Muriel Harris, we worry that a growing writing center can all too easily lose sight of its primary responsibility: one-to-one instruction. Where else on campus can a student simply walk in and ask for help? Where else on campus can a student rely on instruction without evaluation? Where else on campus is collaboration more valued or taken more seriously than in the writing center? And, yet, even in our own center, we feel the pressure to develop more special courses, to work with instructors rather than students, to put tutorial time into administration and clerical work.

Yet another concern raised in Harris' article is that, in taking on so much, we may simply burn out. How can the people who do not get tenure, who are hired on a yearly or quarterly basis, and who probably do not have benefits continue to expand their operation? To shun-growth is to risk stagnation. No one wants either burn-out or stagnation. How, given such a dilemma, do we protect ourselves and our people?

Because centers are so skillful at handling the tough problems, we worry that the writing center can easily become a dumping ground for programs no one else wants to bother with. Few centers are equipped to pick up the pieces of a program that started elsewhere on campus and is currently failing. On the other hand, most writing centers are eager to expand with programs they have initiated. A program that is initiated from outside the center is, however, a different beast entirely.

We want to ask, as well, where expanded writing centers fit in the university hierarchy. Too often, writing center administrators assume new responsibilities

without demanding a change in title or administrative structure. The National Writing Centers Association position statement recommends that we operate in a clearly defined administrative structure, but now that so many centers do not fit neatly under the wing of a director of composition, where do we fit? What are the risks of leaving a home department, of striking out on our own, of creating a new space on campus?

In our own center, the growth has been so rapid that, in less than a year, the director has found herself being called on to report upwards to approximately fifteen people. These include the Department Head, the Director of First-year English, the Dean of Sciences and Arts, the Dean of Special Academic Programs, the Dean of Engineering, the Dean of Students, the Vice-President of Student Services, the Provost, the head of the Mathematics Department, two social sciences professors, and four faculty members involved in writing-in-the-disciplines. Granted, this list is a long one even for the most ambitious writing center director, but it is indicative of the centrality of learning centers in the university environment today. If the writing center director does not pay attention to the line of command, one of those many vice-presidents or heads or faculty people could do immense damage to programmatic changes.

A final concern of ours is that the writing center not be the single site on campus for cross-curricular activities. A few years ago, when the writing-in-the-disciplines movement was the most powerful cross-curricular program on most campuses, a few administrators took to thinking of that program as simply more academic imperialism—the sun never sets on the English Department. It was that kind of suspicion that led many departments and university administrators to fight writing-in-the-disciplines at every step. The last thing an expanded writing center needs is a group of university administrators or department heads worried that the center is taking “their territory”—which too often translates into “their funding sources.”

What, Then, Is the Answer?

Answers, of course, are tricky things, but we will offer some general principles that most center directors can turn to when faced with the promise of expansion. Jobs that extend beyond the traditional bounds of the writing center place the center’s program in an excellent position to influence teaching throughout the university. That happens in cross-curricular programs when the center is the place of primary tutorial instruction. It happens, as well, in student “retention” programs when the center becomes the place on campus which is expert at teaching potential dropouts. In fact, many writing center directors find that they are more influential across campus than they are in their home department, especially if that home is an English department. In the English department, the center director is very like the prophet who will not be heard in her home land.

Across campus, that prophet's voice carries more weight because it offers solutions where none appeared before. That potential cross-curricular influence is, in itself, an excellent reason for expansion. However, any major expansion should be accompanied by an articulation of the basic premises of the new program, understanding of the university power structure that will be created by such a program, and a clear university commitment to that program.

In examining the basic premises of a new program, most centers will discover that they first must know the basic premises of their own program. All too often, a writing center begins to expand simply because it can. Suddenly, the money is there. The opportunity is there. The possibility for advancement is there. Still, a new program that is in direct conflict with the center's basic philosophy of instruction is no program at all. In other words, a center that has always considered itself a nonevaluative center ought to think hard about the consequences of agreeing to take on something like the administration of competency exams even if the administration is willing to provide additional funds for testing. Some centers will decide to take the funding anyway and turn the program into the kind of program they can live with, but they still must find a way to handle the inevitable tension between the funding source with its original charge and the center and its reconceptualization of that charge.

Most centers know almost intuitively their philosophy of instruction. They have not necessarily, however, made that philosophy public. In fact, many centers have worked almost as covert operations for a long time. They have allowed the university to think of them as sites of remediation, for example, even though their instruction extends far beyond remediation. A center that wishes to expand, however, cannot be quite so silent about its activities. Such a center must learn to articulate the basic premises upon which it has built its own program and then expand in the direction of those premises.

Our second concern, that a program of expansion be accompanied by a careful examination of the power structure, might seem to feed into the paranoia that Muriel Harris speaks of. Still, it is an important lesson to learn. Who will get credit if this new program succeeds and who will be blamed if it fails? How will success be measured? Who will the center director report to? If the center is attached to a department (like the English Department), what will be the department chair's role? Department chairs, whether they eagerly support the center or not, are rarely happy when programs expand from their department without their knowledge. They are particularly cranky when they find themselves at a loss to discuss such a program at university-wide meetings. On the other hand, the center director may well feel that she or he ought to be reporting to the dean who is funding the program or the faculty who initiated the program. A clear understanding of the power structure is, then, crucial to the success of any university-wide initiative.

Of course, all university programs are dependent on continued funding, but unlike departments which thrive in good years, starve in bad, yet always continue, the writing center is extremely vulnerable in times of financial crisis. When the writing center takes on large, special programs, it is even more subject to the whims of the administration's pocketbook. If the new program folds when funds get scarce, the center itself could be endangered as well. The university's commitment is most often expressed in its willingness to devote money, positions, and space to a program. Without those, any center taking on a major new program is extremely vulnerable to changes in administrations and to pressures to divert money elsewhere.

Our final point is one that we believe is crucial to the success of any university-wide program. A center director who takes on a cross-curricular program should insist that the program be aggressively interdisciplinary. Writing center directors cannot do alone what the university community ought to do together. Directors may become *Facilitators*—running workshops, setting up mini-courses, consulting with faculty. They might also be *Initiators*—designing and developing the program, finding funds, introducing it to departments and deans. But they should *never* be *lone crusaders*. Cross-curricular programs are stronger when others have an investment in them and see the writing center as an invaluable resource. The more the center allows faculty to distance itself from such programs, the more ineffective even the best programs become.

Conclusion

Most expansion is healthy, and it certainly would take an iron will for any writing center director to turn down extra funding. We must hope, however, that all writing center expansion preserves the heart of writing center work—the strong human connection. Perhaps we should scrutinize each avenue of expansion as carefully as we scrutinize potential tutors. Does it allow for transformational dialogue? Is it culturally sensitive? Does it listen and respond to students? Does it acknowledge the socially-constructed, arbitrary nature of its culture, rules, and language? Does it offer students what Mike Rose calls a “desperate, smothering embrace” or does it offer instead “an encouraging, communal one” (225)? Does it acknowledge other ways of knowing? Is it grounded in the reality of student lives, acknowledging the urgency of their needs, and the importance of such matters as grades to them?

We may be tempted to take on programs that do not meet these criteria. We may think we can handle them in a more human fashion than the institution could. We may even be in danger of losing our jobs without the support of such programs. But writing centers have rarely been staffed by pure pragmatists. We need, as we enter our second decade with *The Writing Center Journal* as our voice, to continue to develop the critical, reflective consciousness that we nurture in our students.

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