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Peter Carino

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Open Admissions and the Construction of Writing Center History: A Tale of Three Models

Peter Carino

Given their knowledge of the workings of language, few writing center professionals would doubt that material history is always more complex than the discourse that strives to record it. And most would certainly recognize that historical discourse constructs the past at least as much as it records it. Despite this dilemma, writing center scholars recently have given increased attention to writing center history. Each account of a center in Writing Centers in Context (1993) includes a history, albeit brief; Christina Murphy and Joe Law’s Landmark Essays on Writing Centers (1995) opens with a group of historical essays; at the 1995 NWCA Convention, Murphy and Law discussed history in a session prefiguring a forthcoming historical bibliography; my own “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History” (1995) argues that centers before 1970 had much in common with centers today; and David Healy’s “In the Temple of the Familiar: The Writing Center as Church” (1995) raises historical questions as he asserts that the denominationalism evident in church history may offer a way of framing center history.

This work indicates a desire and need to construct an elaborately detailed and historiographically sophisticated model that would more effectively account for the complexity of writing center development than has previous historical work. I call such a model the cultural model of writing center history, for it would draw upon the post-structural assumptions and moves of recent cultural criticism and new historicism. A cultural model would be aware of its own role in historicizing, the dilemma of representing history in language, and the need for thick descriptions of the multiple forces impacting writing centers. It would account for progress with an awareness that

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progress is untidy, and it would recognize significant figures without reifying their work as doctrine. Applied to current writing center history, the cultural model would problematize and enrich two models that have regularly (but sometimes uncritically) been adopted by the writing center community in its attempts to define itself historically—models that I designate the evolutionary and the dialectic.

The evolutionary model of writing center history, though usually acknowledging that centers existed before the late 1960s and the 1970s, cites the open admissions initiatives of these years as a watershed moment when centers proliferated as remedial clinics and labs and then evolved into the full-service centers of today. Among others, William Yahner and William Murdick’s 1991 account of the development of the writing center at California University of Pennsylvania takes this tack, as does Jim Addison and Henry L. Wilson’s “From Writing Lab to Writing Center: Reinventing, Advancing, and Expanding.” In a 1995 conversation on WCENTER, the writing center online discussion group, several commentators—including such influential voices as Jeanne Simpson, Irene Clark, and Muriel Harris—challenged the evolutionary model with the dialectic model; that is, a history which places open admissions centers in a pedagogical and political dialectic with writing programs and other institutional entities. The dialectic model maintains that these centers immediately, or quickly, rejected their imposed roles as course supplements responsible for remedial grammar and developed an innovative student-centered writing pedagogy that competed with classroom work.

Often writing center scholars have deployed the evolutionary and the dialectic models simultaneously. Looking back to the 1970s, Harris, for instance, in her “Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers,” begins portraying evolutionary development with reference to the “mid-1970s when numbers of writing centers were getting started” (15) and closes arguing that centers “have gained a sense of permanence and a level of professionalism that has established [them] as an integral part of writing instruction” (24). In between, however, she discusses the ongoing dialectic of centers struggling to explain themselves to colleagues and fighting against marginalization. Similarly, Jeanne Simpson, though promoting the need for a dialectic model in the discussion on WCENTER, has appropriated the evolutionary model in print to champion the continuous development of writing centers (“Introduction”; “Professional Status”). There is nothing wrong with this, for development (though not necessarily progress) usually comes from dialectic. I point out that scholars may subscribe to both models merely to establish the power and currency of each and to suggest that the richness of center history allows for both.

However, as writing center scholarship continues to address history, I think it is vital that historical inquiry begin to reflect on the models it adopts,
for while the models can generate knowledge they also can limit it. Thus, in this essay, I would like to place the evolutionary and dialectic models of center history against the approximately fifteen years from 1968 to 1983. This period spans the years between the open admissions initiatives often credited for the increase of centers and the appearance of Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center,” a significant document in defining writing center work. In doing so, I want to argue that there is some historical validity to both the evolutionary and dialectic models, that each can be linked to verifiable events, that each has served and continues to influence writing center identity, but that neither, by itself, adequately represents center history. I will make this argument by first recalling the complex period of open admissions initiatives, then providing evidence for both historical models, and finally placing the models in contention with one another to illustrate the workings of the cultural model, a model that I privilege but that I realize falls short, like all models, of producing the master narrative that historians like to imagine but know will always elude them.

**Open Admissions And Its Discontents**

Because the evolutionary and dialectic models often cite the open admissions years as formative, if not originative, to understand the power of these models it is necessary to briefly detail what open admissions meant for American culture and, more specifically, for postsecondary writing instruction and writing centers.

It is an understatement to say that the approximate ten years of the late 1960s and middle 1970s when open admissions programs were initiated and developed were one of the most volatile periods of social unrest in American history. With the unprecedentedly large generation of baby boomers approaching college age, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 affording African Americans increased societal participation, more women forsaking homemaking for careers, and large numbers of working-class males returning from Vietnam with educational funding guaranteed by the GI bill, open admissions policies were designed to address the needs of the nation’s most diverse group ever of rising adults.

But not without reluctance and controversy. In 1970, no less than the Vice-President of the United States, Spiro Agnew, thought the open admissions question worthy of public debate, first touching on it in a Lincoln Day address in Chicago before expounding at length in a speech two months later at a Republican fund-raiser in Des Moines. Quoting heavily from such influential educators as Stanley Hook, Irving Kristol, and Clark Kerr, Agnew denounced racial quotas, predicted calamity for academic standards, and called for limiting open admissions to community colleges. The conservatism of this position might be attributed to Agnew himself and a small group of reluctant educators, but even liberal policy makers feared that colleges were
unprepared and underfunded to take on the job of educating such a large, culturally diverse, and variously prepared group of students (see Vermilye). In California, which had mandated that each state institution reserve two percent of incoming enrollments for underprepared and minority students, a 1966 report to the state’s Coordinating Council for Higher Education charged that junior colleges were supporting the mandate almost single-handedly, with state colleges and universities making “very little use of the available two percent exception provisions as a device for admitting disadvantaged students” (Martyn 64).

On the opposite coast, CUNY Chancellor Albert Bowker had proposed an open admissions program to the New York State Board of Higher Education in 1966 but recommended it be phased in gradually by 1975. In the face of campus unrest, however—including the 1969 occupation of a section of campus and the burning of the student center auditorium by a group of African American and Puerto Rican students—CUNY accelerated its open admissions plan to begin in the fall of 1970, despite much public outcry. So controversial was the plan that it became a hot issue in the New York mayoral race (Lavin et al. 9-15). In the same year, the University of Michigan had met demands of student protests by instituting a relaxed admissions policy that would create a ten percent African American enrollment by 1973, a move denounced by several prominent educators (Agnew 108).

American higher education had always had some mechanisms for admitting limited numbers of underprepared students, and in the late 1960s several states were expanding campuses and transforming state colleges and normal schools into universities to accommodate more. But the examples of CUNY and Michigan illustrate the acceleration of open admissions that occurred in the face of racial tensions, an emerging feminism, and a burgeoning college-aged population literally knocking down the doors to get in. It is not surprising, then, that Yahner and Murdick deem their writing center “a war baby” (13).

This is a cute metaphor for the evolutionary model of writing center history and may apply to Yahner and Murdick’s center, but open admissions initiatives did not give birth to centers; they only helped them grow. Nor were centers immediately crucial to discussions of remediation. Although documents of the times occasionally refer to the need for learning centers (Gordon et al.) or point to “the effectiveness of one-to-one tutorials sponsored by students” (Martyn 64), those charged to teach the new students developed remedial classes more often than writing centers.

There is logic in this response. Given the generally conservative nature of American education, it was unlikely that institutions would entrust to anything but traditional classrooms such a massive and controversial task as teaching writing to large numbers of underprepared students. Composition
history supports this claim as most articles in journals such as *College English* and *CCC* addressed the challenge from the pedagogical standpoint of creating a student-centered classroom and from the ethical perspective of teaching standard English rather than respecting student dialects (Kelly, "Toward Competence"; Smitherman). Even Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, often seen as the definitive response to open admissions students, is largely a story of transforming the classroom.

In the CUNY system, where Shaughnessy taught, course work ranged from a single basic writing course at Queens (as a preface to a two-semester writing-about-literature sequence) to three semesters of basic composition at City College (Rossman et al. 171-204). While all of the then fifteen CUNY campuses had some provisions for tutoring, it was neither extensive nor housed in writing centers in the first year of open admissions. At the top end, ten percent of open admissions students at Manhattan Community College were tutored in English; at the bottom end, no students report being tutored at four campuses; in total only four percent of open admissions students in the system were tutored in English, and these in learning centers covering all disciplines (Rossman et al. 151). At many schools, when writing labs were part of writing programs, they often housed a remedial course or a series of courses, rather than, or along with, one-to-one instruction. Patrick Hartwell has described such a program at the University of Michigan at Flint in 1971, where students enrolled in several credit-bearing, self-paced courses, and Yahner and Murdick have documented others. However, the initial response to open admissions seems to have been additional course work, with labs, when used, as supplements.

This emphasis is not surprising because the open admissions years also saw the beginnings of a transformation of classroom pedagogy resulting from, among other forces, the 1966 Dartmouth Conference. As Berlin notes, Dartmouth contributed to the growth of a student-centered expressionist pedagogy and the then-new process model (149). In its more radical forms, expressionist process pedagogy argued that teaching standard English was a kind of cultural imperialism, a position codified by 1974 in the NCTE’s "The Students’ Right to Their Own Language." And even a conservative expressionism would have been more concerned with fluency than correctness. Nevertheless, university faculty beyond the remedial classroom, as well as administrators and the public, were expecting that open admissions students would learn the language of the dominant culture, and funds were being allocated to composition programs based on their ability to bring about this end.

Writing centers were both the beneficiaries and victims of this funding. Citing and denouncing the composition histories of Maxine Hairston and Barbara Walvorood, North laments that many centers were set up to deal with problems of mechanics and grammar while the classroom engaged in
process pedagogy (435-436). Even in programs where the new pedagogy had not been embraced, labs likely repeated the work of current-traditional classrooms, given that open admissions students were often demeaned as "those who could not get it the first time." Thus, as more labs began to crop up by the early and middle 1970s, many were likely assigned the supplementary role that marks the starting point for the evolutionary model of writing center history. At the same time, because process pedagogy—with its emphasis on student-centered instruction, pre-writing, and revision—lent itself to one-to-one instruction, conditions were right for labs to enter the competition with classrooms, a competition that generates the dialectic model.

The Evolutionary Model And Open Admissions

The evolutionary model of writing center history goes something like this: When open or relaxed admissions standards brought hordes of ungrammatical students into the academy, labs were increasingly established to teach them standard English while they learned to write in the composition class. As these labs evolved, they began to examine the writing process, saw the need to teach the whole of it, appropriated a piece of that mission from classrooms, matured into the type of operation North describes in "Idea," and on many campuses today contend with classrooms as the locus of authority for teaching writing.

Admittedly, this description is an oversimplification, and given the theoretical sophistication of writing center professionals today, it is unlikely that anyone still subscribes uncritically to the evolutionary model. Nevertheless, it has continually been evoked when needed to reinforce community, to argue for new agendas, and to address constituencies outside the community. In addition to the examples previously cited, in 1981 Karen Spear, keynoting the Southeastern Writing Center Conference, called for centers to "go beyond quick-fix solutions to treat the full range of language activities that constitute good writing" (21). A year later at the same conference Patricia Teal Bates claimed, "We've come a long way from the grammar drills we began many of our centers with" (7). Both Spear and Bates use the evolutionary model to galvanize center professionals as a community of learners who through ongoing efforts have progressed to a point where they can contend for a larger piece of the pedagogical pie and demand their due respect within institutional structures, a position that shortly thereafter North would address to a larger audience.

Like Spear and Bates in the early 1980s, writing center scholars approximately a decade later still draw upon the evolutionary model to advance new directions for center work and the center's role on campus. Ray Wallace, before championing cross-curricular centers, characterizes early centers as remedial labs where underprepared students complete grammar drills under
the aegis of the English Department (83). Andrea Lunsford, challenging centers to become “Burkean parlors,” places this social-constructionist notion of a center in opposition to the current-traditional “storehouses” and expressionist “garrets” she associates with an epistemologically naive past.

While serving political and rhetorical purposes, the evolutionary model has some basis in fact (or we could not recognize it), if descriptions of centers such as this from 1975 can be trusted:

In our lab . . . we must keep reminding ourselves that the students we see are also enrolled in composition classes. We don’t, therefore, expect students to do extensive writing in the lab or take home lengthy lab exercises. (Our preference for and belief in quick feedback would preclude this anyway). We also tend to focus on grammar and mechanics. Rhetorical concerns such as style, tone, etc. which can be treated in a variety of ways, with an equal variety of emphases, in the classrooms are, we feel, best left for the classroom teacher. If a lab instructor mingles in, he might muddy the waters and confuse the student. For the same reason we try not to work with individual papers that students are preparing for classes, except when it is necessary to refer in a general way to the student’s writing to discuss ways in which material might be organized more effectively, topic sentences clarified, etc. Mainly, we work with specific areas of grammar and mechanics which have been isolated as evident weaknesses in the student’s writing skills. (“Structuring” 4)

Many will be surprised to learn that these are the words of Muriel Harris of Purdue. I quote this passage not to embarrass her, as if I were showing an old yearbook photograph, but rather to establish the validity of the evolutionary model beyond its uses as a political clarion or rhetorical trope cited above.

Harris’s lab was certainly not unique. Clark reports that the lab at USC “was conceived of simply as a place for students to work on grammatical problems such as sentence fragments, comma faults, and surface errors of all kinds” (97-98). Brenda Greene notes that at Medgar Evers College the classroom “was responsible for introducing concepts of rhetoric, grammar, and sentence structure, and the Writing Center (called the ‘lab’) was the place where the concepts taught in the classroom were reinforced through skills exercises and other forms of individualized instruction” (29-30). Though Greene implies slightly more than grammar instruction, she nevertheless portrays a facility emphasizing skills to supplement classroom instruction.

Accounts of similar beginnings are common in center discourse of the seventies (for additional examples, see Lovejoy; McFarland). I quote Harris and Clark because in their subsequent scholarship, they depart significantly from remedial supplementation, thus providing a documentable basis for an evolutionary model of writing center history. Simply put, their labs did
evolve. I quote Greene because Medgar Evers, as one of the CUNY campuses, can be associated historically with Shaughnessy, whose name has become shorthand for innovative responses to open admissions students. Yet Greene's lab at Medgar Evers differs little from the earliest labs at Purdue or USC.

From the vantage point of the 1990s, it is easy to renounce such presentations of writing center work. But as a starting point for the evolutionary model, they are politically expedient in constructing an empowering narrative unfolding toward disciplinary status and autonomy based on progressively increasing knowledge and professionalism. This model is further validated by the increasing number of writing centers established during and since the 1970s, the establishment of writing center organizations and publications, and the development of campus-wide centers affiliated with WAC programs, rather than English departments or developmental learning centers. Despite the attributes of the evolutionary model, its basis in fact and its political value, writing center history is messier than its seamless narrative suggests—as the dialectic model illustrates.

The Dialectic Model: Heroism And Innovation

The dialectic model posits a history that immediately enmeshes writing centers in conflict with unenlightened writing programs that would reduce them to remedial supplements or with insensitive administrators who would cut their funding. The dialectic model sees the alpha and omega points of the evolutionary model—remediation and inclusiveness—as having been always already in contention. Here history is not linear but spatial, a synchronic field in which the same issues contend regardless of time.

Like the evolutionary model, the dialectic model has often been invoked to construct center history. As previously mentioned, it was taken up by several noted writing center scholars in a 1995 discussion on WCENTER and is evident in published work of Simpson and Harris. In addition, as early as 1980, in an article in the first issue of The Writing Center Journal, Lou Kelly assumed a dialectic model in describing the struggles of the lab at Iowa to introduce inclusive one-to-one instruction in the face of institutional demands for remedial grammar scrubbing (“One-to-One”). Judith Summerfield, in “Writing Centers: A Long View,” further supports the model in recounting her battles with administration to maintain financial support and pedagogical affirmation at CUNY in the mid-1970s. Politically, the dialectic model can hearten and solidify the writing center community, enabling members to claim a heritage as student advocates working in the belly of the institutional beast that allows them to exist but often denies the recognition they have always deserved.

While the dialectic model can serve political ends, several accounts of centers written in the 1970s provide its factual basis in the history of practice,
describing innovative practice contemporary with the grammatical work that is the starting point on the evolutionary model. In the 1971 CCCC workshop report on writing labs, Sally Ihne of Iowa’s Muscatine Community College advocated practice including both responses to the rhetorical effectiveness of drafts and work before drafts are produced, arguing for “[o]pen and serious communication . . . in order that the student might have a ‘sounding board’ for his ideas.” Also refusing to be subservient to the classroom, Ihne pronounced that her lab was “developed around the idea that writing ought to be taught on a one-to-one relationship” (286). In fact, a general description of the Muscatine lab’s mission in 1971 differs little from that of centers today:

An unusual thing about this lab is that it does not deal only with students who are having difficulties with writing courses. Many students, even upperclassman, come to the lab to get a response to their writing and to discuss it with someone who will take time to read it closely. The lab, therefore, does not have an image of being punitive or simplistic. (“Experimental Writing Laboratories” 286)

Although Ihne’s lab worked primarily with students from freshman writing classes, her mission statement, as well as her advocacy of one-to-one instruction, clearly stakes out a pedagogy beyond remediation and supplementation.

Like Ihne, Harry Faggett of South Carolina State College envisioned a lab with aspirations of its own. In a paper presented at the 1975 CCC Conference, Faggett tenders a lab in which “theme-writing constitutes the central emphasis” (1). He proceeds to claim that theme-writing, as used in his lab, promotes not only good writing but also self-development in the form of confidence, sensitivity to others, and aesthetic judgment. These objectives are accomplished through offering students topics ranging from self-exploratory narratives, to arguments on current events, to analyses of art. Grammar and mechanics, for Faggett, are only “a means by which to consummate a fulfillment, not the ultimate objective of the exercise” (3). Although Faggett sometimes adopts a condescending tone toward students, his lab is indeed an ambitious enterprise at a time when many programs were prohibiting open admissions students from any more than sentence writing and grammatical drill.

Though the accounts of these labs are obscure and forgotten, Ihne’s and Faggett’s approaches were not anomalies, isolated instances of people ahead of their time. Widely known and noted is the work of Kenneth Bruffee at Brooklyn College, which appeared as early as 1973, the same year that Brooklyn’s center opened. In several articles on the Brooklyn Plan for tutor training, Bruffee endorses training in which tutors write reflectively on their tutoring and critique one another’s reflections (1978, 1980, 1983). This
training, grounded in collaborative learning, mirrors the tutorial practice and broad sense of mission Bruffee was urging: "An active, visible writing center which engages enthusiastic undergraduate peer tutors in its 'intercurricular activity' of developing students writing can draw attention to writing throughout the campus" ("Staffing and Operating" 142). By the late 1970s, Bruffee’s work enjoyed much influence in governing practice and defining a mission for centers and labs. Clark, for instance, notes that in 1979 the lab at USC turned to Bruffee’s approach only a year after opening with an emphasis on teaching grammatical skills (98).

Efforts such as these at Muscatine, South Carolina State, and Brooklyn in the early and middle 1970s underpin the construction of writing centers as bastions of innovation engaged in dialectic with the writing program to claim not only the most effective methods of teaching writing but also the authority for doing so across campus. The dialectic model thus becomes a heroic tale of resistance against uninformed external forces that would reduce the lab to a remedial operation established to benefit students only begrudgingly admitted to the university by the noblesse oblige of government and university administration. This narrative is nourishing, for it reinforces centers’ self-styled image as radical innovators, inspiring new initiates into the fold and heartening old hands. But it is also seductive, for in creating a flattering image, it can cause the community to forget that the dialectic, like the evolutionary model or any history, depends heavily on selectively foregrounding some experiences while excluding or downplaying others. A richer (though probably less grand) version of writing center history emerges, I would argue, when both the evolutionary and dialectic models are juxtaposed, interrogated, and finally collapsed to sketch out the beginnings of a cultural model.

A Cultural Model: After Thicker Descriptions

A cultural model of writing center history would account for evolution but not in terms of a progressive accrual of knowledge, as is the case in the evolutionary model. Neither would a cultural model nostalgically heroize the work of innovators at the expense of the seemingly less enlightened, as is the tendency of the dialectic model. A cultural model, instead, through thicker descriptions of context, would deconstruct oversimplified notions of the 1970s writing center as either a remedial supplement or the home of the brave, though recognizing instances of both incarnations. Thus, a cultural model might begin to elaborate, more than previous models have, a history accounting for the multiple forces in play at various moments and demonstrating that writing centers and those who work in them are always imbricated in the history of writing programs, higher education, and public debate, as well as in local and even personal imperatives.

To attempt to sketch out how a cultural model might work, I want to
return to Muriel Harris’s initial efforts at Purdue to (re)examine them from a dialectic as well as an evolutionary perspective in order to arrive at a cultural reading of the significance of her work in 1975. While Harris seemingly portrays her lab as supplementary (a word in her title), a closer inspection of the passage previously quoted uncovers more complex forces at work. To recall, her description begins with the clause “we must keep reminding ourselves that the students we see are also enrolled in composition classes” (emphasis added). This uneasiness about usurping the classroom’s work implies that although the role of the lab has been imposed, Harris is already harboring the impulse to break the rules, or tutors would not have to keep reminding themselves of their assigned purpose. She also notes that tutors look at matters of organization but mutes this effort, saying it is done only in “a general way.” Here Harris writes as if she wants to disclose that the lab is more than the remedial supplement overtly evident in her text. In addition, she says that her lab does not expect students “to take home lengthy assignments” because of her “preference for and belief in quick feedback.” With this claim, Harris subtly separates the lab from the classroom, where homework is the norm and “quick feedback” is rarely possible. In sum, these examples constitute a subtext whispering that despite her overtly stated mission of supplementing the writing course with grammar instruction, Harris is developing an agenda of her own.

By itself, this subtext can be used to place Harris in a dialectic model as a heroic subversive, just as her overt emphasis on grammar can locate her center as a point on an evolutionary continuum. But in its ability to support both models simultaneously, Harris’s discourse actually undermines them, exposing their aspirations as master narratives by creating contradiction. Some might argue that here I am merely engaging in a kind of deconstructive sleight of hand, turning Harris’s words to say both X and Y, but that this turning is possible suggests the need for a historical model that would account for the indeterminacy of her text rather than reduce it to a link in an evolutionary chain or the coded message of a visionary provocateur.

The cultural model can be further adumbrated by recourse to Harris’s “A Multiservice Writing Lab in a Multiversity” (1993). Here Harris looks back on the origins of the Purdue lab in 1975, the same year she wrote the passage discussed above. Eighteen years later, she reveals that when beginning the lab she was a part-time composition instructor and faculty spouse with a Ph.D. in Renaissance literature who volunteered her services to start the lab for the English Department. In such a position, she could hardly have had the power to do anything other than initially capitulate to the Department’s supplementary vision of the lab, even while instinctively beginning to reshape it. In the following year, she was hired into the position full-time, began the Writing Lab Newsletter, and as is widely known, continued to reinvent the role ascribed to her writing lab and that of others through influential
I construct this brief episode in Harris’s professional biography to underscore the limitations of both the evolutionary and dialectic models in assessing the situation at Purdue in 1975. First, the evolutionary model falls short because Harris’s overt description of the Purdue lab as a remedial supplement does not exemplify the known of writing center pedagogy at the time but a cultural moment in which several forces contend in both shaping local practice at Purdue and in determining what the director can say about it in a global forum such as CCCC. Second, the Purdue lab did not result directly from open admissions, the mythical point of origin (or at least proliferation) on the evolutionary model. Rather it was a response to a broader public issue of the middle 1970s: as Harris puts it, “the national hue and cry about declining writing skills” (2, 1993). Likewise, it would be erroneous to attribute Harris’s subversive subtext to the heroic role the dialectic model would confer, for it is likely that her experience as a classroom instructor, as much as any vision for the lab, had much to do with the scrapping of the skills approach and her ability to transform lab practice without institutional repercussion.

Neither the evolutionary nor the dialectic model alone accounts for Harris’s text and the Purdue lab in 1975, but placed in opposition the two models begin to generate the more detailed history of the cultural model. Through the lens of the cultural model, the initial lab at Purdue is impacted by such diverse factors as a national debate on student writing ability, Harris’s marital and professional status, a depressed job market for Renaissance scholars, the initial wishes of the Purdue English Department, and the individual talent and dedication enabling Harris to cultivate and determine the pedagogy and mission of the lab in a way that would satisfy her, meet the needs of students, and fulfill the expectations of those footing the bill. Similar complexity emerges in situations that at first glance support only a dialectic model, such as the description of Ihne’s lab at Muscatine or Bruffee’s Brooklyn Plan. Ihne’s lab, as may be remembered, is described in 1971 as “an unusual thing.” From this claim, a dialectic model would celebrate her efforts as an exceptional response to underprepared students. However, considering the proximity of Muscatine to the University of Iowa, possibilities emerge for another reading. As Kelly recounts, the lab at Iowa had not only been serving all students for decades, but also influenced the revamping of the writing program in the early 1970s. In 1973, Kelly writes of the freshman course, “the voices I heard [in the writing lab] convinced me that the student’s own language and the experiences—internal and external—that he wishes to share make the best content for composition” (“Toward Competence” 645). Thus, Ihne’s lab, though commendable, even within the small geographic area of eastern Iowa is not the heroic anomaly the dialectic model would make it out to be. Indeed, one might even conjecture that given the long-standing
reputation of the lab at Iowa, Ihne or her colleagues had consulted with the folks down the road in Iowa City before or during the creation of the lab at Muscatine.

Kenneth Bruffee’s Brooklyn Plan seemingly offers a better example to validate the dialectic model, but even the exceptional nature of his work is put in perspective when viewed in the cultural context of CUNY’s open admissions efforts. The dialectic view of Bruffee’s efforts maintains that he created a novel and rigorous program that respected the needs of underprepared students at a time when the composition program was failing them. However, Brooklyn College was not a key player in CUNY’s open admissions plan (see Lavin et al. 62-73). As one of the more elite campuses in the system, Brooklyn admitted only small numbers of the new group, and “[v]ery few of the incoming students were non-white” (Rossman et al. 174). In view of the preparation and socioeconomic backgrounds of Brooklyn’s students, Bruffee’s plan for collaborative peer critiques of whole essays would be more likely to succeed at Brooklyn than at CUNY campuses with larger numbers of open admissions students. This claim is borne out in Paula Beck’s adaptation of the Brooklyn Plan at Nassau Community College, another CUNY campus. Beck admits that

there is perhaps more discussion of grammar at Nassau than there is at Brooklyn. First . . . many of the tutors need some brushing up. Second, Nassau’s tutors are often called upon to deal with serious grammatical deficiencies. Thus, discussions, for example, of subjects, predicates, modifiers, subordination and coordination, and untraditional ways of dealing with problems in these areas have become a regular part of the [tutor training] course’s content. (438)

I raise this comparison not to demean Bruffee’s accomplishments but to demonstrate the potential of the cultural model to avoid the hero-making of the dialectic. Certainly Bruffee’s efforts have been influential and praiseworthy, but part of the effectiveness of the Brooklyn Plan depended on the institutional culture of Brooklyn College and its place in the CUNY system. Likewise, Paula Beck’s work, with its grammatical emphasis, though it could easily be appropriated to support the evolutionary model or, worse, ridiculed as a bowdlerization of the Brooklyn Plan, is the product of several factors, including institutional perceptions of her students’ needs and cultural perceptions of the mission of the two-year college.

**Implications For Writing Center History**

Like all history, writing center history is maddeningly but joyously complicated, and all models are susceptible to the complex temporal and cultural situatedness, and thus political identities, of the individuals and communities who construct them. While I have privileged the cultural
model, I realize its limitations, and I do not mean to condemn the evolutionary and dialectic models as useless or naive. Both have their purposes in that they enable broad and necessary generalizations about verifiable events, e.g., centers have progressed, and the community can recognize commendable pioneers. However, when advanced unreflectively both can be disempowering and even dangerous. In privileging notions of progress, the evolutionary model can seduce the community into uncritical acceptance of supposedly “new” ideas and methods. In turn, this position can foster unexamined valorization of the present, an attitude that at its least harmful is disrespectful to the past and at its most harmful leads to blind arrogance—the “boy-they-were-ignorant-then-but-we-know-now” syndrome. While the dialectic model escapes such presentism, its casting of history in a struggle between the innovative and the unenlightened can create a tale of heroes and villains that privileges and diminishes individuals without regard for the cultural contexts enabling or stifling their efforts.

The cultural model, I would argue, provides a more fruitful alternative, for it combines the advantages and avoids the disadvantages of the evolutionary and dialectic models. Like the evolutionary model, it can record progress but without viewing it naively as an accrual of knowledge traceable to an originative cataclysm such as open admissions, recognizing, rather, that knowledge (and often progress) emerges through the struggles identifiable in the dialectic model and that originative, and even formative, events are usually the product of myth. Like the dialectic model, the cultural model can appreciate meritorious effort but without canonizing a pantheon of immortals whose work passes beyond critique.

This is not to say that the cultural model is some kind of master narrative that in subsuming other models gives us The Truth. Like all histories, it, too, is necessarily a construction of that which we can recover and interpret, and methodologically it is more effective at examining smaller, more local writing center experience than at drawing the broad generalizations often needed to foster a communal identity. But in its thicker descriptions, the cultural model can offer a more finely grained history of how and why writing centers, as an educational and cultural phenomenon, have come to be what they are in relation to such global forces as open admissions or such local concerns as a director’s professional status. Such a history might begin to, in Healy’s words, “celebrate our differences and affirm our commonalities” (24). I hope this essay has been at least a modest gesture toward that beginning.
Notes

1 It is difficult to know exactly how many new centers opened in the 1970s. Thom Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks, writing in 1981 and drawing on various sources, estimate that less than a dozen existed in 1970 and nearly 1,000 by 1980. Their estimate of a dozen in 1970 is erroneous, as Murphy and Law’s, Yahner and Murdick’s work, and my own work demonstrate, but given that in the latter half of the decade regional organizations and the Writing Lab Newsletter sprang up and the CCCC convention began to offer special interest sessions on centers, the 1970s undoubtedly saw marked growth in their number.

2 I choose these years because writing centers enjoyed remarkable growth, in method and role as well as in number (see for instance, Addison and Wilson; Harris, “Trends and Traditions”; Simpson, “Professional Concerns”; Yahner and Murdick). Also, North’s “Idea” marks, I would argue, a shift to a more politically assertive and theoretically sophisticated discourse. Though before “Idea,” essays in early numbers of WCJ and in Olson’s Writing Centers: Theory and Administration address similar issues, North’s attempt at self-definition, appearing in College English, crystallized them, galvanizing the community and promulgating the mission and practice of most writing centers to a larger audience. Following North’s essay, writing center professionals, though still combating feelings of marginalization, became more secure and more assertive about their place in higher education, and like composition studies, began to theorize on their practice from various post-structural perspectives, a historical phenomenon beyond the scope of this paper’s concern with the influence of open admissions on center history but which I have taken up in “Theorizing the Writing Center: An Uneasy Task.” In this essay, when I treat historical work produced after 1983, I do so with an interest in the model(s) it assumes in representing the earlier years, rather than in what it says about the community post-North.

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Peter Carino is Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Indiana State University, where he teaches technical writing, composition theory, and American literature. In addition to two basic writing texts, he has published articles on composition pedagogy, American literature, and baseball.