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Reforming Education in the Land-Grant University: Contributions from a Writing Center¹

Patricia Lambert Stock

In his important history of American colleges and universities, Frederick Rudolph reminds us of circumstances that led to passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, the federal legislation that established the land-grant university:

By the 1850’s the industrial potential of the United States was as apparent as its agrarian past, and there emerged a growing awareness that a new age required new training and new preparation. What was lacking, however, were any certain institutional foundations upon which to erect programs of agricultural and mechanical training as well as any deeply felt respect for expertness. (248)

The founding in the 19th century of the land-grant university as well as institutions of higher learning for women, African Americans, and Native Americans diversified both higher education’s curriculum and its student body. Just over a century later, the post-industrial potential of the United States is as apparent as its earlier industrial potential, and increasing numbers of increasingly diverse students are seeking higher education that acknowledges their personal histories as well as their professional futures. It is clear that those who will prosper personally and professionally in the current information era that calls for broad understandings and diverse interactions require an education different from the one that advocates of the land-grant university proposed in the mid-1800’s. In discussions that are both similar to and different from those that led to the establishment of land-grant institutions, today’s forward-looking educators are arguing for the reconsideration and restructuring of existing

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institutions of higher education rather than the establishment of new ones.

For example, when Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, argues that America's current economic and social problems not only should "be profoundly troubling to those who devote their lives to higher education," but also should provoke us to ask if "our universities are doing all that they can and should to help America surmount the obstacles that threaten to sap our economic strength and blight the lives of millions of our people" (6), he reopens the long-standing debate about the appropriate work of the academy. Finding fault with both Cardinal Newman's image of a university unencumbered by worldly values and agenda and more utilitarian visions of the university, Bok argues that the division between pure and instrumental inquiry in present-day universi-
ties is exaggerated:

It is possible to explore a subject out of a keen desire to understand it better, and a belief that such understanding may be of use to humankind, just as it is possible to understand oneself more deeply even while learning to practice a profession. One would suppose, therefore, that the true mission of universities would be to nurture a healthy balance between applied intellectual pursuits and the search for truth and meaning for their own sake. (6)

For another example, when Ernest Boyer, former President of the Carnegie Institute for the Advancement of Teaching, argues that present-day academics' devotion to their research and to the development of new knowledge—commitments that have shaped the contemporary American university—keeps them from attending not only to the useful integration and application of knowledge but also to the sharing of knowledge and the joy of learning with students, he challenges the academy to expand the definition of research that inspired the establishment of the land-grant university and led already-established American universities to adopt the German research-university model. In so doing, Boyer challenges the academy to expand the definition of research that drives its current work. Specifically, he urges academics to reconsider research in terms of four separate, but overlapping kinds of scholarship: the scholarship of discov-
ery (work that adds to human knowledge and to the intellectual life of the academy), the scholarship of integration (work that makes connections between and among knowledge developed within disciplinary communi-
ties), the scholarship of application (work that emerges when academic theories and practices are brought to bear upon problems and issues of serious import in the larger society), and the scholarship of teaching (work that transmits, transforms, and extends knowledge to others, some of whom may themselves become scholars). Unlike educational reform-
ers of the last century whose goals for a new university included the development of experts in new as well as traditional fields and disciplines, Boyer calls into question academics’ pursuit of their expertness in developing new knowledge at the expense of applying, integrating, and teaching that knowledge.

For yet another example, when Benjamin Barber, Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University, argues that citizens in societies that would be communities of cooperating individuals must learn to be free and cooperative, he not only reopens the postmodern debate about the possibility of human beings working together for their common good, but he also re-imagines the academy’s service mission. Barber does not claim that “the university has a civic mission, but that the university is a civic mission, is civility itself defined as the rules and conventions that permit a community to facilitate conversation and the discourse upon which all knowledge, and thus all community, depends” (222).

For still another example, when Lawrence Levine, Professor of History at George Mason University and Professor of History emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, argues that “contemporary literary and historical canons, like those that preceded them, have been shaped by deep social and cultural forces” (97), he adds his voice to the debate that has shaped and reshaped curriculum in higher education since the rise of industrialism in the United States. Citing the 1885 debate in which Charles William Eliot, speaking as President of Harvard University, argued against uniformity and in favor of diversity in education while his colleague James McCosh, speaking as President of Princeton University, argued that our language and literature would likely degenerate if classical studies in Greek and Latin declined, Levine reminds us that proponents of diversity in education have always faced conservative opposition:

Of course the very expansiveness of the canon is disturbing to those who crave a universal literary or historical canon good always and everywhere, accessible to and accepted by everyone capable of understanding it. The admission that literature, history, and canons are more complex and more variable than that entails a loss of control and an acceptance of the truth that the academic world, like the larger universe, is more chaotic, less ordered, less predictable and more affected by such matters as geography, class, race, ethnicity, gender than many of us have been willing to accept. The idea that somehow the canon transcends the real world and exists in some ideal universe where pure values and eternal verities are free to assert themselves
retains its appeal but remains as chimerical as ever. The university, for all its privileges, is the real world, and its canons have always reflected the temporal aspects of that larger society of which it was—and is—part. (99)

Bok’s, Boyer’s, Barber’s, and Levine’s broadly-conceived visions of the appropriate work of the university in the current era—nurturing a healthy balance between applied and intellectual pursuits; expanding the definition of research that currently drives academic work; facilitating conversation and the discourse upon which all knowledge and all community depend; and expanding academic studies to reflect the larger society in which those studies and the university itself exist—argue for what I would call a dialogic model of teaching and learning in institutions that value critical inquiry and social justice not only in their pronouncements but also in their practices.

As its critics call for the reformation of higher education in terms that draw attention to what have been the land-grant university’s richest vision of itself, institutions like Michigan State University have been about the business of re-examining their own work. Deliberations in these institutions reflect the concerns of critics like Bok, Boyer, Barber, and Levine, and they do something else as well: They ask us to recognize the university as a community of learners—student and faculty learners who are themselves human beings with histories and hopes, with projects and prospects, with relationships and responsibilities. For example, during the 1993-1994 academic year, at the invitation of its 19th president, M. Peter McPherson, faculty in Michigan State University discussed and restated the university’s goals and mission in terms meant not only to speak meaningfully in an era dramatically different from the one in which the land-grant university was established but also to renew the earliest commitments of higher education in the United States—“to learning, intellectual discipline, and the education of the individual for citizenship” (Hawthorne 35). In a document entitled “Framework and Guiding Principles” (1994), MSU’s faculty named and summarized its discussion of the following goals and mission: to improve access to quality education and expert knowledge; to achieve more active learning; to generate new knowledge and scholarship across the mission; to promote problem-solving to address society’s needs; to advance diversity within community; to make people matter.

The values proffered in Michigan State University’s recently developed “Framework and Guiding Principles” are also to be found in three ideals and seven action commitments announced recently by twenty-five current and former presidents of state and land-grant colleges and universities. In Returning to the Roots, a Report of the Kellogg Commis-
sion on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, these leaders present their ideals in the following terms: (1) Our institutions must become genuine learning communities, supporting and inspiring faculty, staff, and learners of all kinds. (2) Our learning communities should be student centered, committed to excellence in teaching and to meeting the legitimate needs of learners, wherever they are, whatever they need, whenever they need it. (3) Our learning communities should emphasize the importance of a healthy learning environment that provides students, faculty, and staff with the facilities, support, and resources to make this vision a reality (v-vi).

Guided by their ideals, these leaders of state and land-grant colleges and universities call upon their peers to join them in an action agenda that will (1) revitalize partnerships with elementary and secondary schools; (2) reinforce commitment to undergraduate instruction; (3) address students' academic and personal development holistically; (4) strengthen the link between education and career; (5) improve teaching and educational quality, while keeping college affordable and accessible; (6) define educational objectives clearly and assess success in meeting them; and (7) strengthen the link between discovery and learning by providing more opportunities for hands-on learning, including undergraduate research (vi-vii).

Motivated by goals like those driving the work of Derek Bok, Ernest Boyer, Benjamin Barber, and Lawrence Levine and by ideals and action commitments like those guiding the work of faculty in Michigan State University and members of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, the recently-established Writing Center in Michigan State University (1992) figures not just as a unit promoting sound literacy learning and teaching in the university but also as an argument for the mission of state and land-grant universities and a case study of educational reform in the current era.

The Writing Center in Michigan State University

Established primarily to provide writing workshop support to students and assistance to faculty interested in using writing to engage students in active learning and thereby in improving the quality and range of their students' literacy, the newly-formed Writing Center in Michigan State University conceived its task broadly. Mindful that literacy is learned through use across contexts and over a lifetime, in addition to working to improve the quality and range of literacy in MSU, the Center reached out to involve itself in the teaching and uses of literacy in both the communities and schools that send students to MSU and the communities
and workplaces that students enter when they leave MSU.

Within a theoretically-constructed infrastructure—a program of interrelated and overlapping activities we call Project CONNECTS (COllaborative Network of New and Experienced Consulting Teachers and Students)—the Center has taken upon itself the ambitious task of creating a culture of writing and continuous inquiry in the university and the communities it serves. Taking advantage of the opportunities that exist when individuals with different but related goals teach and learn from one another for their mutual benefit, within Project CONNECTS, the Center is developing a practice we call consultative teaching. A combination of collaborative learning, peer tutoring, service-learning, student research, and jointly-conducted student-faculty research, the practice of consultative teaching recognizes students as knowledgeable individuals with valuable ideas and experiences to contribute to the learning situation, teachers as model students committed to learning for and with their students, and both students and teachers as learners responsible for sharing their developing understandings and talents with one another and with the broader community.

Those of us who have worked to establish consultative teaching believe it to be a practice particularly well-suited to research-intensive universities like Michigan State that are rethinking and renewing their commitment to the scholarship of teaching and service. In the Writing Center, we are using this theoretically-sound, unusually cost-effective practice not only to improve the teaching of literacy in Michigan State, the State of Michigan, and beyond but also to produce new knowledge about the teaching, learning, and uses of literacy. Furthermore, our work to develop the practice and theory of consultative teaching promises to contribute usefully to four perplexing social challenges: the challenge to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the postmodern academy, the challenge to improve the quality of teaching and learning in America’s public schools, the challenge to prepare ourselves for living life and making a living in the current and future era, and the challenge to redefine citizenship and justice in a democracy yet to be realized.

**Theoretical Foundations**

Although research into literacy and learning emerging from fields as various as anthropology, cultural studies, critical theory, history, linguistics, psychology, rhetoric and composition, and sociology has demonstrated that language—including written language—is best learned informally in one-on-one and small group settings, heretofore only the most well-endowed of educational institutions have been positioned to provide such instruction for their students. In a constellation of interre-
lated and overlapping peer consultancies, the Writing Center is working to make such learning opportunities available to undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty in Michigan State and to families, neighbors, and colleagues in the State of Michigan. In these consultancies, less-experienced, less-practiced writers benefit from the greater experience and expertise of their peers; at the same time, consultants expand and enrich their general education as they read and discuss articles their peers are composing in a wide variety of fields and disciplines that they themselves may not have had the opportunity to study.

Among the peer consultancies the Center has established to improve the quality of literacy in Michigan State and the State of Michigan are the following:

• the Undergraduate Writing Consultancy—the centerpiece of our work—in which MSU students, prepared in course work and field experiences, not only assist their peers in the Center and online with brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing writing for courses across the disciplines but also conduct workshops (e.g., “Peer Response to Writing,” “Reading Complex Texts”) in classrooms and residence halls and provide sustained assistance in courses across the curriculum in which faculty are using writing extensively to engage their students in active learning;

• the Graduate Writing Consultancy in which graduate students organized in special-interest writing groups provide writing workshop support to their peers as they compose papers, theses, dissertations, and articles for publication;

• the Faculty Writing Consultancy and the Teacher Writing Consultancy in which faculty (in the MSU Faculty Writing Project) and K-12 teachers (in the Red Cedar Writing Project, MSU’s chapter of the National Writing Project) teach one another their own best practices for integrating writing instruction into their courses and respond to one another’s writing for publication;

• the Student Writing Consultancy in which elementary, middle, and secondary school students in Michigan, prepared by teachers and faculty in the Writing Center, spend one or two weeks on the MSU campus in the summer to learn to provide writing workshop support to their peers and assist their teachers in the effective teaching of writing in Michigan’s schools;
• the *Community Writing Consultancy* in which MSU undergraduate and graduate students, in connection with MSU course work, assist mid-Michigan service agencies in the composition of documents that advance their work;

• the *Internet Writing Consultancy* in which MSU undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty writing consultants (1) provide assistance to peers in the Center and off campus who are conducting research and publishing on the World Wide Web, (2) conduct workshops (e.g., “Conducting Research on the World Wide Web,” “Publishing on the World Wide Web”) for classes in the Center and in computer classrooms across the university, (3) conduct workshops and institutes for faculty who are integrating World Wide Web research and publication into their courses across the curriculum, and (4) make a wide range of resources available to writers on the Center’s home page (http://pilot.msu.edu/user/writing);

• the *Writing Centers Consultancy* in which directors of writing centers across the State of Michigan come together (originally in a 1995 summer institute in the Writing Center and now in the newly-formed Michigan Writing Centers Association) to teach one another their own best writing center practices.

**Making Connections**

Projects that have developed organically between and among the Writing Center’s peer consultancies illustrate how these consultancies interrelate and overlap for their mutual enrichment. Some of these projects, like the following four illustrative ones, take shape in undergraduate, graduate student, and collaborative student-faculty research within MSU.

• As part of the course *The Writing Consultancy* (English 391) that is required preparation for students who apply to become writing consultants, 4 MSU undergraduates interview faculty who teach writing-intensive courses across the curriculum. Based upon these interviews, undergraduates preparing to become writing consultants develop posters, workshop presentations, and World Wide Web sites that describe and advertise courses that faculty inevitably refine in the process of explaining them to these undergraduates who may become their students in the future or
who may assist other students fulfilling their course requirements. We display the posters these students prepare not only to represent the research undergraduates conduct with faculty in the Writing Center but also to advertise learning opportunities available in Michigan State.

• In the Portfolio Project, since August 1993, twenty-seven undergraduate students have voluntarily collected, discussed, and written about the writing they have composed during the years of their undergraduate education with undergraduate, graduate student, and faculty writing consultants in the Writing Center. They and the writing consultants with whom they have worked to study the role that writing has played in their education have reported on this developing inquiry to faculty in MSU—to inform and influence instruction—and in local, regional, and national conferences and in written articles—to contribute to developing knowledge about the relationship between writing and learning (Thomas, Bevins, and Crawford).

• Recently, during the 1997 Conference of the East Central Writing Centers Association (Pittsburgh), a group of undergraduate and graduate student writing consultants reported on their collaborative work to develop a theoretical model they might use to guide their own and their peers’ consultations with ESL writers (Daniels, Hicks, Mosher, and Walts). The student-researchers involved in this project described their heuristic model WA^2 TCH (talk about the Writer, about the Audience/Assignment, about the writer’s Text, about Communication caveats; and remember that Helping the writer is your primary purpose) and how it allows them to open dialogues that are instructive to student-writers whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own and to themselves as well.

• In another presentation at the 1997 East Central Writing Centers Association Conference, another group of undergraduate and graduate writing consultants described how reading the works of Mikhail Bakhtin—which one of them was studying in course work—enabled them to better understand and serve the needs of small groups of writers who found it difficult to negotiate the demands of a workshop course they were taking in conjunction with a lecture course (Bair, Brazil, Hillberg, Hungerford, and Lamerato). In their conference session, this group demonstrated
how Bakhtin’s concept of answerability enabled them to understand and develop effective writing workshop support for the students whose perplexities inspired their research.

Other projects take shape in collaborations at the state and national levels.

• In 1995, supported with funding from The Office of the Vice Provost for Outreach in Michigan State University, the Writing Center sponsored a two-week-long summer institute we called the Michigan Writing Centers’ project. In this institute, writing center workers from colleges and universities across the State of Michigan came together to share their own best practices. Following the institute, the Michigan Writing Centers Association (MWCA) was established. Through newsletters published by the MSU Writing Center, occasional meetings, and annual conferences, the MWCA enables writing center workers in Michigan to teach and learn from one another for our mutual benefit.

• Since 1993, consultants in the Writing Center have worked together with faculty, teachers, and students in ten states in the Write for Your Life Project—a university-school collaboration that teaches middle and secondary school students to read and write by asking them to read and write about challenges to their health and well-being. After identifying and studying problems of concern to them, students in the Write for Your Life Project write grant proposals to support community service-learning projects they design and conduct to improve their own and one another’s learning and lives. On occasions we call Manuscript Days—and, subsequently, online—Write for Your Life students in Michigan bring their developing proposals to the MSU campus where undergraduate, graduate student, and teacher writing consultants offer them assistance with brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing their writing (Stock and Swenson).

Praxis-oriented Inquiry

Designed not only to enable individuals with different but related needs to teach and learn from one another for their mutual benefit but also to integrate and enrich teaching, research, and service, Project CONNECTS names a program of inquiry inseparable from the service-oriented practice of consultative teaching being developed in its name. In Derek
Bok's terms, in the Center, we are exploring subjects that concern us out of a keen desire to understand them better as well as a commitment to be useful to humankind, in the long run and in the meantime. In Ernest Boyer's terms, we are expanding the definition of research that currently drives academics' work by reconsidering scholarship. In Benjamin Barber's terms, we are reconceiving the civic mission of the university by facilitating the "conversation and the discourse upon which all knowledge, and thus all community" depend. In Lawrence Levine's terms, we are assuming that literature, history, and canons are complex and variable, that geography, class, race, ethnicity, and gender inform teaching and learning. In the terms of Michigan State University's "Guiding Principles," we are promoting active, connected learning, and in the terms of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, we are "insisting that students take responsibility for their own [and one another's] learning" and introducing "them to research, as collaborators with faculty and graduate students and as seekers and inventors of new knowledge in their own right" (vi).

Beginning with the day the Writing Center opened, we made our work the object of our inquiry in order to improve and refine it on a continuing basis and in order to contribute to the development of knowledge about literacy and learning and their interrelationships. For example, during the first year of its operation, the Writing Center invited its consultants and groups of faculty with whom it worked to write in as much detail as they chose the thoughts that came to mind when they heard the word tutor and the word consultant. In discussions documented on paper that we used to line the walls of the Center, richly detailed descriptions of the tutor and the consultant took shape. Individuals working in the Center and those who visited it paused to discuss the theoretical conceptions evolving on its papered walls. Taking particular interest in the project, William McCall, a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and a Graduate Writing Consultant, investigated the etymological roots of the terms under study as well as the history of the practices they connoted. In an article published in The Writing Center Journal, McCall contextualized our unfolding inquiry and contributed to developing knowledge in the field of composition studies.

We undertook this first phenomenological study in the Writing Center because we know that our work to establish a culture of writing and inquiry through the practice of consultative teaching in Michigan State University depends on the development of a rich and shared understanding of our practice among our constituencies; we are convinced that our work to develop a culture of writing and inquiry requires that our students and colleagues not only write but also see—literally—how their writing works in the world. In this research project, we recognized a way to invite
our multiple constituencies into our work.

In light of our broader goals, the research we began the day the Center opened must be recognized as more complicated than it might at first appear. It figures as part of the Center’s continuous inquiry into consultative teaching, the impact of consultative teaching on learning in MSU and beyond, and its potential to serve the common good. Since the first phenomenological study in which we encouraged broad participation, we have conducted numerous others that have been published for the critical review of scholars interested not only in writing center work and literacy studies but also in teaching and curriculum development and in the history and the operation of the American university.

In addition to the work that we have published in local, regional, and national conferences of professional colleagues—like the 1997 conference of the East Central Writing Centers Association (Pittsburgh)—and in professional periodicals—like *The Writing Center Journal*—the MSU Writing Center itself publishes its work in order to draw attention to the importance of situation-specific scholarship that promises to resonate usefully beyond the locations in which it is conducted. In addition to newsletters and occasional publications emerging from its various projects, the Center publishes the following:

**The Peer Review**: This newsletter, produced twice a year by the Center’s Undergraduate Writing Consultants, features news and notes of interest to undergraduate consultants, book reviews, and articles about the undergraduate consultants’ developing research. For example, the lead story in a recent issue featured a report about writing consultants who visited the Detroit area to help one of their recently-graduated colleagues introduce the practice of consultative teaching into the elementary school in which she is now teaching (Granroth).

**The Scholarship of Teaching**: In this journal which the Center distributes nationally upon request, faculty within and beyond Michigan State University in fields as various as fisheries and wildlife, German studies, and women’s studies present and discuss syllabi in which they use writing as a means of learning and demonstrate how those syllabi figure as complex academic arguments about subject matter and how that subject matter is best taught and learned. In one number of the journal, for example, an entomologist describes how she uses writing to introduce non-majors to the questions scientists pose and the ways they think about those questions (Bristow).
The Curriculum in the Academy and the World Monograph Series: In Writing in the Public Interest: Service-Learning and the Writing Classroom (1995), the first number in this series, David Cooper and Laura Julier present the theoretical underpinnings and the practical enactment of two service-learning composition courses in which they engaged students in the discourse of the American civic tradition and the work of public service institutions in the greater Lansing area (The Civic Tradition in America and Public Life in America). In the monograph, as Cooper and Julier tell the story of the Service-Learning Writing Project together with their students, Writing Center consultants and faculty, and individuals whose agencies contributed to and benefited from their students’ intellectual and practical work, they compose a chapter in the scholarship of teaching in the land-grant university. They also construct a rich model of teaching and learning that others who share their commitments and goals may adopt or adapt to fit their own institutional circumstances.

Consultative Teaching: Integrating Research, Teaching, and Service

In addition to the work we do in the MSU Writing Center and the publications that emerge from that work, writing across the curriculum workshops that we offer in Michigan State and beyond—like the illustrative one described below—dramatize the way that the Center accomplishes research, teaching, and service simultaneously for their mutual enrichment and for the beneficial reform of higher education.

For example, in writing across the curriculum workshops we conduct to introduce faculty across the curriculum to writing practices they may use to engage students in active learning and to improve the quality of students’ literacy, we ask faculty to write about a specific topic of inquiry for several audiences and purposes: (1) for themselves, to (re)collect information that will prepare them to enter a study; (2) for one another, to explore, analyze, and synthesize information about a topic of study; and (3) for colleagues apart from the workshops, to speculate about and apply understandings of the topic they are developing.

In writing across the curriculum workshops we conduct in Michigan State University, we often choose “Consulting” as our topical focus for two important reasons: first, “Consulting” defines what may be regarded as a defining responsibility of faculty in land-grant universities; and, second, “Consulting” names the work we are preparing undergradu-
ate students, graduate students, MSU faculty, school teachers and students to do in the Writing Center. We begin these writing-intensive workshops by first asking faculty to recall in writing—in as much detail as they can—a time when each worked as a consultant. Second, we ask groups of three or four faculty to share their consulting experiences and, in so doing, to note and share other consulting experiences that their colleagues’ memories lead them to recall. Third, we ask participants to note, in outline form on overhead transparencies that they subsequently present to the larger group, the commonalities and anomalies among their experiences. We do this because we know that faculty who work in different fields conduct their research and share it with others in various ways, and we wish that variety to become apparent. Fourth, we ask faculty to write informally to speculate about the relationship of their research to their consulting as individual faculty members and as colleagues who work in different disciplines.

Fifth, after discussion of the ideas on the floor, we offer different, short articles on the subject of consulting to groups of four to six faculty and ask them—in marginal notes or notebooks—to conduct a dialogue with the articles about questions such as these: How are the authors’ experiences of consulting like and unlike the ones we have developed? How do the authors’ analyses of consulting resemble and differ from the ones we have developed? How do the authors’ claims about consulting resemble and differ from the ones we have developed? Sixth, after a general discussion in which participants’ initial understandings are reviewed in the light of experts’ understandings of consulting, we ask faculty to write an essai—an attempt—in which they speculate about the implications of the kind of research they do in the academy for their work as consultants and the implications of the consulting they do with practitioners in their fields for the teaching they do in the academy. Seventh, and finally, we point out the many ways in which faculty in the workshop have used writing to learn and to express their developing understandings of the subject under study. We also ask faculty a number of questions aimed at inviting them to think about the effectiveness of their having used writing to learn about and think about their work, their consulting, and their teaching. For example, we ask faculty what the value was to them—if any—of writing before they read articles on consulting written by experts: Did their prior writing and discussion position them to be more thoughtful, critical readers? Readers who retained more of the information in the articles? Readers who better understood the arguments presented in the articles?

Workshops like these, which figure as a service to faculty in Michigan State University and affect the teaching of undergraduate and graduate students in the university, also produce information about the
nature and dimensions of consultative teaching that we in the Writing Center are working to develop and to study simultaneously. We are currently planning a three-part phenomenological research project in which we propose to involve faculty colleagues in MSU just as we involved ourselves and our colleagues in the first phenomenological study we conducted in the Center (McCall). Our plan is as follows: (1) to work with faculty to analyze the final speculative essays they write about the implications of their research for their consulting and their consulting for their teaching in the university; with interested faculty colleagues, (2) to interview and observe one another as we conduct our research, consult in the field, and teach in our classrooms; and (3) to develop a theory that will account for the scholarship of faculty in the land-grant university whose discovery of new knowledge, application, integration, and teaching of that knowledge are integrally related to one another.

Consultative Teaching and Reforming the Land-Grant University

Like all inquiry-based activities, our work in the Writing Center is both retrospective (reflective) and prospective (speculative). A combination of our reflective and speculative work has led us to propose that our colleagues in units across the university work with us to develop the practice of consultative teaching—not only as an innovative means of moving writing and its salutary benefits for learning across the curriculum but also as a means of establishing student-centered learning communities across the curriculum.

We are interested in the development of student-centered learning communities across the curriculum for the reasons I have outlined earlier in this essay and for another important reason that lies historically at the heart of all writing center work: to enable the collegiate success of students who might not otherwise be successful.

Writing centers in the United States—created in numbers to meet the needs of students who enrolled in higher education following the 1944 passage of the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act (the “GI Bill”), the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the 1965 Higher Education Act that established affirmative action policies (Title VII), the City University of New York’s 1970 decision to abandon selective admissions and open its doors to all high school graduates, and the proliferation in the 1980’s of writing across the curriculum programs—have worked historically to enable the collegiate success of students “under-prepared” to meet the demands of the higher education’s customary discursive practices.

Since its inception, writing center scholarship has problematized
what constitutes the responsible work of writing center workers committed to students' collegiate success. It has questioned what is lost and what is gained when students who enter the academy with language practices and life experiences are asked to replace those practices—if not those experiences—with others that make them sound and write, think and value the language practices and life experiences of teachers whose histories they do not share. And it has invited writing center workers to think critically about the politics that define their work, about what has been called a politics of accommodation that encourages students to learn to use discourse and to participate in discursive practices their teachers will value, and about what has been called a politics of resistance that encourages students to question and even to disrupt customary discourse and discursive practices because that discourse and those practices perpetuate historic inequalities and continue patterns of social discrimination. The moral problem this scholarship highlights is one with which all responsible writing center workers concern themselves.

A related problem with which we struggle is less frequently highlighted. While there are some who argue with understandable self-interest that the excellence of higher education in the United States is threatened with disintegration, fragmentation, and indoctrination because the academy is opening itself to new ideas and new patterns of thinking (see, for example, Bloom; Hirsch), there are others who argue persuasively for the value of diverse thinking in the construction of a rich knowledge base (see, for example, Anzaldua; Gates; Levine; Said).

Even though the mission statements of 63% of colleges and universities in the United States currently indicate that diversity is an institutional goal and surveys reveal that colleges and universities are instituting an increasing number of courses designed to teach cultural pluralism (American Association of Colleges and Universities), data reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics indicate that the academy's commitment to cultural diversity and pluralism is running ahead of its ability to support the success and to benefit from the thinking of its diverse students: African-Americans, for example, who constitute 12.3% of the population in the United States, account for only 8.7% of college enrollment and 5.7% of college graduates; Hispanics, for another example, who constitute 7.7% of the population, account for only 4.9% of college enrollments and 2.7% of college graduates. And, although the American Council of Education’s Office of Minorities in Higher Education reports that the most recent four-year trends indicate increased rates of minority student enrollment in higher education (Carter and Wilson), recently released findings of the National Center for Education Statistics reveal that “Among bachelor’s degree seekers, whites and Asian/Pacific Islanders are more likely to persist toward a bachelor’s degree than are
their black and Hispanic counterparts" (22).

Colleges and universities have come to terms more easily with how they will define the intellectual content of a diversified curriculum and what form that curriculum will take than with how they will teach diverse learners. This situation exists in spite of the fact that we know a great deal about practices that support the success of the ethnic minority students who have enrolled in the academy since the late 1960's. A substantial body of literature on minority retention in higher education indicates that the practice of consultative teaching the MSU Writing Center is advancing in Project CONNECTS is a practice that promises to enable diverse students' collegiate success because the practice values what students know and what they bring to the educational setting; because it engages students in experiential learning, group learning, and peer mentoring; because it takes place in a learning situation that is rigorous and supportive, respectful and friendly; and because it blends the academic and the social (Brown; Higgins et al; Justiz, Wilson, and Bjork; Lang and Ford; Stock; Tinto).

In the MSU Writing Center, we are using consultative teaching to introduce students to the discourse and the discursive practices currently valued in the academy and the marketplace—to be sure—but we are also using it to expand that discourse and those practices. As we encourage students across the university—including students who come to the Center for writing workshop support—to become writing consultants, to engage in one or another of the research projects that surround interactions in the Center, to discuss with others (with students and faculty in MSU, with students and teachers in area schools, with workers and clients in community service agencies, with colleagues in local, state, and national conference presentations, and in written articles) understandings they are developing and revising during Writing Center consultations and collaborations and during public presentations and critical discussions of their work, we are preparing a diverse group of learners to become the next generation of scholars and citizens, to take their place and to speak their minds in the academy and world. In so doing, we are calling upon the academy to re-imagine the “extra-curriculum”—just as Derek Bok, Ernest Boyer, Benjamin Barber, and Lawrence Levine have called upon the academy to reconsider research, teaching, service, and the “official” curriculum.

As we involve students in the practices that both shape and are shaped by academic discourse, we are working to redress a failure in higher education that David Bartholomae noted just over a decade ago in his provocative and influential essay, “Inventing the University”: 
[E]ducation has failed to involve students in scholarly projects, projects that allow students to act as though they were colleagues in an academic enterprise. Much of the written work that students do is test-taking, report or summary—work that places them outside the official discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do, rather than inside that discourse, where they can do its work and participate in a common enterprise. 5 (144)

Designed as they are to support learners’ full participation in the social and intellectual practices that define the academy, the pedagogies we are developing within Project CONNECTS in the Michigan State University Writing Center distinguish our work from pedagogies that would indoctrinate—pedagogies based on the tacit assumption that customary forms of language and argument must be in place before something meaningful can be said. Underlying the pedagogies we are developing is the conviction that effective, purposeful forms of discourse develop in the context of functional, meaningful uses of language and argument, not prior to those uses.

If the work of scholars like Bok, Boyer, Barber, and Levine may be understood as calls for the functional, meaningful reconception and reformation of the work of faculty in higher education to better address the needs of the current era and the foreseeable future, then the work of units like the Writing Center in Michigan State University may be understood as arguments for a similar reconception and reformation of the work of students. Furthermore, if the joint statement of contemporary leaders of state and land-grant universities may be understood as a call for the development of practices that make institutions of higher education into genuine learning communities of continuous inquiry, then the work of units like the Writing Center in Michigan State University may be understood not only as arguments for pedagogy reconsidered but also as cases in point.

Notes

1 A version of this article was presented as a talk at the 1997 Conference of the East Central Writing Centers Association, Pittsburgh, April, 1997. It was my intention in that talk, as it is my intention in this article, to discuss writing center work in the context of the broader discussion of the aims, purposes, and conduct of higher education in the current era.
The programming underway in the Writing Center in Michigan State University that this essay describes is the result of many individuals. I wish to acknowledge especially Sharon Thomas, who has served as Associate Director and Acting Director of the Center; Laura Julier, who has served as Affiliated Faculty and Acting Associate Director; Janet Swenson, who has served as Director of Outreach; Fred Barton, David Cooper, Jay Ludwig, Diana Mitchell, Dean Rehberger, Leonora Smith, and Colleen Tremonte, who have served as Affiliated Faculty; and the hundreds of undergraduate, graduate student, faculty, teacher, and student writing consultants who have worked in the Center since it was established in 1992. Whatever the vision, commitment, and effort of those of us who have developed the Center’s programming, our work would not be possible were it not for the support—both intellectual and financial—of The Office of the Provost, The Office of the Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, The Office of the Dean of the Graduate School, the Department of English, and the Department of American Thought and Language. Our work has also been supported by the Bingham Trust, the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education, and the National Writing Project.

In keeping with the Writing Center’s commitment to building a culture of writing and continuous inquiry in MSU and the communities it serves, we ask each student-writer and each consultant to use the last fifteen minutes of one-on-one consultation sessions in the Center to reflect in writing on “what happened” during the session. As they compose these reflections, student-writers and consultants continually theorize and retheorize their practices.

Undergraduates who are hired, on a competitive basis, to be Undergraduate Writing Consultants in MSU are paid just over $6.50/hour.

In his article, Bartholomae notes curricula that he and others have designed to enable students to think/write as academics do in the academy’s various inquiry/discourse communities. I too have developed such curricula for students in high schools and universities, and I have been gratified by both students’ learning and the work they have published as a result of these courses of study. The argument I am making here extends the one that Bartholomae, others, and I have made elsewhere for the salutary benefits of such courses. Here I am arguing that when students join in or initiate research projects designed to answer questions that perplex them in a community in which they are reading, writing, and talking about discourse and how it is learned, they have not only the
opportunity to shape and be shaped by the discourse and discursive practices of that community but also the opportunity to reflect on the benefits and drawbacks of doing so since reflection on its work is one of the community’s constitutive practices.

Works Cited


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