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If I were asked how I would like writing centers positioned in academia's future, I would offer a picture of us as the recognized campus leaders whose vision of how learning environments should be structured has come to dominate educational thinking. But that's just what I'd *like*, not what is *likely*—unless we prepare appropriately. To do so, we have to look beyond our campuses to see where the rest of the world is headed. Academia is too heavily influenced by society's needs and trends and too dependent on the funding that society provides to move in directions other than where society is headed. And since I have been challenged to reflect on how writing centers can continue to be viable parts of academia, I should start by considering the evolving nature of that society for which we are preparing our students. After all, to be viable means to be able to maintain life within a particular setting. Academia needs all its parts moving in similar directions or, at the very least, not detouring from where society is headed. When I consider what all the media tell us about what's down that road, it seems that the most obvious forward motion is toward wherever technology is taking us, and the most prominent feature of who "we" will be can be seen in the changing demographics that forecast what is already becoming apparent.

To see how writing centers can remain integral to what will constitute the academic community of future decades, let's first look at a sampling of that most obvious sea change in our society: the growing dominance of technology in our lives, our jobs, our economy, and our thinking:

- A report by 23 university and industry experts recommends to colleges and universities that they need to increase greatly

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> various types of programs that prepare more information tech-
> nology workers because of the very real—and rapidly acceler-
> ating—shortages of such people in our society. (*Chronicle of
> Higher Education Online* 6/8/99, A29)
>
> • The Department of Commerce is planning next year to launch
> a major advertising campaign to convince teen-agers to choose
> a career in information technology, to ease the shortage of high
> tech workers. (*Washington Post* 7/1/99, E2)

So it is likely that many of our entering students, alert to where the jobs are, are going to be majoring in a complex array of areas encompassed by terms such as "IT" (information technology) or the world of "dot.com" business. Students will come to our campuses either already technologically adept or eager to learn, and they are going to be increasingly unlikely to make use of a writing center that isn't ready to work with them in ways familiar to them. Certainly that will mean computers in the center; possibly that will mean they expect online options to interact with us. And if they aren't yet comfortable with technology's modes of communication (word processing, e-mail, MOOs, chat rooms, etc.), they will be as persistent in their requests for help with that as they are to get help with "fixing" their papers—papers mostly likely written on computers. The more technologically aware writers may also bring in hypertext on a zipdisk, or send us files from their home computers or their computer classrooms. As more and more of our students of the future major in some area of information technology, they will not only be users of technology to write, they may also be taking more courses online, increasing the pressure on us to become aware of the groundswell towards distance learning courses through which students will meet their instructors both on and off campus.

Distance learning is clearly here to stay. Market Data Retrieval, a Dun and Bradstreet educational research company, reports that a survey of 4,000 institutions indicated that seven in ten colleges now offer some form of distance learning (*Lafayette Journal and Courier* 3/16/00, A9). While there is an accompanying pressure for writing centers to participate in academia's urge to jump into distance learning, we need to realize that this mode of instructional delivery is, so far, a mixed bag. Several realities of distance learning—initial low enrollments and higher than normal drop-out rates—indicate that it is not yet the run-away success many universities are banking on:

> • A June 1999 news story reports that distance learning pioneer
> — Western Governors University, which brokers virtual classes
> offered by colleges and companies in 17 states, expected

enrollments of 3,000 by the end of its first year, but so far has only about 100 students. Proponents of distance learning, however, say that the concept will catch on and that enrollments in college-level distance learning courses are anticipated to reach 2.2 million by 2002. (*CIO Web Business* 6/1/99*)*

• Although many colleges are moving to provide more distance learning, online courses seem to have a higher drop-out rate than traditional courses, with completion rates generally ten to twenty percentage points lower than traditional courses. (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 2/11/00, A39)

But distance learning cannot be ignored because it is rapidly becoming big business. Jeanne Simpson warned us several years ago ("Slippery Sylvans Sliding Sleekly into the Writing Center—Or Preparing for Professional Competition," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 21.1 [September 1996]:1-4) that the work of writing centers is in danger of being outsourced to the business world as more economically feasible. (Al DeCiccio has recently reiterated Jeanne's point in "Outsourcing Writing Center Work: The View from the Administration," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 24.10 [June 2000]:1-5.) Now we find that commercially available online tutoring services are stepping onto our campuses. SMARTHINKING, Inc., a commercial online tutoring service with tutors who respond to student papers, has been engaged by Modesto Junior College in a pilot program (Barbara Jensen, posting to WCenter listserv, 3/12/00). This partnering of commercial ventures and academia is leaping into existence with head-spinning speed:

• The academic publisher Harcourt General is joining the growing business of distance education by expanding its online offerings to include Harcourt University which will offer accredited college degrees, pending approval from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, though college bookstores are likely to oppose this competition. (*Wall Street Journal* 7/2/99, B1)

• A number of education-related companies (7thStreet.com; Cytation.com; Learning.Net; Global DataTel; and Eduverse) have announced plans to incorporate distance learning into their educational programs. Two of the companies are partnering to make their courses available to AOL users. (Mary Hillebrand, "Is Education the Next Online Moneymaker?" *E-Commerce Times* 6/4/99)

• ECollege.com helps educational institutions implement distance learning programs by offering standardized template packages

that allow eCollege.com to build a whole online campus in 60 business days. Since its inception in 1996, eCollege.com has gained 122 contracts covering 150 institutions. (*Financial Times* 12/14/99)

• Robert Murdoch's worldwide media conglomerate, News International, is negotiating with Universitas 21 (a global network of research universities) to deliver education over the Internet. News International recently established Worldwide Learning, an offshoot dedicated to delivering distance education online. Four other corporations are said to be negotiating partnership agreements with Universitas 21. (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 12/3/99, A55)

• In a report written by public university presidents belonging to the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, institutions of higher education are being urged to focus on encouraging lifelong learning, in part by ensuring that students have access to distance learning technology. Universities and colleges should team with elementary and secondary schools as well as businesses and government to make educational resources available to everyone. The group supports the forming of accredited groups devoted to setting standards for lifelong learning programs and distance education. (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 9/24/99, A39)

What might all this mean to us in writing centers? Several things. First, we need to recognize our role in helping students use—or learn to use—technology as part of their writing processes. Students may come through our doors not yet adept at word processing or uncomfortable with composing online or discussing writing online, but as writing classrooms move into computer lab classrooms, they will come with questions about writing in that environment. And, at some point in their lives, students are likely to engage in some distance learning that includes composing of texts at a distance—most likely as part of that lifelong learning or job enrichment or retraining that the Kellogg Commission report foresees— or just as part of job training. (A report in the February 4, 2000 *Computing Canada Online* notes that by 2003 one consulting firm predicts corporations will conduct 96% of their training online.) If we haven't already dipped a toe into online tutoring or if we haven't yet found a way to do it in pedagogically and theoretically justifiable ways, we need to explore more deeply. For those of us who resist the online methodologies and technologies available so far because much of what we've read or heard about seems to lack the collaborative and personalized interaction we value, we need to begin searching for ways to make online tutoring more

like the one-to-one conferencing we see as a core part of what we can offer the field of writing. We can't simply shrug and either refuse to go online or settle for some limited and limiting non-conversational written response that looks too much like the traditional marginal notations to texts rather than responding to—and collaborating with—writers. We're going to have to find ways to remain committed to our theory and practice but able to do so online in ways we are comfortable with. It's not obvious to me that we have yet found adequate ways to promote the interactive, collaborative environment we prize at our tutoring tables, though Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry Maid are enthusiastic advocates of using MOOs ("MOOving Along the Information Superhighway: Writing Centers in Cyberspace," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 19.5 [January 1995]: 1-6). But Doug Enders reminds us that breakdowns in the technology can lead to frustration and lost tutoring time ("Virtual Success: Using Microsoft NetMeeting in Synchronous, Online Tutoring," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 24.6 [February 2000]: 12-16), and Kurt Bauman notes that working online can't yet deal with the affective concerns that are such an important part of tutors' work:

> Online writing tutoring . . . just doesn't have the bandwidth to deal with many non-rhetorical or non-content-based issues like writing anxiety, emotional challenges (Who can write a course essay, say, during a traumatic life-period?). But a tutor can be a listener and empathizer as well as a writing-respondent. (posting to WCenter, 3/15/00)

But we must face the challenge and find ways. When we define the kinds of environments we want, we can enlist the assistance of experts in technology. But we cannot sit by expecting they will create types of environments we want to use. We will need to engage in partnering too— to do the kind of collaborative design work that Stuart Blythe has described for us (Muriel Harris, Stuart Blythe, et al. "A Discussion on Collaborative Design Methods for Collaborative Online Spaces." *Weaving Knowledge Together: Writing Centers and Collaboration.* Ed. Carol Haviland et al. Emmitsburg, MD: NWCA P, 1998).

In addition to helping students integrate technology into their writing processes and developing the theoretically appropriate and pedagogically effective online environments for online tutoring, we have other critically important tasks to add to our "to do" lists. We need to clarify for ourselves and our administrators why our academically situated writing centers need to keep our doors open, no matter how tempting it might be for the bean counters who influence budgets to recommend switching to commercial tutoring services such as SMARTHINKING. Let's consider that audience of bean counters and sit in their swivel chairs for a bit. From

their perspective, online tutoring frees up campus real estate now used by writing centers, always a major ongoing expense for any institution, and it eliminates equipment costs as well as salaries for tutors, faculty, professional and clerical help, and the accompanying medical and retirement benefits for those who get them. Companies like SMARTHINKING offer twenty-four hour availability, unlike the campus center or lab (definitely a recruitment tool that students will like), and outsourcing is already a good business practice that has proved its economic advantage. How are we to answer this? What arguments, rationales, responses do we have? Some administrators may see hiring such services as a supplement to on-campus services, but even limited use doesn't eliminate some of our concerns. Lynnell Edwards has raised valid considerations in noting that with for-profit educational ventures, "their impetus to attract and keep customers . . . could create a conflict of interest . . . . [w]hile our (usually) organic relationship to our sponsoring institutions . . . helps safeguard us from slippery practices like editing or second guessing grades or 'enabling' students to depend on us" (posting to WCenter, 3/13/00).

  As we recognize potential problems with commercial online tutoring, we need to articulate them—loudly and clearly—to those who are likely to make the decision to stay with institutionally integrated writing centers or to outsource completely with commercial ventures. What other arguments and evidence can we present that indicate writing centers are valuable services that need to remain open? Several studies have already shown us that writing center tutoring works in terms of grades (an overt sign of success in many circles). Neal Lerner, acknowledging that in the world of bean counters quantifiable data is prized, concludes the following from his study of users and non-users of his writing center:

> [S]tudents at the lowest end of the SAT verbal benefited the most; on a one-hundred point scale, the mean grade of this group was five points higher than students within the same SAT verbal range who did not come to the Writing Center. In fact, this "boost" meant that this group on average performed as well as students who had SAT verbal scores over 200 points higher! ("Counting Beans and Making Beans Count," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 22.1 [September 1997]: 3)

Stephen Newmann found similar results in his Center when his data showed that students who used their Center had more B's and C's than did students who didn't come in for tutoring ("Demonstrating Effectiveness," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 23.8 [February 2000]: 9). Responding to a request from administrators at the American University of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates, Craig Magee looked at grades and writing

center usage at his institution and, similarly, found that "students who used the center had a higher average grade than students who never used the center" ("A Writing Center's First Statistical Snapshot," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, forthcoming). That's one form of evidence we can point to. What else should we be researching and what arguments should we be spelling out when we proactively seek out administrators to show them the advantages of institutional writing centers? That tutors in the center can deal effectively with affective concerns? What factors do we need to look at to emphasize this? What aspects of collaborative tutorial conversation cannot yet be duplicated online? What valuable educational experiences are our tutors gaining by working in the center? Let's be more precise than we have been about answering these questions in researched and closely reasoned ways.

When we have answers to the questions raised here, we will then have a critically important role to play in academia. The personalized, interactiveness of working with writers, including meeting them online, will be something we will need to share with our colleagues on the faculty. Already, there are signs that other educators are recognizing the limitations of the impersonal passiveness of distance learning as an impediment to its success and the need for educators to learn how to overcome this. As a typical example of this, in a September 13, 1999 *InfoWorld* story (Reena Jana, "Getting the Most Out of Online Learning" 21.37), an IBM systems specialist reports on what he calls the benefits and pitfalls of online learning. He describes the boredom he felt by the solitary nature of online learning but the value he placed the one-to-one relationships he formed with instructors in e-mail exchanges. Individualizing; one-to-one interacting; conversational, non-threatening conferencing; working with the learner not the written evidence of the learning: these are what we have relied on so firmly. We must study all this more closely and articulate the defining features and principles more loudly to the rest of the faculty because they are getting ready—if not already eager—to listen to experts in what they must learn to do when they too engage in distance learning. It's time to probe more deeply and to learn how to explain what we have to share with colleagues in other departments and schools on campus. That will not only make us viable and ensure us a place at the institutional table, it may very likely earn us a place-setting at the head of the table where the speaker's podium awaits us.

But before we get ready to rise and clink our glasses at that table so that the rest of the institution can start listening to what we have to say, we need to prepare ourselves to add other writing center insights to what we will share with our colleagues. And again, I turn to what the media are telling us about our changing world—and that is the demographic changes that lay ahead in our society. Another typical example: a Gannett News Service story, reported by Katherine Huff Scott (*Lafayette Journal*

and Courier 3/10/00, A4), informs us that in the next fifteen years, a surge of Hispanic-American students will hit college campuses, and by 2025 Hispanics will constitute about 22% of the college-age population. At about the same time, the babies of the baby boomers will be entering college, and confluence of these two demographic trends will produce a surge of Hispanic students enrolling in colleges. Presently, more than half the students entering colleges in Arizona and New Mexico are Hispanic, a trend that will soon be evident in California, Florida, and Texas. But Hispanic drop-out rates are alarming: half don't finish college, a problem caused in part by inadequate high school education. So there will be a flood of students in our writing centers, some of whom may not be speakers of English as their primary language. And we know that the demographic trends also tell us of the waves of other ethnic groups who are changing the complexion of America, and some members of these groups will also enter college more fluent in languages other than English. And we must not ignore the Universitas 21 indicator that distance learning options will allow students in other nations to enroll in courses emanating from our campuses. We can't—and shouldn't—exclude these students from writing center assistance.

Thus, a question that looms large for us: Are we adequately prepared to work with all these multi-lingual students? Are we incorporating sufficient ESL training in our tutoring? Given the very likely situation that faculty in other fields will be even less prepared to meet future generations of those students in classrooms or online, we should be ready to explain—loudly—that *we* are prepared, and we should do with enough volume for administrators to hear too. We should announce that we will not only work with these writers, we will help our colleagues as well—in workshops, in consultations, in in-service training—in whichever format they can meet with us, to learn how to respond to all the writing these students will be turning in to them—history papers, economics exams, biology reports, computer science proposals, engineering dissertations, and so on. Where there aren't writing-across-the-curriculum or English-as-a-second-language programs on our campuses willing to take on the challenge, we will be the de facto consultants for all these faculty. Equally important, we will be the lifelines for their students who will need our centers in order to move forward in their studies. Where administrators are reluctant to acknowledge this need, denigrating it as remedial work their institutions are not responsible for, we will have to re-educate these administrators to the difference between "remedial" and "survival" skills for large numbers of otherwise competent, motivated students who just happen to come from backgrounds where English was not the primary language. We can also talk in terms of "recruitment" or "retention" to get the attention of administrators who don't get the message any other way.

What will writing centers need to do to be viable parts of our

academic community? We have some serious thinking and testing and researching to do. But it will be in areas we already know are important. We just need to realize how vital it is to keep moving forward—to ask ourselves some hard questions; to explore and surface principles for some areas that we have tended to leave unarticulated because we "know" them; to seek out administrators and tell them what we've found; to learn more from other disciplines such as ESL teaching that we have not traditionally studied in depth; to keep from tossing in the towel when every bit of hardware in the center goes on strike at the same moment; to understand that the coldness of cyberspace needs to be confronted and conquered; to seek help from—and work with—the technology experts we need; and finally, to realize that we *must* clink that glass and talk to our colleagues, to share with them what we have learned and created so that they too can respond to their students online, in pedagogically effective ways. They are going to need us too. If we can accomplish all this, we won't just be viable parts of our institutions; we'll be vital.

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The editors wish to offer their heartfelt congratulations to Muriel Harris on the occasion of her being the **2000 CCCC Exemplar Award Winner.** Thank you, Mickey, for all you have done and continue to do for writing centers.