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What's Next for Writing Centers?

Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris

The future of writing centers will, of course, be affected significantly by changes in the students they serve. Commuting, non-traditional, and technologically sophisticated students will increasingly demand distance-learning opportunities and online access to instruction, while larger numbers of international students will require ESL instruction. Thus, the writing centers of the twenty-first century will undoubtedly be more reliant on technology and need more second-language acquisition specialists.

Another way in which writing centers will probably change is that many of them will expand and become “de-centered.” Even now, many writing centers consist of multiple sites and have connections to other programs (libraries, business schools, athletic programs, and schools of education as well as English departments). This tendency to expand beyond the physical boundaries of a single writing center will, we think, be one of the defining features of the writing center of the future.

However, in spite of major changes, the need for and perceived function of writing centers will probably not change all that much. Writing centers will, perhaps increasingly, be viewed as the “guardians” of writing—places where writing and talk about writing are central. In fact, we believe that writing centers will no longer be viewed only as support programs but will assume on many campuses a major role in the teaching of writing. Many institutions seem to be looking at alternative ways to deliver writing instruction, and if proposed models are put into place, writing centers could assume pivotal roles as a result of their connections with WAC, WID, first-year seminars, learning communities, and the like. The struggle to cast off our remedial image and marginal status may finally end as writing centers become central to the teaching of writing.

At this point in their history, writing centers have not realized their potential as sites of research, nor have they contributed significantly to the body of research on writing and the teaching of writing. In the past,

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most people associated with writing centers have devoted most, if not all, of their time and energy to keeping their programs alive and healthy. But in the future we predict that writing centers will assume a more prominent role in researching not only writing and writers but also more general undergraduate research issues, such as retention and assessment. It is our hope that writing centers will also increasingly be viewed and valued as sites for research.

We sincerely believe that writing centers are poised to assume a more prominent role in the institutions and communities in which they exist. Increasingly, writing centers are no longer seen as supplementary but as programs that are central to the mission of the school and essential to its being competitive in terms of attracting and retaining students. Opportunities for fund-raising, grants, and community involvement frequently accrue to writing centers. Some writing centers have begun literacy projects that might, with concerted effort, lead to a network similar to the National Writing Project. Thus, in the future, writing centers could have a synergistic effect on literacy nationwide.

Clearly, our vision of the future of writing centers is optimistic, but we believe it can be a reality. The years of existing in the margins, struggling to survive, may not be completely over for every writing center, but certainly most writing centers are now enjoying the fruits of those early years of labor.