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Writing Center Work: An Ongoing Challenge

Harvey Kail

Given changing educational demands, populations, budgets, and technology, how do you see writing centers continuing as viable parts of the academy?

No problem! However, I'm not sure I agree that change is necessarily a given, in spite of the oddly comforting phrases we tell ourselves about "change being the only constant." Students continue to want and to need access to the resources of the English language—all kinds of students for all kinds of reasons. As robust, institutionally sponsored, ongoing literacy events, writing centers are perfectly situated to help students to this vital access route. The challenge isn't so much responding to changing educational demands; the challenge is to continue (and to continue) to meet the ongoing demand for competent writing in the academy.

I recognize that "access to the resources of the English language" and "competent writing" and "academy" are not unencumbered truisms. Naïve allegiance to slogans won't do. Still, for me, "resource" and "English" and "writing" and "access" seem essential constants for writing center focus and strategy. I do not think I belabor the obvious. What distinguishes writing centers in academe is their willingness and ability to engage student writers sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, word by word, comma by comma, one to one, face to face. No one else in the academy can or wants to do this work, but everyone wants it done—now. Some things don't change.

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Changing student populations

Changing student populations is where we came in, right? Where would writing centers be without changing student populations? A good example for us is our international students, who have not only increased in numbers but in the variety of languages and cultures they present to us. Changing student populations help remind us of the power of writing in the academy and therefore help to energize the writing center.

Changing technologies

The shift to digital communication has become so pervasive and swift that it doesn't really seem like change anymore. It does, however, seem like very hard work for writing center directors: the constant upgrading of equipment, the allegiance to talk about machines and about software, the additional paper work that comes with computers, the maintenance and repairs, the phone calls, the pleading for help from the technical support staff, and, unavoidably, the raising of the money. Computers take a world of time, and I have to confess that a big part of me hates every second I invest in handling the digital technology.

What eases my resentment about the rigors of the digital revolution is the way peer tutors take to it and even insist on participating in it. While their devotion to email is scandalous, many of them also have a keen interest in using the new technology as part of our Writing Center's effective presence on campus, and tutors have a demonstrable aptitude for working with and in the digital age. Our Writing Center is currently experimenting with combining computer communication technology with older technologies, such as 1-800 phone lines, to link up with students studying at a distance, rather than try to make the digital leap all at once. The tutors feel more comfortable with a headset on and a computer screen in front of them, rather than a live student, than I ever could have imagined. Many of them enjoy the process of bringing the technology to bear effectively on educational problems. Meanwhile, I try to like it.

Changes in budgeting

Writing centers, even big ones, are relatively small time operations, and, as such, chronically suffer budgetary anxiety. The key to remaining fiscally viable in the institution is to understand that our budget process is closer to the way small, non-profit agencies work, rather than the way the English department budget works. There is no one source of funding for writing centers as there usually is for English departments.

Instead, there are multiple sources of funding. None of them, however, is necessarily automatic or “base budgeted.” Our Writing Center budget consists largely of what one can easily think of as “donations” from the community, a form of ritualized giving from a variety of units on campus: the English department, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the office of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, the office of Student Financial Aid (which is the single biggest player in the Writing Center budget consortium), the Alumni Association Travel Fund for Undergraduates, the Graduate Student Association Travel Fund, the Student Technology Fee Committee, etc. The drawback to this kind of budgeting process is that these sources of money must be solicited every year. They are not guaranteed. The benefit, if there is one, is that our Writing Center has multiple sources of revenue. If one unit doesn’t come through with its anticipated contribution, another might be in a position to increase its donation, at least temporarily. In short, our budget is broad based but unstable, and I don’t think this is going to change much. We must continue to maintain our harmonious and informed relationships with our “donor” community, and smile about it, too. I doubt that in the foreseeable future we will gain more dollars for our small base budget; I am, however, reasonably optimistic that the total dollars available to the Writing Center will be adequate, as long as we make it clear (over and over) what the benefits to students are.

In what ways will writing centers continue to be viable contributors to the research community?

Much writing center research has been justifiably focused on two areas: “value added” research, in which we try to measure the development of student writing in relation to writing center sponsored interventions, and market research, in which we try to gather information about who writing centers serve and how writing centers organize themselves to do it. Both areas of inquiry have been useful in terms of validating writing centers in the academy and authorizing our experiences inside of them. I am amazed that so much has been accomplished.

The problem for me is how to take “the next step.” Steve North and John Trimbur, among others, have issued intriguing calls over the years for research that emphasizes the writing center as a window into the unique conversations about reading and writing that abound there. I can imagine all manner of interesting research topics and designs along those lines. The problem for me in answering such calls is that it is late in my day when I get around to thinking of the writing center director as the writing center researcher—very late in the day. Why? Because research is something we have added on after the original writing center creation

myth was well established in our minds and embedded in our job descriptions. Then, with typical irony, we punched our own ticket by using hard won, added on research to validate our service role. Let me put it another (only slightly exaggerated) way: as Writing Center Director my priorities are teaching, service, service, service, and then research—on our service.

One step to develop the potential for systematic research in writing centers, as distinct from occasional research about writing centers, is to attempt to renegotiate the writing center statement of purpose, rewrite its myth of origins, so that research is a featured character, not a walk-on part. That might make for an interesting situation. It might mean, for instance, that research output, not the number of students served, would be the primary justification for writing center viability. It might mean that writing center directors would carry research appointments, and research budgets to go along with them, and job descriptions that have high expectations for publication in exchange for job security and promotion. It might mean that writing center training and procedures and environment would all change to meet the needs of research and publication. Is such a “renegotiation” desirable or even possible? Another way to get at this same issue is to ask, are we, the readers of *The Writing Center Journal* and *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, the research community to which we want to remain a viable contributor? Or is the research community that we seek to influence larger, more diverse, and less interested?

Can you target any issues that writing centers need to open up or begin to address that have to do with our future place in the academy and the larger community?

Writing centers have been surprisingly successful over time, and success means continuity, and continuity is an issue all in itself. Problems for writing centers in the future are just as likely to grow out of the demands of their complex, if mundane, routine as they are from the more focused dilemma of changes in technology or student populations. Maintaining and renewing powerful innovations like peer tutoring and collaborative learning, when they are no longer innovative yet remain powerful, is an ongoing challenge: recruiting, training, supervising, and developing tutors every year; promoting the writing center among students and faculty and the community every year; dealing with the paper work and budgetary begging every year; doing everything else you do every year (don't forget research!). We must take care lest we be burned out by the insistent and repetitive demands of our own success.