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Inside the Community College Writing Center: Ten Guiding Principles

Ellen G. Mohr

by Jill Pennington

About the Author

Jill Pennington is a Writing Professor and Writing Center Coordinator at Lansing Community College in Lansing, MI. She has worked in writing centers at a variety of post-secondary institutions since 1990. Pennington is founder of the Michigan Writing Centers Association and Past-President of the ECWCA. She has served as Community College Representative and Secretary to the IWCA. In addition to delivering nearly fifty conference presentations since 1992, Pennington has served as a leader in the IWCA Summer Institute for Writing Center Directors and Professionals in 2003 and 2004 and 2008.

Inside the Community College Writing Center: Ten Guiding Principles, by Ellen G. Mohr, is an important and long overdue contribution to writing center scholarship. Mohr's book situates the community college writing center within a larger body of scholarship about writing centers as well as ties it to the related fields of composition studies and community college scholarship. Within this careful context, she legitimizes and professionalizes community college writing centers and provides—both for those of us who work within them and those who do not—a rich, yet practical, collection of insights into their unique nature.

In numerous conversations I have had over the past decade with community college writing center administrators, I have heard frustration expressed about many facets of our work. Simply put, many



of us feel misunderstood within our own institutions and the professional community. Though well intentioned, our university counterparts sometimes ask us questions about the nature of our work that implies a sense of pity for the types of writers with whom we work and the level of writing they bring to us. Once, a friend who directs a four-year university center asked me with a genuine sense of wonder, “How do you help people whose writing is *that* bad?” implying that community college writers’ collective skills are somehow “much worse” than that of four-year university students.

The blame for perpetuating misunderstandings about community college writing center work, however, does not lie within perceptions of university writing center staff. Those who work within community college writing centers are to be held accountable for much of it. In conference and workshop sessions geared toward community college writing centers that I have attended, I have heard moaning about lack of status, lack of resources, lack of understanding, and lack of scholarship that “speaks to us.” If writing centers still lie on the margins, I believe some community college writing center administrators picture themselves on the margins of the margins, seeking acceptance and understanding, while not doing much to speak positively about the important work we do and not laboring diligently enough to showcase our contributions through scholarly venues and publications.

What I like most about Ellen Mohr’s book is its unapologetically positive energy about community college writing centers and the students they serve. I would enthusiastically recommend this book to anyone within the writing center community—whether or not he/she is interested specifically in community college writing center work. The book is a combination of background and historical/theoretical context for understanding the culture of the community college writing center and practical advice for successfully managing such a center. There are ten guiding principles that serve as a foundation for this book, as well as nearly fifty pages of useful appendices that include tutor training materials, various forms used within a writing center, and even sample surveys and evaluations. Those who work in four-year university writing centers, I believe, will stand to gain a broad understanding about the many similarities—and some impor-

tant differences—between the work they do and the work in a community college writing center. Those who already work in two-year college writing centers will be able to use this book as a foundation embracing and re-envisioning the important work we already do.

Mohr begins with a history of community colleges and their mission, followed by a history of writing centers, focusing specifically on the emergence of community college writing centers, which began appearing in the literature in 1984 with Gary Olson's chapter in *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration* (a book he also edited), titled "Establishing and Maintaining a Writing Center." Throughout her book, Mohr also analyzes how community colleges are different from other types of institutions. She states, "while the public and private colleges and universities are held accountable to state boards and private institutions, community colleges have a different stakeholder: the community, and that fact separates us" (43). Within this context, "the community college writing center helps the student realize academic goals by providing a nurturing setting for better understanding the rigors of academia and the importance of life-long learning skills" (222). Acknowledging how the community college—and the community college writing center—is a different environment is essential in developing a mission statement for a community college writing center, something Mohr urges us to do throughout Chapter Four. A mission statement situates us within the college we serve and helps us articulate our connection to the goals and values of the institution and our stakeholders.

Mohr points out that community colleges also differ in the diversity of students they serve. Writing centers in these institutions must be able to effectively work with students who are racially and ethnically diverse and may come from literally anywhere in the world. Some students who come to us have grown up in refugee camps and have a very limited understanding of written English, while others may come from wealthy families and are better educated in English grammar than our writing center staff. As Mohr points out, we may even find ourselves working with students who already have advanced degrees in other countries or have written work published in other languages. Community college students, as a whole, also differ in terms of age diversity and socio-economic diversity. Many are single

parents who work more than one job and have many competing responsibilities that inhibit their success. The stakes are high for them.

Mohr also issues many challenges for community college writing centers. Among them, she cautions us against incorporating a writing center into a learning center, which only increases potential to stigmatize us as remedial. In addition, she warns us that although a writing center worker may need to step in occasionally to help with students' literacy questions as they relate to the use of technology, the center should not be a computer lab or facility where students are simply plopped in front of a computer to do de-contextualized grammar exercises. Her own writing center offers modules and computer-aided tutorials, but, she states, "no computer tutorial nor hand-out is given in isolation" (120).

Another cautionary tale Mohr shares is the importance of educating the student body and faculty about our mission. We must be adaptable, she says, but we cannot be all things to all people all the time or we run the risk of giving into pressures from students and faculty alike that may compromise our mission and pedagogy. This is where another of Mohr's suggestions ties in: it is important to have a writing center director with a background in composition theory and with teaching experience who can articulate what we do—and do not do—and why. Though it is perhaps more unlikely that a community college, with student-centered learning at its very core, will "do away with" an established writing center, it is perhaps more important that our stakeholders be educated about what goes on in a writing center lest they are left to make assumptions about its purpose.

The most important piece of advice Mohr offers is her argument for why peer tutors are qualified to work in community college writing centers, a practice that has been questioned both within and beyond the community college writing center community. She quotes Martha Maxwell, author of *Evaluating Academic Skills Programs: A Sourcebook*: "Peer tutoring is a wide-spread practice in higher education and considered by students and educators to be an important component of a 'successful learning assistance program'" (qtd. in Mohr 213). But getting the word out that peer tutors are qualified is largely the work of the director and others who are in charge of the writing center:

In a community college writing center where students are hired to tutor, the director has to have faith in the theoretical foundation of the center. In other words, we have to believe that knowledge is shared, not parceled out; that a writing center is a discovery zone where writers (and individuals) find meaning and put it into a context; and that all writers can improve if put into a supportive non-threatening environment. (90)

Although Mohr's Center uses both faculty and peer tutors, she is a firm supporter of peer tutors at two-year colleges. She says, "when the director must choose one or the other [referring to faculty tutors or student tutors], I always say choose the student tutor" (91).

"If we see ourselves as a dumping ground for the disenfranchised rather than a haven for the hopeful, we will be lost in all of the negativity that is often directed toward community or two-year colleges" (50), Mohr tells us. I believe her book goes a long way toward teaching us how not to subscribe to negativities about community colleges and community college writing centers. We often unwittingly aid in our own marginalization, she cautions throughout the book, when we don't frame the important work we do in the positive light it deserves. I believe Mohr's wise words when she says, "when writing skills are emphasized as basic skills required for academic pursuits and career potential, then writing centers will be institutionalized, not marginalized" (222).

My only reservation with *Inside the Community College Writing Center* has to do with what I consider a necessary but unfortunate choice IWCA Press made in publishing the book as a CD-ROM. Though this choice resulted in a cost-effective production—and price—it makes reading the text a somewhat cumbersome process. One either needs to be willing to scroll through 225 pages of text and nearly 50 pages of appendices on a computer screen or print the book—like I did—and then bind it in such a way that makes it portable. Even given this limitation, I would recommend this text as a must-read for anyone who is interested in writing centers.