

2014

# Extending An Alternative: Writing Centers and Curricular Change

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## Recommended Citation

Essid, Joe. "Extending An Alternative: Writing Centers and Curricular Change." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 38, no. 7-8 (March/April 2014): 1-5.

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# THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E W T T E R

Volume 38, Number 7-8

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing

March/April, 2014

## — FROM THE EDITOR —

This issue of *WLN* begins with Joe Essid's account of confronting a very real and growing problem of how changing priorities of institutions can threaten the writing center's existence. Essid's response was to consider—and act on—the need for curricular change and integration of the writing center he directs into the new programs. He concludes with a close look at their programmatic assessment.

To lighten the mood and stave off misunderstandings, Steve Sherwood and Pam Childers suggest that we consider the advantages of encouraging humor and laughter in the writing center.

Also included in this issue are two book reviews, the first a review by Suzan Aiken of Dawn Fels and Jennifer Wells' book on high school writing centers. Emphasizing the importance of context, Aiken also calls attention to chapters that are appropriate for college-level writing centers. In Daniel Lawson's review of an essay collection on supporting faculty writing, he focuses most closely on the chapters particularly relevant for writing centers—how centers can and should be involved with facilitating faculty writing.

Our Tutor's Column essay in this issue, by Ashley Moore, reflects on a student response most tutors will recognize: the writer's sense of "early closure," of being done once there's a draft in hand.

Finally, for those of us journeying to the CCCC conference in Indianapolis, in March, I look forward to continuing these conversations at the IWCA Collaborative. See you there, and safe travels!

◆ Muriel Harris, editor

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## EXTENDING AN ALTERNATIVE: WRITING CENTERS AND CURRICULAR CHANGE

◆ Joe Essid

University of Richmond  
Richmond, VA

When our Writing Center staked its reputation and perhaps its survival on a proposal to change our first-year curriculum, we entered territory that would have been unthinkable to those in our field a few decades ago. Writing center directors and peer tutors may not like it, but the climate now is very different from the salad days of the 1980s, when scholars such as Tilly and John Warnock argued "it is probably a mistake for centers to seek integration into the established institution" (22). In both the United States and EU nations, we face curricular change driven by emerging technologies, administrative fiat, austerity programs at the national level, American state-house "quality assurance," local institutional assessment, and even outsourcing to private firms. In today's universities, focused on measurable outcomes and fiscal solvency, unless one has an ongoing and secure source of funding, it would be foolhardy not to seek such integration.

Consider what can happen to our programs. In 2006, John Harbord's successful writing center at Central European University in Budapest, in potential competition with departmental writing instructors for institutional support, only survived thanks to "the support of influential faculty, the appropriate use of statistical evidence to support our case," and the Writing Program Award for Excellence at the Conference on College Composition and

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**Manuscripts:** Before sending in submissions, please consult the guidelines and suggestions for prospective authors on the *WLN* website. Recommended length for articles is 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutors' Column essays, in MLA format (including Works Cited). Please send files through the *WLN* website.

Communication. The pressures on campuses also threaten programs long allied with writing centers; Martha Townsend used a strategy like Harbord's to save the campus WAC program at her institution, the University of Missouri, even as well-respected programs such as the University of Michigan's English Composition Board got dismantled (45-46). We have journeyed far, and over rough terrain, since Stephen North changed our field with his 1984 manifesto, "The Idea of a Writing Center." At that time, U. S. higher education still reeled and benefited from the cultural upheavals of the '60s and '70s. Experimentation was not only possible but demanded. Faced with a different reality today, our centers cannot pretend to dwell in a halcyon past.

Our program's role in curricular change, grounded in campus realpolitik, provides a starting point for others seeking autonomy in difficult times. In our case, claiming that writing instruction during the first year could be done better meant that we were no longer, in North's terms, an alternative to the classroom. North himself rethought this position in 1994, with "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center.'" In it, he calls for us to abandon a "delicate and carefully distanced relationship between classroom teachers and the writing center" (16). That abandonment becomes inevitable when a center and its staff voice their opinions about the messy business of an undergraduate curriculum. For directors, this suggests lots of new and challenging work; for peer tutors it means something very different. Striving for excellence with writers becomes no longer ethically correct but also essential to a program's survival. Tutors also become ambassadors to newly attentive faculty, administrators, and boards of trustees.

### A CENTER'S CENTRALITY AND MERGER WITH A WAC PROGRAM

The term "writing center" holds rhetorical power not lost on stakeholders in campus debates about curriculum and student development (McQueeny 16-17). At the same time, an idea by our long-serving Writing Program Director, the late Greg Colomb, may guide writing centers as well. He proposed leveraging an institutional "franchise" for writing programs to shape curriculum. "Franchise" may call to mind a fast-food outlet, but Colomb argued not for blandness but instead a limited mandate that "conveys the right to use a public property or perform a public function; it does not convey ownership" (23). Our center's public function has long been assisting student writers as they struggle with the demands of the academy.

For two decades, we performed this function by employing undergraduate Writing Consultants in both North's ideal center, where tutors talk to writers, and in a WAC program. Using techniques pioneered by Tori Haring-Smith at Brown and Thomas Blackburn at Swarthmore in the 1980s, our "Writing Fellows" worked in individual courses, about 40 sections annually (Hickey). Along the way we discarded the terms "tutor" and "Fellow" for "Consultant," to have a capitalized title that, on our campus, accrues the sort of ethos one associates with "Professor" or "Director." Our Consultants have been the public face of writing assistance and recruiters of new Consultants. All the while, in partnership with the Director, they must retain the good will of faculty. Any successes and mistakes they or the Director make reflect upon the entire program.

### HOW OUR MODEL WORKS

Consultants dedicate between 45 and 60 hours per semester reading first drafts, at least twice, for about 15 writers in a single section, usually a course for first-year or second-year students. These writers may seek additional help at the Writing Center, as do many others not in a WAC class. For WAC, however, we urge faculty to make the meetings mandatory and to bring Consultants to class at least a few times when assignments get discussed. A few faculty do not, and enforcement with tenured colleagues is difficult. Violators simply do not get Consultants again. Consultants in classes respond with written commentary using techniques acquired in a semester-long training course. They hold one-to-one meetings, and then writers revise before submitting final drafts to faculty. These practices help our program by "forming social alliances and finding new identities" (Murphy and Law 140). As Director, I began to find myself

talking more about writing with faculty in Dance or Biology than I ever did in the Humanities departments that had once sent the most students to the Writing Center. As students from these new departments become Consultants, they provide knowledge of the rhetorical strategies and forms of writing common in fields not heavily represented in years past. In the best cases, partnership with a faculty member has turned a Consultant into a “knowledgeable writing specialist” playing a role in faculty development, as Rita Malenczyk and Lauren Rosenberg describe in their article. As in their center, our Consultants “participate in pedagogical conversations along with first-year instructors” (6) during faculty workshops and personal meetings. The Director intervenes when needed to resolve logistical advice or interpersonal conflicts between faculty, writers, and Consultants. These arrangements served us well when radical change arrived.

### NEW LEADERSHIP, NEW CURRICULUM

Our new president, an award-winning teacher and historian who boldly stated that he planned to teach first-year students, challenged us to make our curriculum for them “innovative.” With some trepidation, and sure to alienate some old friends, our Writing Center staked its professional reputation on the side of the President’s call. A first goal involved looking for models, beyond composition, that could strengthen writing instruction during the first year. A second goal involved finding incentives for faculty across the curriculum to teach in a new program. It helped expedite matters that I, the Writing Center Director, also ran the first-year composition program. In meeting with Writing Consultants and WAC faculty, we noted how our old curriculum, focused on a Core Course with much emphasis on close reading and a great deal of writing, offered little writing instruction. Meanwhile, our first-year composition course, taught by adjuncts, had long been slated for major revisions, if not elimination.

With advice from stakeholders, I began to study the first-year, writing-intensive seminar programs. They permit faculty from many fields to teach a favored topic that might not be available inside a major’s course offerings. Many of our interviewees had shown enthusiasm for just such a change. During our campus visits to other programs, both students and faculty showed us the critical need for intervention during the first year. At Cornell, we learned how anthropologist Keith Hjortshoj discovered “illusions of academic continuity between high school and college” among first-year students (6). A first-year curriculum provides a natural location for dispelling these illusions. Otherwise, students will only continue to “imagine that they are prepared” (Hjortshoj 7). On the other coast, we found that Stanford’s Hume Writing Center has long employed the phrase “culture of writing” (Stanford). We discovered that in Colomb’s terms it is a franchise, albeit a very effective one, employing and adapting to the local setting a set of slowly derived best-practices. Students working in the program marketed it and held workshops. We had only done this sporadically at our Center over the years.

I’d hardly unpacked my bags after visiting other schools when I began e-mailing more colleagues and Writing Consultants to share what they would like in a new curriculum. Consultants wanted connections between the existing first-year courses and the rest of the curriculum. Here the Consultants’ remarks closely echoed the concerns of faculty seeking a change from the old curriculum. The concept of first-year seminars found support among senior colleagues eager to teach something new, technologists hoping to see more new-media practices in the classroom, librarians seeking to integrate information fluency into courses, and faculty who had benefitted from working with the Writing Center. Two assumptions guided our lobbying for a revised curriculum. Faculty, even those partisans of the old curriculum, are colleagues of good will. Second, if treated with dignity and respect, all faculty can write excellent assignments and provide effective commentary on drafts. Over the years, it became clear that our faculty know a great deal about writing, even if they would not consider themselves competent to teach writing as a process.

*“Our program’s role in curricular change, grounded in campus realpolitik, provides a starting point for others seeking autonomy in difficult times.”*

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Director of University Writing/ Writing Center Director University of Mary Hardin- Baylor

We seek candidates for a full-time faculty position of University Writing, including directing the Writing Center. Position available: Aug. 11, 2014.

Requirements: A doctoral degree in Rhetoric & Composition or Curriculum & Instruction, or a related field; demonstrated knowledge of Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Discipline; at least one year of experience teaching at the college level; and two years of professional experience in a writing center. Experience in administration of a writing center is preferred. Must be an active, committed Christian.

Responsibilities: The Director of the University Writing Center will spearhead the university's efforts to accomplish its new Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), The Writing Cru, which aims to develop strong foundational writing skills in students and to develop those skills with discipline-specific writing. Complete position description: <[hr.umhb.edu/jobs/details/1958](http://hr.umhb.edu/jobs/details/1958)>.

Questions can be sent to Dr. Toby F. Coley: <[TColey@umhb.edu](mailto:TColey@umhb.edu)>.

Application Deadline: Position will remain open until filled. To Apply: Please submit a completed Faculty Employment Application, along with a cover letter, CV, transcript copies and evidence of quality teaching performance to <[hr@umhb.edu](mailto:hr@umhb.edu)>. Applications may also be submitted by mail or in person to: UMHB Human Resources Department, UMHB Box 8020, 900 College Street, Belton, TX. 76513.

My Assistant Director and I drafted a proposal for two seminars, one per semester, to replace Core and the composition course. This proposal went before a task force on first-year education and emerged with surprisingly few changes after a full semester of open meetings and debates. As a key element in helping faculty new to writing, we made the assignment of an undergraduate Writing Consultant the default option for every seminar. In the end, it won after two rounds of faculty voting. We had changed the curriculum. What next?

### YEAR ONE: RESPONSES AND PLANS

In the first year of this new seminars program, the number of Writing Consultant meetings with writers exploded from 2200 to 4500, and the hours of consultations overall expanded from 1200 to nearly 1900 hours. Writing Center usage that year fell, however, by nearly 50%, though it rebounded in the second year of the seminars program, largely from contacts with a growing number of English-language learners (at the time of writing, these data have not yet been fully studied). To maintain the Center's reputation for quality, our Advisory Board and I tightened requirements for taking the training course and mandated mentoring and non-punitive evaluations for newly trained Consultants. For them, evaluations meant empowerment as well as oversight: Consultants would nominate peers distinguished by their work for the new Consultant-Advisor job, to include both mentorship and leading workshops around campus. All stakeholders in our franchise—faculty, administrators, current and potential Writing Consultants—learned of reasons for any changes. We had always been, in Jane Cogie's terms, "sharers" instead of "seclusionists." This stance, long cultivated by each effective report to faculty about a tutorial, enhanced our position as the "center" for writing and, in Wingate's terms, "a center for academic culture."

Results from the first programmatic assessment of the First Year Seminars (FYS) were positive, with 70% satisfaction from both students and faculty working with the Writing Consultants. Consultants' responses, however, indicate that writers' drafts were less polished than the writers themselves judged them to be. Consultants also suggested several improvements:

- "Give the students or professors the option to evaluate their Consultants." Plans for such evaluations are ongoing at the time of writing.
- Improve logistics for scheduling meetings. One Consultant's response echoed a few others: "Working with a class was a little frustrating because some students scheduled a meeting at the last minute and then got upset when I couldn't meet with them."
- "[Create] a Writing Consultant Twitter page and an official tweeter."
- "Make sure teachers requesting Consultants are interested in actually utilizing them."
- Inform faculty early of Consultants' names and minimum requirements for employing them. As one Consultant noted, "The professor I worked with was eager and receptive to using a Writing Consultant, but he wasn't sure of practical details and how best to incorporate one into the syllabus."

Out of these suggestions, a number of new policies and resources emerged to guide the work of both program directors and tutors elsewhere:

- Making fall-semester assignments early in the summer session, so faculty would have time to integrate the Consultant's work into their syllabi.
- Promoting our Facebook and Twitter sites, as well as working with the FYS Director to be sure faculty know that they will be assigned a Writing Consultant (e-mail and print reminders often vanish without a trace).
- Informing faculty of no-shows by writers. This remains a more difficult area for classroom-based Consultants than for those working in the Center, where we have a consistent policy.
- Refusing to assign Consultants to faculty who did not employ them well. In the second year of the program, several who had been "cut off" then requested Consultants again and, after a short orientation, began to employ them in productive ways.
- Revising the training class. Consultants asked for more practice conferences as well as more attention to ESL and sentence-level revision.



The university's first study of the FYS program compared 56 sections with and without Consultants. Each FYS instructor randomly selected a student and used a four-point scale to score a portfolio of work in five areas: command of grammar, attention to audience, ability to focus, ability to organize, and facility with supporting evidence. Results show that in sections with Consultants, the percentage of writers who "exceeded expectations" (scores of 4) was only 1 or 2 percent greater than in other sections, and these modest improvements happened in finding a focus and addressing audience.

We attribute the lack of statistically significant differences between sections to the novelty of peer assistance and the logistics of making such a shift in the curriculum. In the summer workshops for new FYS faculty, several sessions address designing assignments and giving commentary, but only one short session shared tips for successfully employing Consultants. As a result, as one Consultant noted, "The teacher I worked with [never] really understood what my job as a Consultant was. She also did not encourage her students to work with me." To address these problems, in the second year of the seminars I made personal phone calls to more than 80 faculty teaching or planning to teach FYS. These conversations and other communications revealed that while faculty still needed to learn more about the Consultants, only half a dozen colleagues planned to opt out of employing them. Two cited the logistical headaches of employing a Consultant, two their belief that undergraduate Consultants lacked the ability to help, and two the desire to select individual students who needed help and send them to the Writing Center. All of these exchanges were cordial and provided grounds for improving Consultant training.

While meeting individual faculty, I remind them that they may mandate how much attention they would like their Consultants to pay to grammar, mechanics, and usage. This creates a potential problem we have not yet resolved. Over time, a program that serves faculty wishes could devolve into a proofreading service. I am reassured that many faculty tell me that they understand the pedagogy of the program, and that writers must be responsible for their own revisions. Yet in such a program linked to the curriculum, we cannot ignore what tenured faculty want. We are, in North's terms, not an alternative but an extension of more than fifty classrooms, a large franchise indeed. And if we want our program to continue, we have to serve this audience of faculty and writers well.

Yes, "serve." I no longer shirk the language of service. I believe that our center's franchise for writing, joined at the hip to the tutorial services, breaks every one of North's commandments that centers not "serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum" ("Idea of a Writing Center" 440). Well, we broke almost all of them. We have modified North's final commandment, so that in the end, we helped to define a curriculum that is not external, but integrated with best practices and pedagogy. ♦

*Dedicated to the memory of Gregory Colomb, WAC Pioneer and Mentor*

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