The Emergence of Centers for Writing Excellence

Emily Isaacs

Centers for Writing Excellence (CWEs) are more than just writing centers with new names, although the use of the word “excellence” is deliberate and useful. CWEs and other similarly formulated comprehensive writing centers are created with the assumption that a writing center can and should be deeply valuable to all students and faculty on their campuses, and to the field of writing studies more broadly as well. This list of beneficiaries sounds familiar, of course, but in their sheer largeness of vision and expectation, CWEs are markedly different from either English department “basement” writing centers or small Learning Center-annexed writing centers that have still dominated the national higher education landscape despite significant progress over the last fifty years (Ferruci & DeRosa, 2006, pp. 25–26).

CWEs are deliberate in their mission of becoming truly valuable to all: to all students by targeting the highest succeeding students such as graduate students, honors students, and upper level students; to university faculty by providing targeted, desired, and concrete support in teaching writing across the disciplines; to studies in writing and higher education through production of original research; and to the entire institution through sponsorship and support for an intellectual culture—a culture of writing—in the university and in the community that the university serves. In short, CWEs are the
opposite of modest—in budget and demand for university space, time, and resources, but also in what they dare to promise.

What could be the flagship institution in this wave of writing centers is Miami University at Ohio’s Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence, about which the president of Miami University, David Hodge, declared, “This magnificent initiative will measurably improve the writing skills of virtually every Miami student and assure that every student appreciates that being a strong writer brings many valuable personal and professional benefits” (Giving Tribute, 2006). While we might all recognize some aspect of this declaration as typically presidential, it’s nonetheless important to emphasize the goal of improving—not touching—the skills of “virtually every Miami student” and the presence of two atypical but very public supporters of this writing center—the president of the institution and Roger Howe, a senior executive from the commercial banking corporate world.

CWEs—a term that is not used by all of this class of high-profile, ambitious, comprehensive writing centers, but one that well describes the group—come about because of investment from stakeholders who have not been involved in writing center support before. These investors include graduate and research faculty not typically interested in writing centers; by developing programs, initiatives, and locations that are designed to meet the particular needs of faculty in the disciplines—instruction in poster presentations, support for writing research grants, for example—CWEs gain support from deans and faculty outside of English. Other potential investors are presidents, chancellors, development offices who see in the writing center not a Band-aid for the problem of weak students, but rather a vehicle to advance the institution’s status. Of particular note is the relatively new category in U.S. News and World Reports’ “America’s Best Colleges” that identifies schools that have “stellar” programs in writing in the disciplines (America’s Best Colleges 2008, 2008). Senior administrators also see in CWEs a means to address retention problems through engaging students intellectually (Light, 2001); and, less cynically, a way to promote and support meaningful teaching and learning at a time when research pressures on faculty have arguably decreased faculty attention to individual student learning (Grose, 2007). Finally, with luck and skill on the part of the director and development office, important stakeholders for CWEs can be alumni and other donors from the business community who do not have to be persuaded of the value of writing and for whom impacting the entire campus is immediately attractive. As any university development officer will tell you, gifts come most easily for projects that are perceived as broadly valuable, relevant to the non-academic as well as the academic world, and that have the potential of permanency, like a named building or position. “Writing” fulfills the former quite easily, and “Center” fulfills the latter equally so.

WHY “EXCELLENCE”?

For all of these populations just discussed, the term “excellence” is appealing. Clearly excellence is language imported from the corporate world: an internet search for “excellence” brings up, among others, Excellence, a magazine for Porsche owners, a handful of associations for excellence in manufacturing, and various self-help organizations designed to achieve both vague and specific excellence. Further, “excellence” is just as clearly not the language of humanities professors. For many of us, the first reaction is an eye-roll; “excellence” is vague yet superior, just the kind of corporate-speak that many of us lampoon in our composition classes when we teach advertisement analysis. As English professors, we can readily imagine the parodies possible—earning this or that badge, certificate, or medal of excellence for just about anything not worth studying. Beyond these gut reactions is the association with the use of excellence elsewhere on campus, primarily in areas far from the humanities, in the business and engineering schools and in student support services—all very much outside the culture of English. I want to echo Adler-Kassner (2008), Edocie (2003), Ritter (2006), and Schwalm (2001) in arguing that writing people can and should give up their fear of appearing un-English, un-academic or anti-intellectual in choosing to use the language of the dominant culture (and yes, that is often corporate culture) because often it’s the very language that will allow us to reach much-needed and desired public and student audiences.

Nonetheless, it’s appropriate to take up the most serious critique of excellence, one that I was reminded of by a colleague on WCENTER (Orange, 2008) who, in response to a query I had sent about the CWEs, offered up an extensive quote from the second chapter of Bill Readings’ (1996) book, The University in Ruins. Readings’ central argument is that the modern university is without bearings and purpose, no longer bound toward teaching the national culture as has been the case since the Enlightenment (p. 8). Echoing others (Downing, Hulbert, & Mathieu, 2002; Ohmann, 2003) who argue that public universities have become corporations, Readings sees the terms as emblematic of the current crisis of purpose in higher education. He critiques universities for adopting “techno-bureaucratic notion[s] of excellence” (p. 13), which are purposely and problematically “non-ideological” (p. 14). Most interestingly, Readings (1996) argues that the term excellence “deflects attention from the questions of what quality and pertinence might be, who actually are the judges of a relevant or a good University, and by what authority they become those judges” (p. 32). In some ways, I think Readings is right: excellence does serve as a kind of mask, covering discussion of what good writing might be by asserting that only “excellent” writing is valued.

In fact, that “writing excellence” can mean so many different things for many people, yet at the same time suggest, in its forthright assertion of
supremacy, that there is only one kind of writing valued, that of excellent writing, is what makes it most useful for a writing administrator. Most of us have observed that people outside of the writing disciplines are unfamiliar with the idea of genres, that genres have different criteria for excellence, and that the skilled writer of one genre is frequently unable to easily bridge to the next genre. In other words, while we in writing studies have come to realize the plurality of writing, for the vast public that uses the term, in and outside of academia, there is simply good writing and bad writing. The term “writing excellence” capitalizes on that perception, without doubt. While as Kelly Ritter (2006) notes, “Composition, unlike other disciplines, is perpetually at the mercy of cultural conceptions of literacy” (p. 45), writing administrators, always engaged in public work, must work to use cultural conceptions to the advantage of the students who will benefit from their work. Clearly, for some (Bosquet, 2004; Readings, 1996, among others), working with dominant beliefs and working with those in power who primarily support dominant beliefs, is to get in bed with the devil. However, I believe a diverse group of people who believe strongly in the importance of writing can come together, through a CWE initiative and, once there, have the conversations that will reveal differences in writing values and criteria. It seems to me that it’s important to do more than critique those outside of the academy: we need to engage with them.

Jeanne Simpson (2006) and David Schwalm (2001) have called on writing administrators to accept and use the language of upper-level administrators, an argument that Adler-Kassner (2008) extends on when she asks Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) to join her in working locally and nationally to “think consciously about developing messages” (p. 142) that counter prevailing stories about students and schools’ failures in writing and writing instruction. Adler-Kassner, drawing on political and community organizing principles, asks us to change our language, to drop colons and academic speak, and instead to explain issues with an awareness that many we need to speak to have little or no insider knowledge of higher education and writing instruction. Drawing on the work of these advocates for employing and valuing outsider language, I am arguing that the language of excellence attempts to speak the language of administrators, potential donors, non-humanities faculty, and the general public.

But is there a danger in adopting the language of administrators and corporate America? For Melissa Lanetta, quoted at length from a WCENTER email in The Everyday Writing Center (Geller, Edicote, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007), although necessary at times, “using the terminology of administration changes the message” (p. 118). Principally, for Lanetta, using administrative language can change the message and “obscure what we do well” (p. 118). Much of the richness and complexity of what we and students do well is lost, she suggests, when we adopt others’ language. Going beyond Lanetta’s warning, Geller and her co-writers of The Everyday Writing Center express deep concern about administrative language use, seeing it as co-option (my term). For them, advising writing administrators to provide administrators what they want, as Simpson and Schwalm do, is dangerous and a little immoral, more or less by definition. They write:

We commonly hear the claim in our field, for example, that the most effective tool we have to create necessary and productive relationships with those we report to on the organizational chart is our rhetorical skill. We agree that many writing center directors are skilled rhetoricians, yet we are troubled by the assimilationist idea of this approach in the same ways that we are troubled by the all-too-familiar axiom about our role in bringing student writers to an understanding of or accommodation to the discourse of the academy. (2007, p. 116)

Yet in this book-length text, what exactly is dangerous about using administrative language, or, by extension, corporate language never really becomes clear. It seems that some find using the language of administration “assimilationist” (Geller et al., 2007, p. 116) perhaps because it’s “non-ideological” (Readings, 1996, p. 14), or perhaps using such language is dangerous simply because it’s not the academic language that we have worked so hard to master and in which we have invested our very sense of identity?

Some of what critics of the excellence movement and critics of writing center directors and administrators who work collaboratively with upper administrators are concerned about is valid, however, particularly as articulated by Adler-Kassner (2008). There is a reasonable concern that, in the drive for funding, we may exploit rhetoric and public perceptions about writing and learning that ultimately cement notions of a vast and increasingly illiterate population that needs to be either kept out of school or scared straight or some equivalent. Linda Adler-Kassner (2008), in The Activist WPA, asks that we avoid “justifying[ing] requests for support for student writing by citing what students cannot do” (p. 142) because while this method may lead to short-term gains (funding and support), this strategy

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1I use the term “writing administrator” deliberately as a term that potentially includes writing center director and writing program administrator as others (Lanetta, Bergmann, Fitzgerald, Haviland, Ledbuska, & Wielocki, 2006) have argued. I think today’s writing center directors and writing program administrators have much more in common than they have ever had. Although each has their own specialization, both draw on the same core beliefs and knowledge about writing, both are faculty-administrators, and both are at the threshold of stepping out of narrowly defined programs—traditional first-year writing programs or writing centers—and into broader, more central work in promoting and supporting literacy throughout higher education.
will further the view of a nation of ever-more failing writers. This is an important point that architects of new centers and programs need to negotiate as they work to gain funding and help the public better understand the current state of student writing in higher education. In fact, a CWE can be instrumental in the effort to move beyond the negative rhetoric of Johnny Can’t Write, perpetuated so well through much of our nation’s more celebrated educational acts and texts (e.g., A Nation at Risk, A Test of Leadership, NCLB, etc.). A CWE that invites in individuals from outside the community who hold dominant views of literacy can be transformative simply by celebrating rather than castigating student writing. By using our professorial and academic clout, we can be part of defining writing excellence, and thereby be part of what Adler-Kassner (2008) describes as an effort to create “an overall change in the stories told about writers that circulate” (p. 155) in our universities and in the culture more broadly. Directors of CWEs, and others of the same philosophy, in their willingness to talk about writing outside our circles, as difficult as that can be, are giving up the tradition and ideology that leads many writing administrators to avoid working with others outside their communities, preferring to view the world outside as antagonistic, holding onto what Eodice (2003) calls a “margin/containment trope” that has become “embedded in our lore to such a degree as to become doxa—we pass along these beliefs and their resulting practices to the detriment of future generations of writing center leaders” (p. 117).

**CHALLENGES TO CHANGE**

As I call for writing administrators to join me in considering the possibility of a CWE on their respective campuses, I do so with some sense that writing center history, like history of literacy crises, is not a straight line of progress, and that this movement to redefine and redirect ourselves toward excellence (and against focus on remediation and supporting first-year writing) is less new than promotional materials might suggest.

Boquet (1999), Carino (1996), and Lerner (2001, 2004, 2006), among others, have worked hard to debunk some popular and dangerous, if often immediately self-satisfying, tropes about the history of writing centers and writing center work. One myth, debunked by Lerner in several historical essays, is that in the old days the writing center was all about remediation and working with the “deficient” student-writer, whereas now, with the rise of the independent field of writing study scholarship, we understand the writing center as a progressive institution that seeks to develop the abilities of all writers, as these writers themselves define the goals and skills of writing. In reading excerpts of reports from across several decades, one can’t help but notice that we keep re-announcing ourselves as more than re-medi-"
It is this very history of gratitude without complaint that caused Jeanne Simpson (2006) to advise us that “Nothing is gained with passivity and meekness” (p. 202). I suspect our tendency toward meekness comes from reasoning that if we’re small we won’t be worth cutting. But small operations are routinely cut—when a dean has to cut 3 percent out of her budget, a $15,000 writing center budget removal may solve half of her problem, with few angry individuals with whom to contend. Our contemporary scholarship and practitioner conversation, as one can most quickly observe by participating on the WCENTER list for a few weeks, indicates that many of us have taken Tillman’s approach of trying to survive by presenting ourselves as a very small budget line item. The fear of being cut back, re-categorized, or removed keeps us with our heads down, asking simply to be left alone to do our work with our tutors and students. We go to our own community for comfort, and to share our strategies for stretching budgets, our methods for darting irritating questions from ignorant colleagues, and our last-minute responses to administrators’ questions and demands.

Importantly, this tendency toward accommodation and modesty has been well earned from a long history of marginalization, first within English departments and then within composition studies—“marginalized by the marginalized” (Carino, 2001, p. 7). Writing center administrators themselves feel marginalized and comparatively devalued, along with writing program administrators—despite efforts by the MLA and WPA—because they are still often seen as inferior simply due to the common and seemingly persistent view of administrative work as “service” and something other (lesser) than the intellectual work of teaching and scholarship (Marshall, 2001, p. 75).

Yet still, what is striking about the rhetoric of writing center administrators as opposed to say athletic directors—recall your university newspaper accounts—is how different these leaders are in their talk about the money they need to do the job for which they have been hired, their needs from the institution and the community, and their central and long-lasting value to these institutions. In promoting CWEs, I am actually arguing for a self-image upgrade—stop thinking like a writing center director who is lucky to have anything and start thinking like the athletic director who expects a hell of a lot more.

WHAT IS A CENTER FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE?

My enthusiasm for CWEs comes from my work chairing a taskforce aimed at re-building a small English department writing center that was “accidentally” cut, and from studying the success of writing centers at diverse universities across the United States. The result of this study was a proposal that was accepted by the administration of my New Jersey state university, and which has been significantly enacted. Here is a list of the features that I see in strong writing centers and CWEs that aim to be broad and comprehensive and also play a role in systemic and institutional transformations (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007, p. 117), or, in my language, in transforming the culture of writing at their institutions.

MISSION FOR A CENTER FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE

Transform the Culture: A writing center that is focused on excellence and responding to the needs of the entire student body can change the way all students—remedial, average, honors, graduate—perceive the value of writing and their own abilities to develop as writers. The key for creating universal concern for writing is to transform the culture: students need to believe that writing matters in every discipline and at every level. At a university with a strong culture of writing, students see writing as central to all the work that they do: to understanding anthropological concepts in their general education courses; to making a case for admission to law school; to writing a persuasive proposal in their capstone Marketing course; to presenting original research at a national conference in Audiology. A CWE—an idea as much as a place—is flexible and dynamic, responding to immediate needs and long-term institutional changes, and ultimately central in establishing, maintaining, or elevating the intellectual climate on campus.

Range of Writing Services: A CWE expands on the core work of one-on-one tutoring to a broad range of activities that build upon one another, enabling the CWE to affect every student on campus. It provides:

- One-on-one tutoring in the center
- A strong OWL for
  - One-on-one tutoring
  - Live “chat” for quick questions
  - Documentation and writing guides
- An attractive, interactive, and resource-rich website—for students, faculty, and other constituencies—that links directly from the main institutional site.
- A university common book program. The CWE, with links to first-year writing and the rest of the academic departments, is the ideal sponsor for a common book.
- Public readings of contemporary writers
• Public readings and celebrations of university writers—basic writers open-mic, student-research conferences, first-year writing faculty readings, etc.

• Workshops or non-credit mini courses that focus on
  • writing tasks or skills (e.g., resumes, application personal statements, job letters, thesis/dissertation writing workshops, writing presentations, poster presentations)
  • genres in writing (sciences, social sciences, humanities, business, arts, etc.)
  • writing conventions and mechanics (APA or MLA style, editing and proofreading, tips for ESL writers)

• A mobile writing center—CWE staff can visit classes to provide teaching writing support, thus providing a "centerless" CWE experience for large numbers of students (e.g., presenting, modeling, and supporting peer review; leading and responding to brainstorming sessions; teaching editing skills; modeling and teaching discipline-specific writing conventions).

• Writing fellows—development of a program pairing senior writing consultants with selected disciplinary faculty to support writing-intensive, WAC, or WID initiatives or classes.

• Faculty and writing in the disciplines support services
  • Course design consulting—the director provides one-on-one consultation with WAC faculty who aim to design courses with a writing emphasis.
  • Department consulting—consultation for departments on integrating writing into courses or curricula, responding to and evaluating student writing, developing assessment measures, or designing and sequencing writing and research assignments.
  • Peer feedback for faculty scholarship—small writing faculty writing groups to provide intimate and supportive environments to support faculty toward successful scholarship as well as one-on-one feedback from writing faculty and even outside senior scholars brought to campus primarily to review and respond to junior faculty work.

• Research on writing
  • For the purpose of improving instruction and curricula
  • For assessment of teaching and learning
  • For contribution to the field
  • To support the institution’s efforts toward retention and student engagement
  • To support the broader community
  • For systematic assessment of the center’s work

CENTER FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE STAFF

A CWE is flexible and diverse in its staffing, drawing on a range of traditional and non-traditional personnel to provide its services in and out of the center. These include:

• A faculty director who is able to understand the challenges that faculty and students face, is active in the field, is engaged in the work of teaching or supporting student writing, and is interested in writing and learning across disciplines.

• An associate director to run the day-to-day operations of the CWE.

• An associate director to run the out-of-center operations of the CWE, primarily through writing in the disciplines and/or writing in the community activities.

• An administrative assistant

• A CWE Board chosen for its diversity and representation of diverse stakeholder interests, possibly including local or national representatives.

• Writing consultants
  • Graduate assistants from various disciplines who have taken appropriate coursework in the field and who can model and support best practices for all writing consultants.
  • Non-assistant graduate students
  • Adjunct staff
  • Peer writing consultants who have taken appropriate coursework
  • Undergraduate service learning students drawn from new classes in Education or Writing

• Writing fellows—advanced writing consultants who are given greater independence and responsibility than consultants, often engaged in work outside the CWE.

PLACEMENT AND FUNDING OF THE CENTER FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE

Administrative location. Administrative location of the CWE is crucial to success. While much depends on local context, a CWE is most likely to be successful if it is perceived by users—students most importantly, but also the rest of the campus community and ultimately the larger community it seeks
to serve—as a university center. The CWE director and budget should therefore be independent of an academic or other department, reporting directly to a high-level administrator such as the provost. Further, although clearly there are successful centers that do not follow this approach, given that the CWE needs faculty interest and engagement to be effective in affecting the lives of every student, the CWE should be tied to the academic side of campus. Many faculty will not see a center located in student support services as a place where they can get support for their teaching and writing.

**Physical Location.** My former colleague, Paul Butler, has argued persuasively that a CWE must have a striking, light-infused, centrally located space, configured variably for public readings, private tutoring, technologically driven mini-lessons, with office space for staff and a range of reading, writing and thinking spaces for the many people who visit the center (Issacs, 2006). Crucial to this arrangement is location—ideal locations include the library, the most-used academic building, or a student center.

**Funding.** While some private and well-funded public universities are successful in gathering the large funds necessary for a CWE, funding from existing sources is possible; raising this budget, however, will mean decreasing or eliminating that of some other programs in the institution (Simpson, 2006), something administrators are reasonably hesitant to do. Other sources will be needed to provide additional funds.

- **Student Fees.** Although I have located no references to raising money through fees in any scholarly article, I have identified a dozen universities, mostly public, that support writing centers through some sort of fee—attached to a writing-intensive course, as a semester fee, for non-graduation credit courses. Of these I favor a small, universal, and clearly identified “Center for Writing Excellence” fee. This approach is upfront—students and parents are made aware of the CWE and the CWE is held appropriately accountable.

- **Development Money.** Development money is ideal, and while never a sure thing, attempting to support aspects of the CWE through a donor may be successful. A significant number of "named" writing centers already exist as testament to the real possibilities of raising this money in this way.²

²A partial list of named writing centers includes: Farnham Writing Center (Colby College), Booth Writing Center (Connecticut College), Stone Writing Center (DeMar College), Nesbit-Johnston Writing Center (Hamilton College), Zuckermand Writing Center (L.A. Valley College), Normal H. Orr Memorial Writing Center.

**Grant Money.** Available for particular aspects of a CWE mission—for support of community needs or to seed a new program; for faculty development or teacher education.

**EXEMPLARY CENTERS FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE**

Many centers across the country run programs that exceed expectations, making significant strides in changing the culture of writing at their institutions. Here are highlights of a few such centers.

At Miami University’s Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence website (Miami University), a web reader will see a broad range of services: personal consultations, short classes, online resources—for undergraduate and graduate student writers. Faculty and teaching assistants (TAs) are offered individual assistance, workshops, online resources, and $5,000 grants for faculty projects to improve instruction in writing. Beyond these extensive services are efforts to celebrate, value, and learn from writers. On the day I visited the website, the top of the page read “Miami Students Blog from Ghana,” and readers were invited to read this impressive piece of student writing. As well, the website also announces readings, writing contests, and recent winners of some of these contests. As the current director Paul Anderson (2008) explains, a “constant theme” of the Howe Center’s advertising is the emphasis on serving “even the most accomplished” students.

Notably, Miami’s CWE was originally established to support “faculty and departments wanting to improve and increase the amount of writing provided in their courses” (Anderson, 2008), and it has an extensive faculty-development program of workshops, grants, and other support services. The success of these initiatives is broadcast on the website: Under “News” is an announcement of Miami University’s most recent U.S. News and World Report ranking, and in the linked page, readers learn that Miami received notice as 1 of 28 schools with “stellar programs in ‘Writing Across the Disciplines’” (Miami University). Notably, in its mission statement, Miami’s CWE identifies tutoring students last; the first two of four goals are to work with faculty to develop their abilities in teaching writing, and the third goal is “foster a culture of writing in which students welcome the writing instruction they receive in their courses, seek additional opportunities to write outside of class, and strive continuously to improve their writing

(Marquette), Joyce and Roger Howe Center for Writing Excellence (Miami University), Marian E. Wright Writing Center (University of Michigan-Flint), the Gayle Morris Sweetland Writing Center (University of Michigan), Hume Writing Center (Stanford), and William L. Adams Center for Writing (Texas Christian University).
skills" (Miami University). Miami has a robust staff that includes a tenured faculty director and two tenured assistant directors, three classified staff members, and a slew of tutors of various types; additionally, the director and staff are guided by an advisory committee of faculty, program directors, and at least one dean, and, finally, a "National Advisory Board" composed of Chris Anson, Andrea Lunsford, Martha Townsend, Kathleen Yancey, and Art Young. Not surprisingly, the physical Howe Center is also extremely impressive; located in the library, it boasts a very large, open space, available to students 24 hours a day. As Anderson (2008) explains, "The open space gives us a bigger footprint, a larger physical space, and it enables the library to host us without giving more space than is appropriate." Funded through the endowment and general university funds, the Howe Center budget will likely exceed $2 million by 2010.

Temple University’s Writing Center, directed by Lori Salem, who is the Writing Center Director and Assistant Vice Provost, steps outside of traditional writing center purview in that it is the administrative home for Temple’s writing-intensive course program, which offers 250 w-courses each semester, taught by faculty in the disciplines. As well, Temple’s program has three guiding principles that I find exemplary and that Salem articulates as follows: (1) "to promote a progressive atmosphere . . . in which the value and complexity of writing and teaching writing are valued"; (2) "that services and supports the need to be diversified to meet the needs of different 'niche' groups among students and faculty"; and (3) that services are better and more useful when data about all services are collected and analyzed not only so that these services can be improved, but so that the writing center can "collaborate with central admin on large-scale assessment projects" (Salem, 2008). Following these principles has enabled the Temple Writing Center to support faculty in the writing-intensive (WI) courses deeply and individually, and likewise to go beyond on-one-one tutoring in a generic way to, for example, develop specialized services for dissertators in the forms of writing groups, dissertation seminars, and "dissertation bootcamp." This center’s close to half a million dollar budget comes almost entirely out of the provost’s office. Notably, Lori’s position is not faculty, but administrative, and the center is located in the center of the university in the learning center that also houses the library. This impressive writing center has broad impact, exemplified by a truly stunning as well as comprehensive website (Temple University Writing Center). It has also achieved "relative stability," and I would say excellence, despite several changes in central administration during those years, in large part because Lori Salem, not a faculty rotating director, has been director for twelve years, building an increasingly important center that is in itself an academic program as well as a center for student and faculty services.

The CWE at West Virginia University appears to be separate from the university’s writing center, although both remain in the English depart-
ing-across-the-curriculum initiative and strengthen engagement with writing on all levels and in all disciplines” (Ohio University CWE). To my mind, this de-emphasis of the CWE from traditional and expected writing center work with students, basic or struggling writers in particular, serves to elevate the writing center’s importance and increase its reach; by working with faculty on revising curriculum and pedagogical practices toward writing, this writing center impact is potentially much stronger than if it presented itself as working solely with students.

The CWE at Penn State University, directed by Jon Olsen, home of The Dangling Modifier and recent host of the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, is intriguing as much for its work beyond the institution as within. Although the website’s most immediate links are to the separate undergraduate and graduate writing centers and a substantial WAC program, boasting the support of development of close to 100 additional Writing Intensive (WI) courses, bringing the institutions total number of “WI” courses to well over 300, the CWE has also begun a project entitled “The Public Writing Initiative” (Center for Writing Excellence, 2008). Students in professional writing classes, under the oversight of CWE writing fellows, work with local organizations to create professional quality documents. The website highlights one project “that uses a commissioned writing assignment from the Public Issues Forum (PIF)” “to prepare issue books to guide non-partisan deliberation of local civic issues among community members” (Penn State CWE, 2008). This program, adopted and perhaps adapted from a previously existing Technical Writing initiative, highlights what appears to be Olson’s drive toward creating “public scholarship”—ways for Penn State University students to engage with the public, learning marketplace or life skills, and also contributing meaningfully to communities outside of the university. This approach toward the CWE, like Ohio’s national writing project connection, enables a CWE to be valuable to stakeholders and community members outside of the university.

At the University of Kansas (KU), Terese Thonus, new director of the KU Writing Center, describes a “roost” model that addresses the need to provide broad and comprehensive writing center services by providing writing tutoring services all over campus (Thonus, 2008). At KU, the emphasis is on student services, and each year the Center tutors significantly more students by opening “Writer’s Roosts” in libraries, residence halls, and other student-centered locations according to student request (2007, KU Writing Center Annual Report). Located in Student Services and with a reporting line to a vice provost, this non-faculty director model approach provides a yearly budget of over a quarter of a million dollars and emphasizes student services.

An interesting CWE that is still emerging is Florida Atlantic University’s “University Center for Excellence in Writing” (University

Emergence of Centers for Writing Excellence, 2003–2004), which describes itself as “devoted to the support and promotion of writing for all members of the FAU community.” Additionally, at Montclair State University, where I work, the Center for Writing Excellence is up and running. Just in its second year of operation, central funding has enabled the faculty director to hire the staff needed to be a prominent and important force on campus. Yet to be determined is both its ultimate direction and its ability to actually become a vehicle for positively impacting the intellectual culture on campus, deepening and broadening the experience all students—and other community members—have with the intellectual power of writing.

CONCLUSION

In 1999, Elizabeth Boquet concluded “Our Little Secret” with a call for writing centers and writing center research to go beyond concerns for best ways to tutor, how to use new technologies, and the like. Instead, she asked that we embrace “off-task” possibilities to allow writing centers to go past the scope of what they are intended to do. She writes, “What is most challenging to me about my work in the writing center is the excessive institutional possibilities that the writing center represents. The way in which a writing center exceeds its space, despite the university’s best effort to contain it” (p. 478). A CWE enables writing directors to inspire faculty, students, administrators, and community members to do just this—to be excessive in their influence, to make the best writers better, and to effect all writers on campus. Only a CWE isn’t working despite the administration, it is working deliberately and openly with it. What was once off-task is, for a CWE, most definitely on-task.

REFERENCES


