

Spring 2019

Centering Partnerships: A Case for Writing Centers as Sites of Community Engagement

Amy McCleese Nichols
Berea College, nicholsa@berea.edu

Bronwyn Williams
University of Louisville, bronwyn.williams@louisville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

McCleese Nichols, Amy, and Bronwyn Williams. "Centering Partnerships: A Case for Writing Centers as Sites of Community Engagement." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2019, pp. 88-106. doi:10.25148/clj.13.2.009071.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Centering Partnerships: A Case for Writing Centers as Sites of Community Engagement

Amy McCleese Nichols and Bronwyn T. Williams

Introduction

Six years ago, Brian McAdams walked into the University of Louisville Writing Center and introduced himself to Bronwyn, the director. As the newly appointed academic services coordinator at Family Scholar House, a nonprofit serving single parents pursuing a college education, Brian wanted to introduce himself and discuss ways in which the University Writing Center might be helpful to students attending the University of Louisville. Brian had used the writing center at his alma mater extensively during doctoral work and believed that the services offered by the Writing Center could be an integral part of helping Family Scholar House residents. Bronwyn had an ongoing interest in community work but had only recently taken on the position of director of the University Writing Center and not yet figured out how, given limited resources, to connect it to the community. That meeting marked the start of an evolving university-community collaboration that connected writing center values and approaches to our work with two community organizations and shaped our conceptions of how writing centers can be particularly well-suited to community writing projects.

Conversations about writing programs and community engagement within the field of rhetoric and composition often proceed from an assumption that, while local contexts may vary, the important institutional dynamic to consider is between the “university” as an institution and the community or organization involved. Certainly, such considerations of the institutional presence of the universities in community work are vital. Yet universities are not monolithic institutions. Many might not regard a service-learning course as obviously different from a writing center community project. Yet, as many who work in writing centers have argued (Bouquet; Grimm; McKinney; Rousculp; Bergmann), writing centers, though institutionalized parts of many colleges and universities, often are grounded in values and practices distinctive from other parts of the university: typically freed from the constraints of semesters and involving the possibility of collaborative work both among writing center staff and externally with partners. These projects have demonstrated how writing center values and practices can shape community work in ways that realize possibilities beyond traditional service-learning initiatives (Rousculp; Brizee and Wells; Wells). We argue, however, that the values and approaches involved in writing center work can make them particularly well-suited within universities as sites for community literacy partnerships. Rather than regarding community work as an occasional side project, writing centers offer often unexplored opportunities to be a locus for communi-

ty engagement within the larger college or university. As part of a developing body of knowledge on community-engaged writing centers, we propose that the distinctive institutional and pedagogical positioning of writing centers make writing centers potentially powerful sites through which universities can work with community partners.

In this article, we chart our ongoing efforts in our University Writing Center to develop a partnership model grounded in what we consider to be “writing center values.” A full description of what might constitute writing center values could include in-depth attention to the individual writer and all the varied intersectional contexts with which they might identify: race, class, culture, gender, sexuality, ability, religious background, language, dialects, and more. Combined with an attention to writing processes, a full description of writing center values would require the kind of book-length treatment given elsewhere in writing center scholarship (Denny; Greenfield and Rowan; Rafoth; Babcock and Daniels, to name only a few). For the purposes of describing our community work in this article and affirming the positional affordances of writing centers for this work, we have turned, in particular, to a set of values intimately connected to those mentioned above but applied specifically to the university-community interactions we discuss here. The values we name in this article, then, include privileging long timelines, radically dialogic approaches to learning, sustainable change, attention to perceptions of agency, institutional interaction, ongoing critiques of power structures, and collaborative goal-setting and decision-making. Our point is not just that community engagement is possible through writing centers, but that the distinctive institutional and pedagogical positioning of writing centers within universities make them particularly well suited for ethical and sustainable community work.

As scholars such as Linda Bergmann have noted, the sometimes “marginalized” positionality of writing centers as liminal academic spaces with distinctive approaches to pedagogy and collaboration, “can open up some time and space with which to develop new ways of thinking, learning, and interacting, and can foster engagement with institutions outside the university” (160). Within this context, then, our similar goal has been how to utilize a writing center’s distinctive position within a university to create participatory and long-term community partnerships.

In what follows, we extend the arguments made by previous examples of writing center community engagement, articulating a practical and theoretical framework for structural sustainability and theoretical grounding. Although the focus of this article is on describing an approach and process rather than conventional research design and findings, we will describe throughout the article ways in which knowledge was being co-created for ourselves and our community partners. In our institutional context, then, an understanding of our tactical and strategic resources, a working theory of ethical engagement, and an emphasis on foregrounding dialogue separate from a research or funding agenda has helped us blur our own boundaries between “university” and “community.” In this article, we first discuss the values in our writing center work that inform our community collaborations. We then offer more detailed discussions of how three specific values—privileging long timelines, radically dialogic ap-

proaches to learning and action, and writing center approaches to navigating institutional structures around issues such as funding and assessment, guided our practice.

Writing Centers and Community Writing Projects

The institutional location and pedagogical focus of our University Writing Center, like many writing centers, is marked by several core values. We often tell writers during outreach presentations that we will work with any writer on any piece of writing at any point in the writing process, outlining a broadly inclusive strategy for beginning conversations with writers that respects their agency in the writing process (“University Writing Center Mission Statement”). Like many writing centers, we understand our teaching as distinctive from (and sometimes contrasting with) the pedagogical approaches and possibilities that take place in university courses. For example, our timeline for working with a student is not constrained by the temporal limits of a semester. Instead, a writer can keep coming back to work with us as often as they find it useful over multiple semesters. Also, we can start our work with writers where they are, not where a course imagines they will be. Just as important, our approach to learning is not shaped by a final, graded assessment, but instead focuses on responding effectively to a given rhetorical context and the open-ended learning that such responses can often require. Such qualities are familiar to those who have worked in writing centers.

Other scholars have drawn on elements of these practices in shaping their approaches to community writing projects. Allen Brizee and Jaclyn Wells, in their writing center’s community engagement project, stress the importance of meeting their partners where they are and approaching their work as an ongoing dialogue. They also learned that engaging in genuine, collaborative dialogic participatory processes cannot be rushed, so that they had to adjust and extend the timelines they had envisioned for the project. And Lisa Zimmerelli highlights how an emphasis on reflection connected the work of her writing center with a service-learning project.

In particular, we found Tiffany Rousculp’s theoretical framework of a “rhetoric of respect” useful for connecting writing center values to community writing projects. Building on concepts from ecocomposition with its metaphors of “organism, environment, relationship, place, and the ...concept of the web...”, Rousculp describes development of the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center, a long-term community partnership that she and others built in partnership with writers from the area. Creating this community partnership as a set of multidirectional relationships required a continual conversation about and flexibility toward all these elements (xv). For Rousculp, then, a rhetoric of respect is bounded by one’s ability to recognize another person’s value and worth while simultaneously remaining aware of one’s own strengths and limitations; she defines this rhetoric in opposition to notions of “tolerance or acceptance,” which often imply a sort of embedded disdain for the other (Rousculp, p. 24–25). Instead, “respect needs flexibility and self-awareness. Engaging within a rhetoric of respect draws attention to how we use language in relation with others; how we name and classify, how we collaborate, how we problem-solve...a

rhetoric of respect requires discursive action” (Rousculp, p. 25). We find a rhetoric of respect provides one element of our theoretical foundation for understanding the intellectual and affective work that happens in the interactions in our writing center. When we began to explore our collaborations with the community, we knew that we needed to bring such principles to those relationships.

Our Community Partners – A Description

Within our own writing center context, this theory-informed practice about the co-creation of knowledge has proven beneficial for us and our partners. Bronwyn had a long-standing interest in both community writing and theories of community work—such as participatory action research—that was grounded in his understanding that teaching and fostering writing should not be bounded by classroom walls (Williams, “Seeking”). Instead, as teachers and researchers, it is important to understand that people are writing everywhere, and our work should respond to the ways that writing moves in and out of the classroom. In addition, he was committed to the idea that the university, as a part of the community, needed to do more than simply have “engagement” as a goal, but that there should be an explicit commitment to reciprocal learning and collaborative creation of knowledge. When he became director of the University Writing Center in 2011, the mission and values offered the possibility of exploring the more collaborative and reciprocal community writing project.

When Brian McAdams from Family Scholar House came in to visit during Bronwyn’s second year as director, the timing was perfect. Family Scholar House, a local nonprofit with a mission “to end the cycle of poverty and transform our community by empowering families and youth to succeed in education and achieve life-long self-sufficiency,” supports single parents through housing, academic services, and financial assistance as they pursue higher education (“Family Scholar House”). For the first couple of years, the collaboration consisted primarily of occasional workshops and resource fairs while Bronwyn tried to figure out how to create sustainable community partnerships without any additional funds or staffing. At the same time, Brian and Bronwyn kept talking about how the University Writing Center might support Brian’s vision of more local, and convenient, writing support for Family Scholar House students.

Three years after Brian’s initial visit, Amy applied for one of the University Writing Center assistant director positions reserved for doctoral students. She expressed an interest in attempting to create and sustain a community partnership with a local organization, noting an interest in using the liminal space of the writing center, where personal, academic, and professional writing were already intersecting, as a springboard for community engagement. As a previously trained volunteer coordinator who had worked at a literacy nonprofit in Lexington, Kentucky, Amy came into the position with a set of skills suited to building this kind of partnership. Bronwyn suggested reaching out to Family Scholar House to gauge their interest, and Brian was enthusiastic at the idea of offering more writing support for Family Scholar House scholars.

Cassandra Book also joined the University Writing Center as associate director at the same time as Amy and has also been involved in our community writing efforts.

As the Family Scholar House project developed, we added a second community partnership with the Western Branch Library of the Louisville Free Public Library. The Western Branch Library, built in 1908, was one of the nine original Carnegie libraries of the Louisville Free Public Library. It was the first library in the nation to serve and be fully operated by African Americans. It underwent a substantial renovation about ten years ago and is the home of the African American Archives, featuring resources dedicated to African American history in Louisville (“Western Branch Library”). Bronwyn, aware of the library and its significance to the community, reached out to Branch Manager Natalie Woods about the possibility of working together and received an enthusiastic response. As these partnerships have grown over time, our values have drawn our attention to the need for materially embodied support structures that undergird our particular brand of participatory community writing partnerships and allow us to create a stable, apprenticeship-style model that allows graduate and undergraduate students to more easily engage in that work while maintaining the kind of stable flexibility research suggests is necessary for reciprocal and (when possible) sustainable partnerships.

Creating Stable Internal Support Structures for Sustainable Engagement

As mentioned above, a more open-ended timeline toward learning is recognized as a common value and strength of many writing centers’ pedagogy (Bouquet; Geller et al.; Murphy and Sherwood); students who are so inclined can come back multiple times for more consultations, not only during a single semester, but over their college careers. Writing center tutors and the writers with whom they work can take a longer, more developmental and formative perspective on learning to write. In terms of community projects, writing centers offer similar possibilities. Unlike service-learning courses, which can be limited by a single-semester timeline, and grant-funded projects, which are at the mercy of the yearly funding cycle, our project has been able to focus on year-by-year incremental and sustainable relationship-building. This longer timeline has meant that unique opportunities have arisen for partnership evolution, flexibility (including failure and compromise), and dialogic development of projects.

Early in our community projects, our goals included establishing a system that would create a sense of continuity for our partners, engage undergraduate students in community writing projects, and allow for graduate student assistant directors to get hands-on experience in the relationship-building and established procedures that are crucial to success in a stable, long-term partnership. We realized that all of these goals would take a timeline measured in years. Another exigence for gradual development was that the on-campus University Writing Center schedule was routinely so full that staff could not be spared for community projects. We needed to create internal support structures to train and support a continued flow of volunteers. We recognized that, like many writing centers, turnover of staff and volunteers would create challenges for continuity and that we would need to create systems of recruiting, training,

and recordkeeping that acknowledged the inevitable turnover of both administrative and tutoring positions.

Our first step was repurposing and reorganizing some of the duties held by graduate-level assistant directors at our center (who hold positions for at least one to two academic years) to focus on our community writing projects; this position would create internal support but would also provide low-barrier entry points for graduate participation (Mathis et al. 148). The assistant director would meet regularly with our community partners, collaborate on planning, and reflect on progress as well as coordinate and observe the student tutors at the two sites. Part of creating a sustainable program is also creating institutional memory. Amy kept detailed records of meetings and programs offered and set up a cloud-based partnership coordination manual and records that could both bring new assistant directors up to speed and be continually updated. Subsequent assistant directors coordinating the programs have continued this work. Between record-keeping and setting up in-person training dates for incoming assistant directors, we build some sense of continuity with our partners: introducing new people into the partnership and maintaining the institutional backing of the University Writing Center. Should Bronwyn step down as director, the institutional memory of the partnerships is available for his successor.

Because of this continuing pipeline of stable administrative support from the ground-level, we have been able to allow our partnerships to evolve over time in ways that might be difficult in short-range partnerships. It takes time to get to know people in each organization, but it also takes time to get to know the participants who might become involved in any services or programs offered. For example, Family Scholar House works with some participants who, due to past trauma, may have issues of trust. When Amy began offering in-house hours in 2015-2016, few Family Scholar House students chose to take advantage of the writing center hours, but a relatively steady flow of participants chose to participate by the end of the 2016-2017 year. As new volunteers began to work with the same program, they found that they sometimes had to simply maintain a steady presence for some time before students would use their services. We currently offer tutoring hours each weekday afternoon, and those hours are typically filled, suggesting that this patience has paid off in what participants understand to be “normal” program offerings at Family Scholar House.

We also knew that we wanted to find a way to involve more undergraduate and graduate students in these projects and make sure they felt they were gaining something from the experience. The University Writing Center is institutionally part of the Department of English. We worked with the department to design and approve a course titled “Literacy Tutoring Across Contexts and Cultures” that would be open to upper-level undergraduates and graduate students, offering them the pedagogical training necessary to engage in writing tutoring. As part of the course, students would tutor at the two community sites; after the course, they could, if interested, continue to work with one of our partners through a further one-semester internship, senior culminating project, or volunteering on their own. The first course was taught by Andrea Olinger, one of our English Department colleagues, while Layne Gordon, the Writing Center assistant director who succeeded Amy, was responsible for coor-

dinating students' work with our community partners, observing and supporting the tutors and doing the kind of long-term, reflective work that we believe is the mark of both writing center work and participatory community collaborations. Though it is true that working with a course brings in the risk of the one-semester-and-out problems that sometimes mark service-learning courses, we feel that our ability to provide continuity and build long-term relationships through the Writing Center mitigates this problem in two ways. First, students walk into an ongoing project, often tutoring next to students who had taken the course earlier and are continuing to volunteer. Also, our long-term relationships with these partners allow us to provide context to students about the organizations and our goals. Volunteers come and go just as tutors come and go in writing centers; however, the writing center as an organization with a clear pedagogical philosophy and set of values continues on.

We also believe that, as a writing center, our longer timeline has been beneficial in allowing ourselves, and our community partners, to be flexible and benefit from the input of multiple stakeholders working within our partner organizations. As our volunteers show up regularly, they get to know not only the academic support partners who constitute our primary contacts but also the people who run the front desk, the security manager for the building, and other volunteers. These partners are also able to provide input that results in our services improving over time as we remain flexible. For example, our partnership with Western Branch Library originally began with them offering us a space in their archival area downstairs as one which would be quiet for working with K-12 students on projects. However, in reality, being in the basement meant that volunteers were out of sight and out of the way. As writing center directors know well (McKinney; Rousculp), a visible and welcoming presence is vital in encouraging writers to come in and work on their writing with tutors, so we knew we had to make some adjustments. Thanks to input and encouragement from library staff, volunteers are now located upstairs with a sign that says "Talk to Me About Writing!" - a small but critical practical shift that has resulted in more interaction with writers of all ages.

As conversations have developed, we have been able to build incrementally on the strengths of different volunteers and assistant directors to diversify our offerings while still maintaining the core focus of the programs. The complex give-and-take of regular meetings and check-ins has allowed us to expand our services and meant that we could remain aware of and attuned to opportunities as they emerged. At one meeting with Family Scholar House, Brian mentioned that he wished he could find a way to connect the students and their children through a literacy event. That started a conversation that resulted in Amy's idea to run a series of story-writing workshops in which parents would write favorite family stories with their children and then compile and bind them in small books. It was a success, with 133 parents and children participating over three workshops, raising the profile of the University Writing Center work at Family Scholar House and resulting in more individual meetings with Amy. We also experimented across several semesters with meeting one of Brian's long-term goals: to offer writing help at multiple times during the week on multiple Family Scholar House campuses to expand the likelihood that busy Family

Scholar House residents could take advantage of our consulting hours. We were all concerned that tutors might become discouraged if Family Scholar House students were not able to take advantage of the expanded tutoring availability. When tutors at some of the smaller Family Scholar House campuses had no students showing up to work with them, we restructured the program to refocus more of the resources on the main campus. At our latest meeting with Brian and his staff, we focused on other outreach strategies to get the word out to students on the campuses. As has been noted in several places in the literature on community literacy, moments of disjunction and compromise within the partnership have taught us just as much as successes (Rosenberg) and have allowed us to work to institutionalize a dialogic practice focused on real conversations that move both programs forward.

Ultimately, this focus on making semi-permanent structural shifts to our program has allowed us to institutionalize in ways that have proven helpful to us and our partners. As Katrin Girgensohn points out, a stable institutional presence for writing centers requires a combination of sustaining relationships and building processes. For our University Writing Center, the ability to plan a long-range partnership that does not depend on the personality of a single contact or professor has been helpful. In addition, as we will discuss below, the longer timeline lets us think about assessment, and what constitutes success both for us and for our partners, in ways that emphasize cumulative, sustainable—and patient—progress.

Response, Action, Reflection – Work First, Research Later

Writing center work is rooted in the assumption that consultations have to meet writers where they are. The dialogic model of writing center pedagogy is in part intended to find out what the writers know, ranging from how they read the assignment prompt to rhetorical knowledge to understanding about their writing processes. Effective individualized teaching has to grow from, and respond to, a knowledge of an individual's knowledge and needs. As Murphy and Sherwood note, an effective writing center session offers a writer, "the opportunity to practice collaborative problem solving with an experienced writer who has the student's best interest in mind" (19). Such an approach contrasts with the exigencies of most classrooms where class size works against individualized teaching, and assumptions must be made about what students should know when they walk in the door. Our University Writing Center is fairly typical in that we ask students, when they make appointments, to tell us their primary concerns about their writing project and then, during a consultation, we ground our teaching in finding out what the writer knows or has experience with and then try to build on that knowledge through collaborative conversation. We also believe it is important to regard working with a writer as a situation where there is a reciprocal orientation to learning from both tutor and student. In this way, we connect to Haswell and Haswell's conception of "hospitality" as a pedagogical disposition that "welcomes and makes room for new ideas coming from any direction, including students, and undercuts the fatal expectation that knowledge transfer is a one-way street" (8). Perceiving students as people from whom we may learn, and the writing

consultations as an encounter in which “both teacher and student will be altered by their meeting,” (8), changes how we respond to their ideas and writing and helps students develop a more robust sense of motivation and agency (Williams, *Literacy*).

In a similar way, our approach to community work emphasized first finding out the concerns and knowledge of community members in the assumption that community members understand their own needs and conditions. Collaboration and organizing, in such an approach, is not an expert-driven practice, but instead approaches the partnership as one in which it was essential that our community partners felt a sense of ownership and agency over the project, goals, and processes” (Brydon-Miller et al.436). As with writing center appointments, the goal is to find out what people know and begin from there. In our work, both in the writing center and the community, concepts such as hospitality and reciprocity are both action and disposition. We enter in to our university-community partnerships with a willingness and assumption that we will learn as much as they will learn.

Toward that end, we did not immediately come into our partnerships with a research project in mind; rather, we had discussions framed around what kinds of direct interventions might be mutually useful and beneficial given their needs and our specialties without foregrounding any kind of research agenda. We did our best to make clear to our community partners that “your agenda is our agenda.” Finding out the nature of such an agenda takes more than a few meetings, and in this way the need to find out where people are necessarily overlaps with the longer timeline discussed above and with materially embedded practices over time. With both Family Scholar House and the Western Branch Library we met a number of times to find out more about each other, how we were organized, what we valued, and what limitations we faced in implementation. Like Rousculp, we tried to keep in mind, and communicate to others, an understanding that we were building relationships and that those relationships would evolve and shift. What’s more, our mutual relationships would be shaped not only by our collaborations, but also the network of other relationships involved for each organization. We wanted to understand each other’s organizational goals and challenges, as well as the goals for both sides of the partnership. For Family Scholar House, Brian and his staff saw the need for tutoring services on their various campuses, so that students with families and busy schedules could have consultations in a place both convenient and familiar without having to make their way to the university campuses where many discussed feeling intimidated and uncertain. In our first year, this developed from a topical “writing workshop” set up to a more open and collaborative lab setting where Amy was simply present to answer questions, help read assignments, and provide services as asked for by participants – letting individual students drive the agenda completely was more effective for time-stressed parents who wanted immediate and specific feedback on current writing projects. For the Western Branch Library, staff requested having trained writing tutors available after school for the K-12 students who were often hanging out in the Library and asking for homework help from short-staffed and overworked librarians.

Writing center work also emphasizes the importance of continuing the dialogue, and rethinking assumptions and approaches as part of the process. In a writing center

consultation, we often have to adapt to new information, reframe what we know, and check frequently that the writer's concerns are being met. Interactions with community partners are no different. We've continued to meet regularly with our community partners to review, brainstorm, and rethink how we are approaching our projects. Such continuity has allowed us to take the time to listen to partners' long-term needs rather than focusing solely on semester-long investments centered in courses. At the Western Branch Library, for example, when the school year ended, Natalie mentioned that, over the summer, there would be many young people in the Library each day, but that she did not think they would be interested in individual tutoring services. We brainstormed about what kinds of literacy activities the students might find engaging and fun. It was a collaborative conversation in which we listened closely to what Western Branch Library knew about her organization and the young people who use it. We eventually came up with the idea of a series of comic-writing workshops connected to the Library's summer reading program, which, over the course of the summer, drew more than 50 participants.

On the other side, as we noted above, we continue to make adjustments about how we are working with Family Scholar House, including a return to a combination of workshops and individualized tutoring. At the Western Branch Library, we have expanded our work to include adult writers and moved the hours into the evening, when families said it would be more convenient for them. Meanwhile, at the University Writing Center, we encourage the tutors to reflect both on their experiences as well as their impressions of the project. We routinely ask Family Scholar House students for their feedback as well.

In our community writing partnerships, this cycle of dialogue, events, and reflection is part of our ongoing creation of knowledge – the research findings, if you will – that can be the focus of a writing center community partnership. Creating a collaborative cycle of education, action, and reflection is just one of a number of practices and approaches that we have drawn from participatory action research in our efforts to engage in sustainable and ethical community work (Brydon-Miller et al.; Stevens et al.; Williams and Brydon-Miller). Writing center values that emphasize dialogic approaches to learning, sustainable structures and long timelines, and collaborative reflection and assessment have important and productive resonances with core values in PAR theory and practice. Although some community writing scholarship has drawn from PAR (Licona and Gonzales; Dix; Grabill; Hurtig), it has been used rarely in writing center work on campus (Ozias and Godbee). Too often, in writing center studies as well as rhetoric and composition in general, PAR is absent in discussions and approaches to community work. Yet we find that PAR approaches to strategies such as listening and reflection with community partners, for example, do not replicate writing center practices but rather harmonize with them. Although we do not have space in this article to explore these important alignments in detail, we believe that PAR also offers writing centers a context for emphasizing that research need not always be top-down and positivist. At the same time, writing centers offer community researchers using PAR an institutional setting that already understands knowledge as something that is co-created and grounded in participant experience and involve-

ment. We have found that this alignment of values and approaches has provided us with a rich combination of resources through which to approach our collaborations and urge scholars in both fields to explore these powerful complementary, yet distinctive, theories and practices.

As we noted above, any community project takes time—and patience. In Bronwyn’s words, often this requires simply “showing up.” Showing up in our context has meant keeping a sense of flexibility when setting up programs and plans. While we have put time and effort into making sure our work is meeting a need articulated by our partners, we also save room for the moments when no one shows up, and then we show up the week afterward. And when no one shows up, we encourage the tutors to use the opportunity to learn more about the place and people, whether that is by talking with staff or by simply reading bulletin boards. At the Western Branch Library, when the consultants aren’t working with students, they chat with them, building relationships and learning about the community and the people in it. By building our relationships and a sense of trust gradually, we have found ourselves more able to have conversations when offerings need to change for the mutual benefit of both organizations.

Navigating Institutional Interactions and Assessment

Like many writing centers, we realize that our institutional position is simultaneously sound and always potentially precarious. We never know when staffing, administrative support, or funding may change. So, like many writing centers, we must think strategically, and often, about our position within a larger institution. We are not alone in seeing our operating budgets shrink (Scott and Welch; Essid; Mullin et al.), forcing us to think about how programs can be initiated and sustained with limited material resources—a reality we often share with community non-profit organizations. At the same time that budgets get smaller, many of us face demands for quantitative assessments that are increasingly driven by corporate, positivist structures of knowledge creation (Scott; Schell; Perdue and Driscoll). Like other writing programs, then, we have worked to find ways to respond to such institutional demands, while at the same not losing sight of values and goals that cannot be reduced to numbers. Writing center directors have long experience with traversing such waters (Bouquet; Grimm; Geller et al.; McKinney) while keeping a focus on forms of reflection and assessment that privilege a sustainable and dialogic approach to learning. It is these values and theories of learning that not only play a crucial role in our work on campus but that also shape our collaborations with community partners.

Universities like quantifiable assessment. Whether through course grades and cumulative grade-point averages or the numbers they stockpile for everything from internal reports to accrediting agencies, universities are structured to recognize success most clearly when it is accompanied by numbers. Grades are one of the oldest and most ideologically entrenched standardized assessment mechanisms in education, even in the face of research that indicates that grades are actually detrimental to motivation and student learning (Blum; Klapp; Williams, *Literacy*). One pervasive and

powerful strength of writing center pedagogy is the fact that we don't grade the writing of the students with whom we work. Rather than worry about how we are going to grade the work, we can focus on making the writing as strong as possible (though students and consultants are often aware of the specter of grades from instructors that hang over consultations). Writers visiting writing centers often talk explicitly, and gratefully, about the positive effects, and pleasure, of being able to learn without the threat of a grade (Bergman; McKinney; Murphy and Sherwood). Although our University Writing Center does keep track of numbers of visitors and sends writers an exit survey about their experiences—we are acutely aware that we are part of an institution with a bias toward quantitative measures of success—we do not regard those numbers as the definitive measure of the work we do. Effective writing and perceptions of authorial agency are difficult to represent in numbers without reducing them to simplistic concepts that cease being useful. We are piloting different approaches to writing center assessment that focus more on concepts and perceptions than solely quantitative measures (Bromley et al.). More to the point, at the University Writing Center we understand that successful learning of rhetorical concepts and writing processes can be idiosyncratic to individuals. The process of learning and being able to use a new concept in an individual context can be a recursive process that takes time and patience.

In the same way that the university privileges grades and numbers to assess and measure student learning in courses, university administrations often default to quantitative measures to assess community research. Our university is a case in point. While our university's Office of Community Engagement states that the point of assessment is to allow "academic and administrative units to explore University of Louisville partnership activities through a range of categories, and to share reports about the work we do with the community" (Vice President for Community Engagement), the actual assessment database created by the office focuses overwhelmingly on quantitative measures. Of the 38 categories on the office's online reporting system, 35 are quantitative (hours, numbers of students, grant funds, project dates, etc.). The purpose driving this data is also made clear on the website, that it will be "used for reporting and assessment processes related to the President's 2020 Plan Scorecard, the SACS Institutional Accreditation process, and for affirmation as Carnegie Foundation Community Engagement University" (Vice President for Community Engagement). An ideology that progress must be able to be represented in numbers can create its own self-perpetuating logic. The university administration only recognizes quantitative numbers as legitimate measures of assessment, so primarily asks for numbers on its database, and then focuses on numbers, such as grant funds distributed and "instances" of student engagement, in reports and on infographics it distributes to the university and the community. When the university privileges such measures of success, it can shape the logic and emphasis of community projects and how decisions are made. If, for example, funding can be renewed or pulled simply by a set of numbers that are assessed every semester, it could make one more hesitant to experiment and fail, to start with one idea and see it evolve through a participatory process into

another. Decisions can't help but be influenced by having the university-sanctioned numbers always lurking in the back of your head.

Writing program administrators of all kinds are acutely aware of the tensions of responding to institutional demands for quantifiable numbers, while not losing our focus on creating strategies for more effective writing and enhanced student perceptions of agency (Bouquet; Scott). Part of this effort involves designing kinds of assessments that more accurately reflect our goals and values (Bromley et al.; Schendel and Macauley). Part of this effort may involve providing some numbers – numbers and visits and exit survey results – but pushing back against other requests that ask for numbers we do not consider relevant or accurate. What we also do, in our writing center, is make an ongoing case for other ways of understanding knowledge making. We provide narratives, case studies, testimonials, and other forms of response, and emphasize why we find such information relevant. Of course, some administrators may dismiss non-quantitative assessment. Yet for each administrator only interested in numbers, another will often listen to the narratives and focus groups. We can continue to push for different practices and values, even from a position on the margins (Williams, "Writing Centers").

In community work, as in writing center consultations, the process of learning and progress is often recursive. As we have noted above, time, patience, and flexibility are crucial to both experiences. It is harder to be flexible and sustainable if every experience or tutorial must be reduced to a number. If, for example, a consultant spends two hours with the one Family Scholar House writer who shows up, and their conversation covers a range of subjects, from writing to time management to feeling comfortable on campus, we see that as a successful day, not a disappointment because it was fewer writers than we usually see over such a timeframe. We do keep track of consultant hours and numbers of visits, for our own uses and for the Office of Community Engagement database. But we never assume that they justify the whole program. Our approach to working with our community partners is a more holistic approach shaped by writing center values. Working with one person is a success. Working with twenty is a success. If someone doesn't show up for a week, we don't panic. If, at the Western Branch Library, we decide that our consultants could have more of an impact in planning reading programming with the librarians, we will shift our focus to doing that. In the same way that in the Writing Center, we don't have to produce a text by a student to be graded at end of semester, we want to think about reflecting on success with our community partners in terms of values of participation, change, identity work, agency, and transfer of concepts, all of which are difficult to quantify unless we create reductive rubrics. Even as we fulfill the institutional requirements to provide quantifiable data, we work not to lose sight of our goals to come up with a variety of assessments that answer the questions we and our community partners want to know, not the university number crunchers. Rather than "share" results with the community, we want to draw on approaches, including those from participatory action research, to collaboratively create assessments that serve the interests of everyone involved.

Our assessments can also evolve in dialogue with partners in ways a rigid, university-wide structure cannot. Within the university, more and more assessments from learning goals to the use of space to pay levels draw on corporate, neo-liberal structures and ideologies as to what creates value. We are trying to resist such logics by creating an enclave of a different practice where we can be more “radically dialogic.” Of course, there is no doubt we are still part of the institution and, as Feigenbaum notes, we cannot completely “ignore the institutional constraints that both enable and disable [our] pedagogic, civic, and research goals, even when those goals conflict with those of the institution” (52). Yet, as in our writing center work, we explicitly focus our primarily efforts of assessment in more holistic, collaborative efforts with our partners and make this focus an integral part of how we talk about our community partnerships.

The other challenge for creating sustainable community work is funding. Here again, the organization of the University Writing Center provides both opportunity and challenge. At our university, the University Writing Center is a well-established part of the institution with a tenured faculty member as director. Though funding and staffing levels may rise and fall, by working through the structure of the University Writing Center there is the possibility of having a long-standing, stable organization that can work in the long term with community partners. At the same time that writing centers are often stable institutionally, they are also often scrambling for funds and staffing. Our inability to spare our regular Writing Center staff for our community projects meant taking the time to devise our plan for integrating a system of undergraduate tutoring and internships. On the other hand, finding ways to create a community writing program without new money is also liberating in that we could afford to take a long view toward success and not panic at every setback along the way. Still, as every writing program administrator knows, funding is always vulnerable, and administrative and faculty allies can be replaced with people far less supportive of our program and our values. There is a strength to becoming an “institutionalized” part of an organization, but we never have the luxury of taking such positions and relationships for granted (Girgensohn).

We recognize the need to work within the institutional structures of the university. What’s more, we recognize that, in some institutions, central offices devoted to community engagement can play powerful, positive, and even leadership roles in creating participatory models of community engagement with holistic, collaborative assessments. Of course, quantitative measurements can be an excellent way to measure the success of some kinds of community engagement. What we would argue for, regardless of the nature of the larger institutional structures of a particular university, is the importance of writing centers to articulate and ground their work in the kinds of values we have discussed here. In our context, this has meant that, while we do communicate with the central office and provide them with the numbers they require, we remain strategic and thoughtful in our negotiations so we can maintain common-sense control of an approach that we feel works collaboratively with the community. In many ways, this is similar to the positions that writing centers often find themselves in regard to writing in the university. Writers may bring in assignments

from other courses or stories of writing pedagogy that make us cringe, but we work with what we're given. We then, perhaps, reach out to instructors' departments to offer alternative pedagogical approaches, in hopes that, bit by bit, we change the culture of writing on campus by creating an enclave of different practices (Williams, "Writing"). Writing centers excel at not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good, both in terms of pedagogy and assessment. In the same way, we advocate talking within the university about the connections between writing center and PAR values as a way of providing an alternative model for community engagement that might, eventually, allow increasing room for measuring project success in more holistic ways.

Conclusion

Community organizations rarely work on the semester system. Sometimes community writing projects run aground on issues of sustainability, timing, and school-centered assumptions about issues such as needing a project to enable students to produce graded work. University partners cannot assume that the demands of our timelines are workable and convenient for everyone involved. What's more, for community organizations, universities are just one of a myriad of interests with which they must work and negotiate, just as any university program such as a writing center must navigate through a complex network of rules, offices, and relationships. As universities continue to seek opportunities to collaborate with community organizations, it is critical that we continue to develop multiple avenues for engagement that offer adequate support for the affective and relational aspects of such partnerships. To collaborate successfully with a range of community organizations, we need to explore new conceptions of how we work and what values shape that work. We found that writing center values and practices provided us with a framework that emphasizes working on a longer timeline than a semester, taking more radically dialogic approaches to building relationships, and developing assessments that can produce thoughtful and productive information for everyone, rather than simply grades and numbers.

We also believe such an approach means we must attend to the detailed questions of the work rather than deeming them beneath our notice; to ignore such details is often to doom the possibility of vibrant, long-term, and flexible relationships. How will we train volunteers (in a timely manner) to work respectfully with a variety of populations? How do we create structures and processes that continue to offer engaging opportunities for ever-changing cohorts of students, and productive partnerships with community members? In what ways will we hold ourselves accountable to continued conversation with partners? How will we assess our partnerships in ways that let others see our progress but resist the temptation to pretend that numbers served equates to success? And, finally, how might we keep records adequately so that new leaders can sustain and develop efforts in the future?

We understand that writing centers are only one model for framing community work and that there is no single answer, no single way to engage with the community. Even so, we believe that many writing centers have the benefit of providing an exist-

ing, well-established part of most colleges and universities and could be a fertile space for creating collaborative and sustainable projects. The University Writing Center, for us, has been a liminal site that has allowed us to explore a different pace for community partnership, and we hope our experiences will prove useful in this continuing conversation. Indeed, a plurality of perspectives will be necessary for continuing to develop a robust conversation around community literacy for writing centers and in general, as Eli Goldblatt notes in a recent article: "...differences need not lead to feuds and jealousies. In the coming years, we'll have to develop rich internal dialogues among our factions and caucuses so that we nourish intellectually and emotionally sustaining relationships within the diversity for which we strive" (Cella et al. 44-45). It is essential, then that we engage in dialogue with others in our schools interested in community work, as well as with other writing centers in other institutions, so that we can explore and reflect on myriad approaches.

Our local partnerships will always be developing. In addition to the kinds of conversations we describe above, we are continuing to discuss what it would look like to conduct research with our partners, focusing on questions of importance to them. Engaging in such research also means taking a more participatory and collaborative approach to research ethics that involves, and respects, the values and needs of community partners (Stevens et al.). Ultimately, we look forward to continued development of theories and practices of community engagement that emphasize and leverage the relational aspects of writing center rhetoric and values. Being able to work on a long-scale timeline, start from where our partners are, and focus on assessments of progress that are mutually agreed upon rather than institutionally imposed offers us the opportunity to enact an ethos of hospitality and build collaborative programs that work toward sustainable change.

Works Cited

- Babcock, Rebecca Day, and Sharifa Daniels. *Writing Centers and Disability*. Fountainhead Press X Series for Professional Development, edited by Allison D. Hitt and Trixie G Smith, Fountainhead Press, 2017.
- Bergman, Linda S. "The Writing Center as a Site of Engagement." In *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement* Eds. Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2010 160-176.
- Blum, Susan D. *"I Love Learning; I Hate School": An Anthropology of College*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2016
- Boquet, Elizabeth. *Noise from the Writing Center*. Utah State University Press, 2002.
- Brizee, Allen and Jaelyn M. Wells. *Partners in Literacy: A Writing Center Model for Civic Engagement*. London: Rowman & Littlefield. 2016.
- Bromley, Pam, Northway, Kara, Schonberg, Eliana. "Transfer and Dispositions in Writing Centers: A Cross-Institutional Mixed-Methods Study." *Across the Disciplines*, 13.1. (2016) Web. 15 October 2017.
- Brydon-Miller, Mary, et al. "Lighting a Spark, Seeing the Light: Educational Action Research as Transformative Practice. *BERA/SAGE Handbook of Educational Action Research*. Eds. D. Wyse, et al. London: SAGE Publications. 2017. 435-451.

- Cella, Laurie, et al. "The Powerful Potential of Relationships and Community Writing." *Community Literacy Journal*. 11.1 (2016): 41-53.
- Denny, Harry C. *Facing the Center: Towards an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*. All USU Press Publications, 2010, http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress_pubs/168.
- Dix, Stephanie. "Teaching Writing: A Multilayered Participatory Scaffolding Practice." *Literacy*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2016, pp. 23-31.
- Essid, Joe. "Working for the Clampdown? Being Crafty at Managed Universities." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 30, no. 2, 2005, pp. 1-5.
- Family Scholar House. *Family Scholar House*. Web. 20 November 2017.
- Feigenbaum, Paul. "Tactics and Strategies of Relationship-Based Practice: Reassessing the Institutionalization of Community Literacy." *Community Literacy Journal*, 5.2 (2011): 47-66.
- Geller, Anne Ellen, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Bouquet. *The Everyday Writing Center : A Community of Practice*. Utah State University Press, 2007.
- Girgensohn, Katrin. "Institutionalizing Academic Writing Now: From Margins to Center." *European Association for the Teaching of Writing*, June 2017. Unpublished conference paper. Royal Holloway University, London. 2017.
- Grabill, Jeffrey T. *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action*. Hampton Press, 2007
- Greenfield, Laura, and Karen Rowan. *Writing Centers and the New Racism : A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*. Utah State University Press, 2011
- Grimm, Nancy. *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton Cook. 1999.
- Haswell, Richard, and Janice Haswell. *Hospitality and Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession*. Utah State UP, 2015.
- Hurtig, Janise. "Community Writing, Participatory Research, and an Anthropological Sensibility." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 39.1 (2008): 92-106.
- Klapp, Alli. "Does Grading Affect Educational Attainment? A Longitudinal Study. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy, & Practice*. 22.3 (2014): 31-22.
- Licona, Adela C., and J.Sarah Gonzales. "Education/Connection/Action: Community Literacies and Shared Knowledges As Creative Productions for Social Justice." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2013, pp. 9-20.
- Louisville Free Public Library. *Western Library*. Louisville Free Public Library. Web. 9 January 2018.
- Mathis, Keri E., et al. "Building Infrastructures for Community Engagement at the University of Louisville : Graduate Models for Cultivating Stewardship Building Infrastructures for Community Engagement at the University of Louisville : Graduate Models for Cultivating Stewardship." *Community Literacy Journal*, 11.1 (2017): 146-56.
- McKinney, Jackie Grutsch. *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP. 2013

- Mullin, Joan, et al. "Administrative (Chaos) Theory: The Politics and Practices of Writing Center Location." *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*: 225-35.
- Murphy, Christina and Steve Sherwood. *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*. 4th Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 2011.
- Perdue, Sherry Wynn, and Dana Lynn Driscoll. "Context Matters: Centering Writing Center Administrators' Institutional Status and Scholarly Identity." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2017, pp. 185-214.
- Rafoth, Ben. *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*. Utah State University Press, 2015.
- Rosenberg, Lauren. "Navigating Difficulty in Classroom-Community Outreach Projects." *Community Literacy Journal* 11.2 (2017): 65-73.
- Rousculp, Tiffany. *A Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center*. Urbana, IL: NCTE. 2014.
- Schell, Eileen, E. "Austerity, Contingency, and Administrative Bloat: Writing Programs and Universities in an Age of Feast and Famine." Welch, Nancy, and Tony Scott, editors. *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. Utah State University Press, 2016.
- Schendel, Ellen, and William J Macauley. *Building Writing Center Assessments That Matter*. Utah State University Press, 2012.
- Scott, Tony. "Subverting Crisis in the Political Economy of Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 68.1 (2016): 10-37.
- Stevens, Douglas, Brydon-Miller, Mary, & Miriam Raider-Roth. "Structured Ethical Reflection in Practitioner Inquiry: Theory, Pedagogy, and Practice." *The Educational Forum*, 80.1 (2016): 430-443.
- Vice President for Community Engagement. *Vice President for Community Engagement*. University of Louisville. Web. 9 January 2018
- Welch, Nancy, and Tony Scott, editors. *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. Utah State University Press, 2016.
- Wells, Jaclyn. Investigating Adult Literacy Programs through Community Engagement Research: A Case Study 8.2 (2014)
- Williams, Bronwyn T. "Seeking New Worlds: The Study of Writing Beyond our Classrooms" *College Composition and Communication*. 62.1 September 2010. 127-146.
- . "Writing Centers, Enclaves, and Creating Spaces of Pedagogical and Political Change within Universities." *European Association for the Teaching of Writing*, June 2017. Unpublished conference paper. Royal Holloway University, London. 2017.
- . *Literacy Practices and Perceptions of Agency: Composing Identities*. London: Routledge Press. 2018.
- Williams, Bronwyn T. and Mary Brydon-Miller. "Changing Directions: Participatory Research, Agency, and Representation" *Ethnography Unbound: From Theory Shock to Critical Praxis*. Sidney Dobrin and Stephen Brown, Eds. Albany, NY: State U of New York Press. 2004. 241-257.
- Zimmerelli, Lisa. "A Place to Begin: Service-Learning Tutor Education and Writing Center Social Justice" *Writing Center Journal*. 35:1 (2015): 57-84.

Author Bios

Amy McCleese Nichols is the Director of Writing Resources at Berea College's Center for Teaching and Learning and a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisville. In addition to intersections of community engagement and college writing programs, her current research focuses on network mapping for better understanding of rural literacy sponsorship.

Bronwyn T. Williams is a professor of English and director of the University Writing Center at the University of Louisville. He writes and teaches on issues of literacy, identity, digital media, and community engagement. His most recent book is *Literacy Practices and Perceptions of Agency: Composing Identities*. Previous books include *New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders*; *Shimmering Literacies: Popular Culture and Reading and Writing Online*; and *Identity Papers: Literacy and Power in Higher Education*.