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Why Can’t We All Just Get Along: The Case for Satellite Writing Centers in Academic Libraries

At most colleges and universities, undergraduates who tend to be heavy users of basic library reference and instructional services—international students, academically unprepared students, and students with poor study skills—are often also the ones most in need of support from college and university writing centers. There are obvious advantages to these students for the writing center to be located within the library itself; there are also less obvious benefits, both to writing center administrators and staff and to librarians, when the two facilities are located within the same building.

While writing-center professionals who are members of the Wcenter listserv suggest that the placement of writing centers within academic libraries has become something of a trend, it is not clear whether there are more writing centers or satellite writing centers in libraries than there were ten years ago (Quast). A study of 357 library building and renovation projects between 1995 and 2002 shows practically no change between the percentage (6.9 percent before the new building or renovation and 6.8 afterward—about 24 out of 357) of in-library writing centers before and after the study (Shill and Tonner 458).

Libraries with a library-center presence fall into two categories: those like the University of Kentucky, where the library is the main location for the writing center; and those like Eastern Oregon University, which houses a satellite center with limited hours. Either way, the benefits of bringing the writing center and the library together can be great from a marketing standpoint. Hannelore Rader, dean and university librarian at the University of Louisville, reminds us that
academic libraries, particularly research libraries, do need to become more involved in the teaching, research and enterprise activities of their universities if they want to remain viable and competitive in this new information environment. Outreach activities to faculty, technology, students, and others are necessary now as never before if libraries want to remain a major part in the educational enterprise and continue to be funded (Rader).

Mary Lee Sweat, dean of libraries at Loyola University in New Orleans, observes:

The basic idea [is] … one-stop shopping. … If you want students to use your library … you want to offer them everything they need. You don't want to have to send them to other places on campus (qtd. In Albanese).

Brian Coutts, dean of libraries at Western Kentucky University, agrees that a primary reason why it is a good idea for the library to develop partnerships with other campus systems is to attract students to venues perceived as underused. WKU’s library, for example, has teamed with the campus food service to provide an on-site café, with the student government to bring in entertainment, and with the Art Guild and counseling center as well as with the writing center (Albanese).

Libraries have been around since at least the third century B.C.E.; the writing center dates only from the 1970s (Avinger et al.). Many centers started with the recognition by faculty, especially within the humanities, that many students needed assistance with writing related both to their coursework and in pursuit of other personal and professional goals. The experience of Washtenaw Community College, in Michigan, is typical.

The English/Writing Department at Washtenaw began by dedicating a small room to a walk-in Writing Center. The department hired a director at a technician's level, recruited
student volunteers, took a table and chairs from several classrooms, and put a sign on the door. With advertising and referrals from instructors, students began to trickle into the center. They liked the kind of help they received, but the department soon began to see that students came in only once or twice, usually at midterm and during finals when they had papers due or when their grades were in jeopardy (Avinger et al).

Since the 1980s, writing centers, like libraries, have responded to the development of computer-related technology and increased competition from bookstores and other commercial venues by becoming increasingly sensitive to the perceived needs of their customers, which often means that they try to be available where and when the clients need them. The Web site of the writing center at the University of Central Florida, for example, provides a Webcam so students can see just how busy the center is at any given moment, and whether there is likely to be a tutor available if they go in (“University Writing Center”).

On-site writing centers even face competition from their own and other schools’ online writing-assistance sites or listservs, such as the University of Missouri’s Writery, which is open even to writers unaffiliated with that university. Many writing centers now offer students the convenience of emailing drafts to their tutors or engaging in online discussion with other students about their writing (Leander). Just as library patrons increasingly choose to access many library resources from home, writing-center patrons have become increasingly reluctant to travel to find writing assistance. And if they do have to go out, students would prefer to do all their homework at a single location.

Of course, writing centers must do more than bring warm student bodies into libraries. “Adding a first class coffee bar in the main library, lending laptops to students, extending library hours” can accomplish that goal (Rader 4). In fact, writing centers within libraries meet real
student educational needs. For example, writing centers tend to be connected with their institutions’ English or composition departments, and being located within a central building like the library will help the center reach more students outside the humanities (Cummins).

Additionally, the missions of academic libraries and writing centers are often similar. Suggestions made by Janice Chernekoff, former director of the writing center at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, to writing-center professionals interested in increasing the number of students who use their services are identical to suggestions a librarian would make for forming partnerships with faculty members to promote library use:

I actually invited faculty from my own and other departments to come and speak with the tutors about some of their more difficult writing assignments. We listened and asked questions, clearly demonstrating our interest in an intention of helping their students in appropriate ways. We spoke with only six or seven professors last year, but the impact of this strategy was far-reaching as they spread the word to other people that these tutors were serious about their work (Chernekoff).

Writing-center professionals and librarians are also in a position to see an aspect of the undergraduate research process that their professors do not. Celia Rabinowitz, director of library and media services at St. Mary’s College in Maryland, notes that both librarians and writing-center professionals agree

students generally do not tell faculty that they are afraid of the library for fear of seeming incompetent, and that they are often reluctant to ask faculty for clarification when assignments are unclear. Many librarians might argue that not much has changed in the past 10 or 12 years (Rabinowitz).
It is likely as well that both the professional staff who supervise college and university writing centers and the undergraduate and graduate student tutors who do most of the work would agree.

Another similarity between the ethos of librarians and writing center staff is that neither group believes it receives the respect it deserves. Francis E. Nussbaum, who is clearly a bit contemptuous of the librarian’s role, writes in an instructional article in *American Biology Teacher* that professors planning to take their students to the library should

[alert the library staff to your scheduled visit so staff members may be introduced, but do not let the librarian conduct the tour. Librarians are competent, service-oriented, well-meaning people, but they do not understand the specific requirements of your assignment (qtd. In Rabinowitz).

Liz Rohan, an assistant professor of English at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, compares the current status of writing-center staff to that of librarians at the beginning of the twentieth century, after Melvil Dewey’s establishment of the first professional library school, when there suddenly became a divide between school-trained librarians (mostly men) and those (mostly women) who had learned their skills on the job. Similarly, Rohan asserts, many of the low-paid part-time professionals who now comprise much of staff of writing centers come from the ranks of women who received their PhDs in the 1970s and 1980s, a period, Rohan states, closely corresponding to the time when full-time professors ceased teaching low-prestige writing courses, and universities began to rely increasingly on adjunct faculty (Rohan 67).

It would seem that librarians involved in information literacy instruction and those who help students do well in their classes would sense their similarities and work together, but this is not always the case. Writing-center professionals often have more contact with English
department professors than with librarians, and may identify themselves more with professors than with librarians.

There are also differences between the cultures of the typical academic library and college or university writing center. Christine Cozzens, director of the Center for Writing and Speaking at Agnes Scott College, makes a point echoed by other writing center directors when she describes a writing center’s identity as a “pleasant, popular work space for students writing papers.” Librarians may find some elements that make a writing center “pleasant” unacceptable—food and drink, for example, and a certain amount of noise. Security has also become an issue when the writing center is open at times when the rest of the library is closed. The undergraduates who do so much of the work at both writing centers and library reference departments may also have different expectations as to the kind of behavior that is acceptable on the job. Guidelines have to be clear. Debra Quast, head of reference at Marshburn Library at Azusa Pacific University, advises:

Make sure the center director knows of any restrictions within the library on painting, furniture, signage. We came in one Monday morning to soft teal walls in the Center.

[The director] didn’t know that all paint is supposed to be taupe, white, or mushroom and painted the center herself (Quast).

Quast also points out that it must be clear which operating expenses will be covered by the library and which by the writing center—printer/copy expenses, for example.

Writing-center staff and librarians note that some problems arise from administrative or political issues. Alison Russell, director of the writing center at Xavier University in Cincinnati, notes that no one bothered to consult or even inform her of plans to move the university’s writing center to the library. “All the stakeholders should have been consulted,” she says. Russell
reports a feeling of alienation from and disinvolvement with the process of moving the writing center from its current basement location to the library.

Another large problem writing center directors who work within the library face is turf battles with other groups desirous of prime space. Sara Kimball of UT Austin writes, “Last summer, I had to make it clear that the com[putation] center’s idea that the writing center could move into this dingy hole in the basement was completely unacceptable.” Mark Shadle, a writing center director who works from the basement of the Eastern Oregon University Library, also says it was difficult for him to get enough space to operate effectively. He observes: “while the library is great for a mini-writing center, it may not be the best spot for the full-tilt boogie center.”

By not recognizing their similar missions and sometimes marginalized positions within the university, librarians and writing-center professionals may be hurting themselves professionally. One way for both librarians involved in reference and information-literacy instruction and writing-center professional staff to receive respect from their teaching colleagues is through publications in peer-reviewed journals. Important studies of the ways in which undergraduates perform their research have been conducted both by librarians and by writing-center professionals, and these studies often cover parallel ground because librarians and writing-center professionals seldom consult one another’s literature. As an example, Rabinowitz cites Carol Kuhlthau’s well-known 1993 studies that indicate many students never acquire a focused topic, and that this may be a “result of the notion that the purpose of a search is to reproduce an author's view rather than to make sense within one's own frame of reference…” (p. 62). Empirical evidence of … misunderstandings between teachers and students is readily available, but neither
Kuhlthau nor most other librarians have integrated it into their own research. This evidence comes primarily from the field of composition studies. And this literature suffers from the same neglect as the library literature (Rabinowitz).

Michael Lorenzen, formerly library instruction coordinator at Michigan State University, suggests that a first step toward setting up a writing center within the library is for librarians and writing center staff to get to know each other—to visit each other’s workplaces with the preliminary goal of knowing when “referrals of students to each other were appropriate” (Lorenzen). With more communication between writing center and library staff members, areas of knowledge and expertise can be shared. Lorenzen, for example, after meeting the writing center staff, was invited to give a talk for writing center tutors and staff members on plagiarism.

Michigan State University opened its temporary library writing center satellite in 2000, and its success led to its becoming a permanent service a few months later (Lorenzen). Following Washtenaw Community College’s example, Lorenzen advises librarians simply to “find a few tables in a busy patron area or an office and allow the writing center to have writing tutors in the library.” Others suggest that much more careful planning will be necessary to convince all involved parties that a physical connection between the library and the writing center is a good idea. Gail Cummins, who directs the University of Kentucky’s writing center, says, “When asked if I had any idea what kind of space we needed for a writing center, I unscrolled two gorgeous plans and handed [the Vice Chancellor] a binded [sic] book with function and space described to match the plan. That’s when I finally heard from the head of the library and the University’s president” (Cummins).

The improvement of the quality of undergraduate research and writing is a main goal of both educational librarians in academic settings and of the staff and tutors at college and
university writing centers. Librarians and writing-center professionals have the potential to form strong teams. Indeed, it is in the best interests of both librarians and writing-center professionals to work out practical and ideological differences in order to form partnerships that will not only benefit their undergraduate patrons but will also benefit their institutions (by bringing in more customers) and themselves (by facilitating an exchange of ideas and experiences).
Works Cited


