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Introduction

THE POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY OF SHARING COMMON GROUND

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This collection comes at a time when many writing centers are facing changes. These changes, brought about by institutional forces that work to bring student academic services together in learning commons environments, represent a critical juncture for writing centers as spaces, as theory-based sites of practice, and as loci of identity for administrators and tutors alike. What may seem like an obvious fit to university administrators—to merge writing centers with other, similar student services—brings up many long-held anxieties on the part of writing center professionals. Writing centers have a history of real and perceived marginalization, which is well-documented in the field’s scholarship, including several chapters in this collection. For example, two articles referenced throughout this collection offer advice—including words of caution—for writing center professionals who find themselves relocated to a learning commons. Elizabeth Vincelette’s (2017, 22) tellingly titled “From the Margin to the Middle” offers a set of heuristic questions to help guide the balance writing center professionals must negotiate between optimizing shared resources and “safeguarding their existing practices, procedures, and policies.” Similarly, Malkiel Choseed (2017, 18) urges writing center professionals to make clearly known and take careful steps to maintain our “distinct disciplinary and professional identity” during mergers into learning commons. Although merging with a learning commons may serve to move a relatively autonomous entity such as a writing center into closer proximity to other student services—bringing it additional resources, scope, and prestige—it can also undermine theories and practices that have been developed over decades of theorizing, researching, and practicing. As contributors to

this collection make repeatedly clear, the politics of location take center stage when writing centers merge with learning commons.

Writing centers are resilient, however. As retention and student success become high-profile goals and as academic institutions look to develop students as sophisticated communicators across disciplines and media, more and more writing centers are becoming—or considering becoming—part of multiliteracy-focused learning commons enterprises (Koehler 2013; Deans and Roby 2009; Choseed 2017; Vincelette 2017; Soriano Young 2020). In fact, the success of writing center programming has on many campuses contributed to the emergence of the learning commons model. Writing center directors and tutors have a wealth of knowledge to share in these endeavors: we are natural collaborators and, for decades, have developed skills and practices that put us in a perfect position to lead conversations about the learning commons at our institutions (Harris 2000; Lunsford and Ede 2011).

A thread implicitly woven throughout this collection is the rhetoric of “shared”—and if we separate *shared* and *common ground*, it can be argued that “shared” is actually one step above “common ground.” While common ground seems to be more passive, perhaps a metaphor for the foundation of the building that houses the learning commons in which the writing center is located, shared is much more active . . . and requires *work* and *construction*. This, of course, refers to both the physical process of building and designing individual spaces *and* the construction of working partnerships between those who inhabit the spaces. While many authors in this collection use the term *shared*, they also discuss the process involved with arriving at what it means to share. For the contributors to this collection, co-location didn’t simply mean that everyone easily agreed on objectives and procedures when they all moved in together. Rather, sharing—and working toward integrated pedagogical models—often meant negotiating those coveted budgets and resources, calibrating how to collaborate successfully, and, sometimes, making concessions to enhance new institutional partnerships. In other words, “sharing” means letting someone into your space and your pre-established routines (which is not always what we want to do).

This collection is intended primarily for writing center professionals but also for all stakeholders of writing in and across campus, who find themselves collaborating in (by choice or edict), or wishing to explore the possibilities of, a learning commons enterprise. This book offers program administrators, directors, staff, and tutors a resource of theoretical rationales, experiential journeys, and go-to practical designs and

strategies for the many questions involved when writing centers find themselves operating in shared environments, including:

- What do writing centers gain by affiliating themselves with a learning commons? What might be possible drawbacks of doing so?
- How might we ensure that learning commons endeavors have sound pedagogical foundations that mesh with writing center philosophies (rather than just being convenient cost-cutting consolidations)? How should writing centers communicate their knowledge of best practices to faculty and administrators?
- What institutional factors affect the success of a writing center in a learning commons, such as budgets, resource allocation, and reporting structures?
- What skills and pedagogies can writing center professionals capitalize on to be effective partners and co-teachers in a learning commons?
- How have writing center approaches to tutor training, programming, faculty development, and other practices evolved or altered through affiliation with a learning commons?

The history of writing centers has proved that we must pay attention to names and titles, definitions of purpose and mission statements, institutional hierarchies and physical locations (Macauley and Mauriello 2007; Mauriello, Macauley, and Koch 2011; Grutsch McKinney 2013; Salem 2014). These are not niceties but, rather, necessities for developing successful programs. Writing centers that become part of learning commons must be cautious about losing ground or compromising as they collaborate and help build new spaces, structures, training models, and practices. For example, writing centers have long rejected being cast as “fix-it shops,” yet it is now common for the learning commons to be touted as a place for “one-stop shopping”—as several contributors to this collection describe. While that might sound like an attractive catchphrase coming from the mouths of campus tour guides and in the photos of university brochures and websites (and, certainly, there are some benefits to having academic resources that are centrally located), a retail-esque moniker could detract from the specialized services a writing center and its staff can offer students.

This caution is warranted at the level of theory as well. Writing centers have developed rich theoretical frameworks that have been adapted and variously implemented in centers as writing center administrators make strategic decisions, as tutors are trained, and as day-to-day interactions are practiced. A persistent concern in this collection is that the theory-based integrity of a writing center will be compromised by a merger. For instance, a merged tutor training program in subject tutoring and writing center tutoring may result in fewer readings in

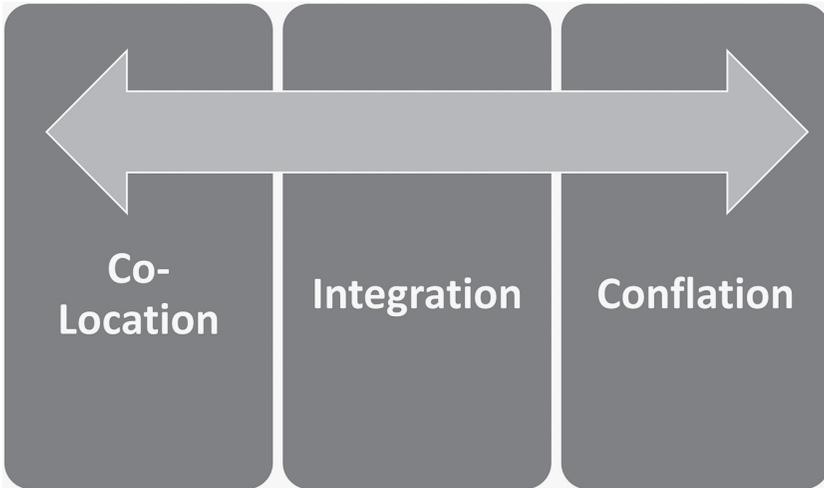


Figure 0.1. Continuum of co-location/integration/conflation models of writing center and learning commons degrees of collaboration

writing center theory, since those readings may not apply to, say, STEM tutors (see Crank, chapter 5, this volume, and, for a similar negotiation of tutoring STEM students, Nadler, Miller, and Braman, chapter 4, this volume, as well as the more general “cautious optimism” of Egbert, chapter 10, and Richards, chapter 11, both this volume). This loss of shared theoretical frameworks among writing center staff would certainly compromise the integrity and identity of a writing center. It can therefore be helpful to conceptualize a writing center’s place in a learning commons, as David Stock and Suzanne Julian outline in chapter 7, this volume, in terms of a continuum of degrees of collaboration (figure 0.1):

1. *Co-location* of services in a common area, which entails minimal or modest collaboration;
2. *Integration* of services through a shared service model, which entails a mutual and measured degree of collaboration; and
3. *Conflation* of writing and research services through a combined service model, which entails a merged approach to collaboration.

A co-located arrangement may have fewer theoretical ramifications for writing centers, leaving the practices and principles of the writing center intact. However, the closer the arrangement moves from integration toward conflation, the more opportunity there might be for productive collaboration and integrated support for students.

GRAND NARRATIVES AND PERIPHERAL VISIONS

Writing center practitioners may also be concerned about the very idea of a learning commons—how it might disrupt Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s (2013, 3) well-known conceptualization of the writing center “grand narrative” that “writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing.” Just as defining what a writing center is and is not has historically been problematic (Boquet and Lerner 2008; Lerner 2009; Corbett 2015), the definition of “learning commons” currently varies widely between institutions (Oblinger 2006; Salem 2014). All entities that share the name *learning commons* (or a close iteration of it) do not look the same, contain the same offices and resources, or fall under the same purviews of governance. As Lori Salem (2014, 20) discusses in her essay “Opportunity and Transformation,” the context of writing centers can “fundamentally change the meaning of writing tutoring.” Salem describes how the broader political-educational climate in the United States affects the shape and roles writing centers can take, including the “big tent” aspect of learning commons that also go by names such as “Learning Centers, Tutoring Centers, and Centers for Academic Excellence” (26; also see Book, chapter 2, this volume). For a broad definition applicable to the various learning commons configurations described in this collection, we could say that “learning commons” are domains in which wide varieties of campus constituents share spaces and resources that affect their learning and engagement with others.

Thus, given the nature (and names) of all the various student-support configurations of a learning commons, it can be difficult to calculate how many writing centers are actually part of a learning commons model. Salem, reporting in 2014, estimated that about 25 percent of writing centers were housed in the “big-tent” model. She also indicates that about 52 percent of the colleges and universities she sampled had centers specifically devoted to writing. But she also writes that some of those centers are standalone units while others are a “subunit of a larger learning center, learning commons, or tutoring center” (27). The most recent data available, from the Writing Center Research Project Survey (2018–19), suggest that of the 110 writing centers that participated in the survey, up to about 50 percent might be classified as fitting into some sort of bigger-tent learning commons model.

Whatever the actual percentage of writing centers housed in learning commons happens to be, the studies and stories in this collection illustrate that learning commons designs can span the co-location/integration/conflation spectrum by being randomly thrown together,

thoughtfully constructed, or mentioned from time to time and then not thought about again. And even though Grutsch McKinney (2013, 6) urged that “we need to become aware of narrowness of the writing center grand narrative and the tunnel vision that it enables,” the protean nature of learning commons (which may be formed out of convenience or at administrative whim) can take writing centers down unforeseen paths that may not be welcome. Certainly, we could say, though, that despite these potential problems, the two are better together; writing centers are natural complements to the learning commons environments. Both prioritize learning and the social construction of knowledge, placing comfort and customizability as guiding principles for structure and function. As several contributors to this collection illustrate, successful partnerships attract more students to a learning commons where writing centers and other academic resources are centrally located, encourage those students to take responsibility for their own learning, and help them gain knowledge about networking and seeking out available, adequate resources. Together, a well-crafted, well-maintained relationship between a writing center and a learning commons can reinforce the universal importance of collaboration and good writing. For example, writing center and library personnel have experienced much fruitful collaboration over the years (see, for example, Elmborg and Hook 2005; Jackson 2017; Alabi et al. 2020). Yet library and writing center collaborations might not always proceed smoothly at first (see, for example, the WCenter listserv discussion thread “Cross-Training for Librarians,” November 8, 2020). The writing center, learning commons, and library connection occurs so frequently, in fact, that the topic warrants its own section of chapters (part three) in this volume.

And yet, while these ideal spaces and partnerships *can* exist, the process of getting there is sometimes fraught with challenges: ownership, governance, spaces, budgets, and best practices, just to name a few. While learning commons have been around for some time now, posts continue to appear on the WCenter listserv and in the Directors of Writing Centers group on Facebook from directors whose centers are being moved as the result of someone else’s decision, whose budgets or staff sizes are being compromised, or worse—whose jobs are being eliminated in favor of “consolidation.” Posted questions often appear in the forms of “who does the writing center director report to when the center is part of a commons,” “how will the library and/or writing center change,” and “should the writing center remain separate from the other academic entities in the commons?” For example, Talinn Philips posted

a message to the WCenter listserv (July 27, 2020) to describe and seek advice regarding being “encouraged” by upper administration to move from WCOOnline to TutorTrac to align more closely with other tutoring services. After an unpleasant experience with the attempted transition, Philips especially expressed their concern about the consequences of “rebellious” if they were to switch back to WCOOnline. Members of the close-knit writing center professional community often look for research, case studies, data, and support from others who have gone through similar experiences, which suggests that there is no one right way to imagine a learning commons and the writing center’s role in it.

When questions like Philips’s surface, readers can sense the apprehension beneath the words posted, as the person who posted them begins to construct all possible future scenarios in their head. This certainly comes as a direct result of the histories of writing centers—often “optional” academic resources that may exist in whatever space becomes available, that may or may not have a budget, and that could be eliminated or changed at any time. On the positive side, the professionals associated with writing centers become accustomed to making the best out of any space and situation. Further, we are well-versed in collaborating with academic units that serve students (and so are library staff members and resource center directors, who are also represented in this collection). Thus, when faced with change, we deserve the opportunity to have input into what happens with our centers while also maintaining at least some of the integrity of our autonomous identities, especially when writing centers join learning commons.

While many (if not all) writing center administrators and directors have had to give something up—a location, a position, or something else—the advice, successes, and cautionary tales in this collection connect to one important question. For any writing center administrator or director who is facing a potential move into a learning commons, that question is this: *What is shared, and what is sacred?* All of the authors in this collection posit that writing centers have certain practices, terminologies, and pedagogies that are distinctly different from subject tutoring or the operations of other student services (e.g., how we train our tutors, interaction techniques, pay rates, and even paperwork and reporting). In these cases, the authors argue, writing centers should keep the integrity of *their* practices sacred, and administrators and directors should stand *their* ground. Doing so will not call into question a writing center’s contributions to the shared goals of a learning commons. Rather, it will help a writing center retain a distinct identity while under the learning commons umbrella.

WRITING CENTERS, LEARNING COMMONS, AND WAC/WID

Yet we might also ask another integrity-and-identity question regarding the specific nature of the work we do involving *writing*. Seeing a relative dearth in the explicit treatment of writing center and WAC/WID discussion throughout the chapters in our collection (with the notable exception of Robby Nadler, Kristen Miller, and Charles Braman’s chapter 4 and Nathalie Singh-Corcoran’s chapter 6) and understanding how intricately interwoven with WAC/WID writing centers have been historically (see, for example, Pemberton 1995; Corbett and LaFrance 2009), we posed the following question to our contributors: one of the risks involved with moving the writing center into a learning commons is that it becomes associated with a strong student-centered/student success identity and perhaps loses a focus on WAC/WID and/or work with faculty and perhaps even graduate students. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but—briefly—could you share your thoughts on this? Several authors offered the following perspectives. The viewpoints offered regarding WAC/WID actually say a lot about how contributors feel regarding the topic of writing centers and learning commons more generally.

For Elizabeth Busekrus Blackmon, Alexis Hart, and Robyn Rohde (chapter 1), moving writing center services away from “ownership” of the English department meant broadening the opportunity and scope for cross-disciplinary connections:

While we agree that moving a writing center into a learning commons can result in a greater emphasis on student success, we do not view that affiliation as a negative consequence—especially if student success is not framed in a deficit model. In our experiences, we have also found that moving writing centers out of English departments and into learning commons actually increases the focus on WAC/WID and opens more opportunities to work with faculty across the disciplines and recruit consultants/tutors from multiple disciplines. In other words, when a writing center is moved away from “ownership” by an English department, faculty and student writers in more disciplines and departments (including, for example, career education, grants, and fellowships) see themselves as contributing to a culture of writing at the institution.

Virginia Crank (chapter 5) echoes the authors’ words above regarding interdisciplinary cross-pollination and sharing of resources:

As a center working primarily with undergraduates, my Writing Center has not lost any of its WAC/WID focus by moving into the larger Learning Center; it seems to have instead been able to capitalize on that part of our mission by being in closer physical and administrative proximity to peer tutoring in other disciplines. We have more cross-pollination of ideas, resources, and clients than we did when the Writing Center was both

physically and philosophically an offshoot of the English Department. I believe this positive transition has been possible mainly because the Learning Center operates from the same faculty-driven, pedagogical approach to tutoring as the Writing Center rather than from a student-services model housed outside of Academic Affairs.

In contrast, Cassandra Book (chapter 2) expresses the benefits her center has experienced by staying affiliated with an English department and having a tenured English faculty member as the director:

For some writing centers, moving into a learning commons certainly risks changing to more of a student success identity, therefore losing a focus on WAC/WID and interaction with faculty and graduate students. This risk seems to be especially significant for institutions that create learning commons with the explicit purposes of student-service consolidation (financial) or to exercise more top-down control of programs (power). The degree to which previously independent units within a new learning commons become one streamlined unit may also impact a center's ability to continue WAC/WID and faculty initiatives. However, in our case, our center remained autonomous, and its reporting lines did not change from the College of Arts and Sciences and the English department, so we did not lose our WAC/WID focus or our ability to work with graduate students and faculty. Our writing center director is a tenured professor in the English department, which is the primary reason our center maintains a focus on WAC/WID, research, and graduate student programs. At the same time, current learning commons models seem primarily conceptualized as resources for traditional, full-time, undergraduate students, except for those commons with an explicit teaching and learning focus. Writing centers with a commitment to WAC/WID may be better suited to the teaching and learning model.

Celeste Del Russo (chapter 8) views her involvement with a learning commons as an opportunity to position writing and communication as central goals for all students across the curriculum:

As a center that is housed in a Writing Arts Department in the College of Communication and Creative Arts, it is very unlikely that our center would lose its identity as a center of writing with a WAC/WID focus (given our positionality). So, I can see how my positionality may skew the response here. I can personally see potential to influence student services with WAC/WID initiatives. I see the WC's merger with student support to be an opportunity for placing writing and communication as central goals for all services in the learning commons. The challenge is in negotiating these mergers in such a way that WAC/WID is viewed as a central goal of all parties involved. It's an opportunity for writing centers to shift the landscape of student support.

And Alice Batt and Michele Ostrow (chapter 9) sum up the question of WAC/WID and learning commons nicely. They see their willingness

to make the most of sharing common ground as expanding and amplifying their impact on student success across campus without compromising the “high-touch approach” WAC/WID awareness requires:

As academic units in the provost’s portfolio and with missions to support teaching and learning, both the UWC and the libraries consider ourselves to be fundamental to student academic success. Collaborating in the ways we’ve enumerated in our chapter means we are able to expand our support for student academic success in new ways and amplify to campus how we impact student success. What has not changed, however, is our high-touch approach to our teaching and learning services in the interest of a more efficient or automated approach the term *student success* may conjure in one’s mind. This hasn’t been an expectation from campus since opening the Learning Commons, and we do not expect it to be.

OUR COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

Before we move on and as the editors of this collection, we’d like to offer readers some of our backstory for why we’re involved in this project.

Steven: I started my career in writing centers in 1997 as a freshman peer tutor in the Writing Center component of the Learning Support Center at Edmonds Community College, near Seattle, Washington. I remember fellow students moving fluidly and seemingly at will between the Tutorial Center (where they could receive tutorial help in math, the sciences, languages, and other academic disciplines) and the Writing Center (where they could receive typical one-to-one writing tutoring). I drifted over to the Tutorial Center myself to get some desperately needed help with my daunting math requirement. Fast-forward about twenty-five years, and I find myself back in a learning commons environment. Similar to Teagan below, our Writing Center at Texas A&M University, Kingsville, in the fall of 2018 was moved from an Office of the Provost direct report to the Center for Student Success, which includes tutoring in all subjects, advising, and the first-year experience program. Luckily, at that time, I was not just the Writing Center director; I was also the coordinator of our QEP: Culture of Writing (essentially, WAC program), as well as a (as of fall 2019) tenured faculty member in the Department of Language and Literature. So, in short, I was responsible for an important part of our (ultimately successful) Southern Association of Colleges and Schools reaccreditation efforts; consequently, I collaborated with anyone and everyone on campus who had a stake in designing and implementing the best support possible for our students’ writing skills and development. Now, I’m not saying that my institutional status has automatically shielded me from the problems of integration into a learning commons.

I have still had to facilitate our center's consideration of co-location/integration/conflation in planning and action. But, echoing Cassandra Book above, my hybrid status as both faculty and administrator allows me to draw on a wide variety of resources and connections available throughout my university. Further and fortunately, the valuable information I've gleaned from contributors while co-editing this collection has proved timely and invaluable in my ongoing decision-making.

Maria: My interest in this topic originated in 2013, when the provost at John Carroll University in University Heights, Ohio, organized a pilot Learning Commons consisting of a weekly rotation of study tables. The inspiration for this format was based on the after-hours sessions the Writing Center had been offering since 2010. Plans were developed for a reconstruction of the space in the campus library where study tables were held, which included the relocation of some academic resources such as the Writing Center. To prepare for this potential merger, I began to research partnerships between writing centers and learning commons and presented on the topic at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Tampa, Florida (see Singh-Corcoran, chapter 6, this volume). Since that time, the Learning Commons space remains as described, located on the garden level of the university library—colorful and comfortable, popular with and attractive to students. Plans and blueprints for a full renovation (including the relocation of the Writing Center) have resurfaced a number of times, but administrators continue to choose other, less expensive and less invasive capital projects as their priorities. I remain hopeful that the space will be constructed someday, for the students' sake more than the potential Learning Commons constituents, but I also believe that moving the Writing Center *away* from the English department and into a student-centered space would be beneficial for the center's image and associations. While I wait for the relocation to happen, I continue to carefully read and absorb the numerous narratives—positive and problematic—I hear and study from my writing center colleagues.

Teagan: When I began directing the University Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke in 2007, the center was located in the English building and was associated strongly with the English department, even though technically the center was housed in Academic Affairs. A few years into my directorship, Academic Affairs moved all student-support services, including the Writing Center, into one building in the center of campus. I was struck by how little input I had in this process—decisions were made before I knew the conversation was happening. Like the authors of chapter 1 and 5 above, I

welcomed the change, though, and took advantage of the many opportunities the move afforded: to collaborate with other student-support areas, to increase visibility and usage, and to more effectively position the center as a “university” rather than an “English” resource. At the same time, I was concerned about the Writing Center losing its autonomy and distinctiveness: a full-credit writing center theory and practice course, staff who researched in the field and presented at conferences, a focus on long-term student support and development. When I left the position to become an administrator in the Honors College, there was some debate about replacing me with a staff line, which most likely would have resulted in more integration of the Writing Center into the student-support unit since a staff person would report to the head of that unit rather than to a department chair. From my experience and my reading of the chapters in this collection, writing centers have much to gain and also much to lose when integrating into larger academic units such as learning commons and student-support centers. The changing nature of reporting lines, physical locations, and funding sources can create tenuous situations for writing centers but also situations that present great opportunities for collaboration and growth.

How might we (as directors, coordinators, administrators, stakeholders) draw on our past and present attention to writing center studies to help shape the future of the learning commons? In many ways, tough questions about what a writing center can or should be and where it belongs in university structures come down to the all-important goal expressed by Muriel Harris (2014, 287): “empowering students.” If we (writers, tutors, faculty, staff, and administrators) are all “students” of the writing and communication game, can a learning commons model help or hinder our efforts to empower each other? *Writing Centers and Learning Commons* offers eleven original chapters divided into four parts with interconnecting themes—part one: Grand Narratives and Spirited Metaphors; part two: Peripheral Visions; part three: The Writing Center, Library, and Learning Commons Connection; and part four: Cautious Optimisms—that comprehensively explore the question of writing centers sharing common ground.

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