

DISRUPTING THE CENTER

*A Partnership Approach to Writing
Across the University*

REBECCA HALLMAN MARTINI

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Introduction

WHY A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP APPROACH IN THE WRITING CENTER?

On June 7, 2016, a fraught colleague of mine at New Jersey City University (NJCU) contacted me about a callous dean's unchallenged decision to "dissolve the writing center" by moving it out of Academic Affairs and into Student Support Services. As part of that move, her colleague, who was a PhD in English, would also be "removed" from her directorship, along with the elimination of thirty other people. The "new writing center" would become part of a general tutoring center, where writing tutors would not receive training in rhetoric and composition as they were currently. My colleague was writing to share the petition to keep the writing center open and to ask for my support, as the projected close date for the center, June 30, was fast approaching.

The petition, written by the then writing center director, explained the administration's decision to close the center as "the latest 'cost-saving' action," meant to "save money by substituting top-quality tutors with lower-paid, less-qualified tutors." In other words, all current writing center tutors were fired; some tutors were invited to apply for positions at the general tutoring center, without any information about wages or hours, while all of the professional tutors permanently lost their jobs. Despite having their strongest year yet, with a 68 percent increase in one-on-one tutoring sessions in a single year and over 1,110 signatures on the petition, the administration closed the center in just three weeks' time. From the administrators' perspective, this move was meant to "end duplication of tutoring services and save money" (McDonald 2016). The provost claimed, "No one is losing their jobs, no full-time employee is affected," yet it was unclear whether or not the many adjuncts who worked as professional tutors would be hired by the student-only staffed tutoring center, as indicated by an email from the interim dean. The NJCU Writing Center shut its doors on June 30, 2016.

The NJCU Writing Center represents just one of several writing centers that have come under attack over the past several years.¹ Unfortunately, upper administrators seemingly do not understand or value writing

studies and the work of writing centers. This problem continually pervades the modern academic world—it's not new. Nor is their willingness to make quick decisions for and about writing instruction without consulting writing studies experts.

And yet, our tendency to quickly assume that the administration works in a singular, consistently problematic way may also be unfair and limiting. For example, in another recent attempt to reposition a writing center as a “student service,” thereby removing the qualified director of the Centre for Writers at the University of Alberta, a past director at the university spoke out on the WCenter listserv. Roger Graves, a past director of both the Centre for Writers and Writing Across the Curriculum and also the current director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning, admitted in response that he was “concerned” about “some of the comments that characterize ‘the administration’” in the email exchange. He then attempted to rationalize the position from which “the administration” was working, as they tried to systematize how multiple writing centers on campus were positioned and how they reported. He also explained that conversations surrounding this particular writing center’s repositioning “did not involve a budget cut, a change in services to students, or a physical change” and noted the administration’s willingness to meet with and listen to the University Writing Committee, despite the fact that they did not act in the way the committee would have liked them to act. Graves acknowledged that there are indeed some “well-intentioned administrators” who simply do not understand writing center work, the implication here being that, rather than paint them as the ultimate bad guys, perhaps we should find ways of better communicating our work to administrators.

While we must learn to clearly describe our work to a broader university audience, writing center administrators also need to build strong relationships across campus. Part of why some writing centers close or lose their autonomy may be a lack of what Mark Hall has called “social capital,” which is rooted in the ability to create and maintain relationships that involve the exchange of resources in a mutually beneficial scenario across a network of respected participants who often hold similar values and principles. This concept accounts for both the resources that a group accrues through institutional relationships (Bourdieu) and the “reciprocal nature” (Coleman) that develops through “extensive networks of people brought together by shared values, assumptions, and beliefs,” which ultimately lead to the development of trust. By developing social capital, writing centers can make themselves valuable to the university while also challenging marginality. Even in 2010, Hall

recognized budget cuts and noted that an important response is to position the writing center as a fundamental university resource, a move he highlights by describing a “partnership” between his writing center and the school of social work.

I agree with Hall’s argument, especially his emphasis on social capital and cognition, which recognizes the importance of creating a shared vision. I also think we need to more closely examine how the language we use to describe our work across the university signifies one crucial way of building the kind of social capital for which Hall calls. This requires us to be more cognizant of how those outside our centers, including the administration, understand the teaching of writing, and it sometimes requires a willingness to change and adapt our language. Thus, instead of determining collaboration by identifying similar goals and values, we must also be willing to create new visions *with* others.

Within this context, and oftentimes alongside humanities disciplines and English departments more generally, writing centers find themselves working under increasingly difficult university climates as the reallocation of resources continues to suggest the national and local value placed on education and areas within it. Thus, we must proactively respond to whatever “crisis of education” arises. Recently, such crises have included high dropout rates (Douglas-Gabriel 2016), increasing tuition prices (Seltzer 2017), low employment (Hennelly 2016), and the increase of contingent faculty who are not fairly compensated for their work (Chen 2017). These “crises” provide the opportunity for change and, particularly, for what can be thought of as “disruptions” in higher education.

In *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out* (2011), business scholars Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring argue that traditional universities have the potential to respond to these interruptions in education through “disruptive innovations,” which occur when a new approach, often presented as either cheaper or more user-friendly than what already exists, challenges the dominant educational paradigm. Identified by some as the most influential business idea of the early twenty-first century, disruptive innovations are initially considered to be inferior, yet over time their emphasis on functionality and their ability to improve the services or product eventually catch on with mainstream customers, rather than solely meeting the needs of “low-end” customers, or those previously considered to be “non-consumers” (Bagehot 2017; Wolfe 2016). In this case, the concept of disruption is a “positive force” that has the potential to alter the university context and its services, making them more simple, convenient,

accessible, and affordable (Christensen, Horn, and Johnson 2008, 11). Further, disruptive innovations interrupt the traditional educational trajectories by changing the very nature of how we understand quality and improvement. In this way, that which was once deemed “inferior”—the disruptive innovation in its early development—becomes the preferred approach, thus redefining the practice and its context.

In the current climate of higher education, universities must react quickly when likely disruptions present themselves. While disruptive innovations in higher education often come from outside the university, this book makes the case that writing centers can effectively respond to—and counter—these external disruptive innovations through their own internal innovative practices that ultimately lead to positive change. For example, despite the assumption that instructor-to-student is the ideal or preferred educational environment, writing centers work from the idea that valuable learning occurs in peer-to-peer scenarios. This kind of education also happens to be more accessible to student writers and less expensive than hiring full-time instructors. In this way, writing centers themselves work as a kind of disruptive innovation to the traditional, classroom-based, instructor-student educational standard.

When writing centers can find ways to respond innovatively to potential disruptions in higher education, they increase their chances to build social capital. And the more social capital they have, the more likely opportunities to be innovative present themselves. For instance, developing a course-embedded tutoring program to support a writing-intensive art history course when university budget cuts lead to increased class sizes, if done through strategic partnership—the primary response to disruptive innovations described in this book—will likely increase social capital for the writing center. Not only will this create a meaningful relationship between the writing center and the specific course or department (in this case, art history), but it could also help establish a writing center identity with increased social capital (in the College of Arts and Sciences more generally, and beyond). Likewise, if the writing center has a good partnership with a particular department already and has established social capital, then when budget cuts impact curriculum, departments may approach the writing center for help in creating an innovative solution to support writers and teachers of writing before looking externally.

Alongside the need for a timely response to external disruptions, and in order for their responses to work, universities often have to change their inner structure (or DNA) to meet new higher education demands. Christensen and Eyring (2011) explain that a university’s

DNA consists of deeply rooted, historical, institutional traits that seem innate or natural within particular institutional types. Of course, there is nothing natural about institutional structures. Yet, such traits that seem to be commonly present include procedures like face-to-face instruction, departmentalization, long summer recesses, competitive athletics, a tenure and promotion process, and a general education curriculum alongside a chosen major (135). Currently, Christensen and Eyring argue that online education is the most prominent disruptive innovation because it directly challenges the face-to-face trait that so many universities express as an essential element of institutional DNA. In their response to external online education products and services then, universities face the challenge of creating a response that simultaneously makes space for some kind of online (or hybrid) models for learning and alters the university's traditional, face-to-face instructional practice that makes up part of their institutional DNA. Michael B. Horn and Heather Staker present one such approach in a K–12 context in *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools* (2015), where they argue for an approach that combines in-person and online learning methods that allow some degree of student control over time, place, path and/or pace (34). While this approach alters the DNA of a primarily face-to-face instructional environment, it also does so intentionally, from within, incorporating elements of both in-person learning and online models via a new, hybrid, or blended approach.

In this book, I argue that writing centers in particular can respond to crises of higher education and the disruptive innovations that challenge university practices through their own innovative approaches to writing instruction. We can (and must) find ways to work both within and against a current political climate driven by college administrators who are strongly influenced by a business-model mentality, corporate interests, and post-Fordist values, including privatization, efficiency, cost-cutting, and mass production. Our ability to develop partnerships with colleges and departments across campus presents one successful strategy for doing so. Rather than focusing on what we will or will not do and insisting on singular visions of writing instruction, I argue that writing centers need to start thinking more strategically and creatively about how we can work *with* departments across campus to support student writers, and simultaneously about how those departments can help provide support for writing and the work of writing instruction. Given the rising value of writing in the workplace and the expectation that college graduates have writing proficiency (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2015), more universities have initiated quality

enhancement plans that emphasize writing. Departments from art history to math have grown increasingly concerned with the quality of writing instruction that students receive in their majors.²

As extracurricular learning spaces that primarily work through peer-to-peer instructional approaches outside the traditional instructor-student classroom scenario, writing centers are well positioned to challenge dominant educational paradigms through localized disruptive innovations. Similarly recognizing the potential writing centers have for responding to change in higher education, Joe Essid and Brian McTague argue in *Writing Centers at the Center of Change* that, within the corporate university, writing centers will likely face challenges from or related to private firms or artificial intelligence that offer tutoring or writing support services, the cutting of additional tenure-track lines as certain majors and programs are eliminated, curricular changes especially to general education requirements, additional “writing-focused” services appearing on campus without communication with the main writing center, students engaging in more writing including multimodal and multimedia composition, and concerns related to job security (2020, 11–12). In this book, I present a strategic partnership framework as one response to current or potential disruptions such as these, and I include three partnership case studies that inadvertently respond to current or potential “disruptive innovations” in our educational paradigm: online education, outsourcing to public-private partnerships (P3s), and career readiness initiatives like the “Go Pro Early” model. My argument is that through intentional use of the strategic partnership framework, we can directly intervene before disruptive innovations change a university’s DNA in ways that threaten ethical teaching and learning.

Within the context of “disruptive innovations,” I use the case studies to explore the role of the writing center in the twenty-first-century university. I intentionally use the term *twenty-first-century university* to acknowledge a current university climate that requires an awareness of the challenging job market and the need for students to be well prepared for the workforce, in addition to the way that universities operate as businesses and have been doing so for a long time. In using *twenty-first-century university*, I mean to move beyond arguments about the “neoliberal university” and the “corporate university,” which bring with them problematic ideologies that conflict with humanitarian ideals about higher education and often accompany a “fight the man” mentality. In some ways, picking this fight becomes imperative because writing centers are well positioned to engage in it (Monty 2019). Yet, this book operates from the premise that, administratively, we must work within as

well as against the business mentality of the twenty-first century, and that we can ethically do both. In other words, we can be spaces that “incorporate frameworks of social and restorative justice . . . in response to the neoliberal academy” (Monty 2019), while also adopting administrative practices and terminologies that speak across departments. In a sense, to survive and sustain writing center practices, we must.

Within this context, I explore the following questions:

1. How can writing centers actively respond to disruptive innovations in ways that support their survival and prosper, and as a result continue to support writers and the teaching of writing?
2. What do sustainable writing center practices require in terms of our administrative work?

This book argues that writing centers and other key stakeholders in the teaching of writing across the university benefit from a strategic partnership approach to leadership. Strategic partnership involves intentionally creating relationships with multiple parties by establishing a shared vocabulary around the teaching of writing that encourages mutual benefit and stakeholder engagement within a negotiated space. This is a book primarily for writing center administrators, but also for administrators of writing across the curriculum and writing programs who are interested in networking across a wide range of departments, colleges, and administrative units. Although this book focuses on academic partnerships, this approach could also be adapted to work with student life, first-year experience programs, and public-school systems, among others.

Ultimately, this book makes a case for the valuable role that extracurricular centers and programs can play in twenty-first-century higher education and uses the writing center as an example. When a partnership framework is spearheaded by a program or center that has been historically marginalized, like the writing center, the program must begin by creating a sense of agency, both internally and externally. Thus, agency has become a central concept in this book and for the development of strategic partnerships.

ESTABLISHING WRITING CENTER AGENCY: RESPONDING TO DISRUPTIVE INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As I mentioned earlier, the establishment of a writing center demonstrates a disruptive innovation. In particular, a writing center staffed by undergraduates who provide peer-to-peer writing support proves to be both cheaper and more user-friendly than reducing class sizes and

hiring well qualified writing instructors in full-time positions. The idea of peer-to-peer learning also challenges the dominant educational paradigm of teacher/student. However, there is also pedagogical value in peer-to-peer learning and support, especially when learners work with those who are operating at only a slightly higher level than they are (Vygotsky 1962; Zebroski 1999). Even though writing centers primarily hold a history of remediation and marginalization (North 1984; Carino 1992), they also fit within the definition of disruptive innovation. Thus, the navigation of disruptive innovations in higher education feels like familiar territory for writing centers that can present themselves as both an internal response, or “smart solution,” to a disruptive innovation while also engaging in pedagogically ethical and sound practices.³ Yet, writing centers still need to establish their own sense of agency by first owning the perception that they can act and make meaningful decisions about the teaching of writing and, second, by showing that they are well positioned to respond to disruptive innovations, specifically related to writing instruction, in ways that other departments and units are not.⁴

Developing a sense of agency enables writing centers to be more creative and innovative because they have more autonomy to make decisions based on their own values and needs or those they perceive, rather than simply to appease a parent department or administrator. While *innovation* as a keyword truly befits the twenty-first-century university, I define innovation in writing instruction as that which disrupts, revitalizes, or reinvents traditional approaches to writing, which are often rooted in current traditional curricula, textbook method(ologie)s, and face-to-face best practices. In using the term *current traditional*, I mean to evoke Berlin’s (1996) description of current traditional rhetoric (CTR), which includes still-common composition pedagogies such as teaching modes (Ramage and Bean 2012; Seyler 2014) and presenting writing as formulaic and thesis-driven (Birkenstein and Graff 2016; Bartholomae and Petrosky 2010). With the exception of a more recent focus on argument (Lunsford and Lunsford 2008), CTR has for the most part persisted despite our belief that other approaches have threatened it (see Zebroski’s 1999 “The Expressivist Menace”).

Market values are equally significant to this definition of *innovation*, especially in terms of how upper administrators use the word to represent educational designs that seem new. Within and among writing teachers, *innovation* can mean a new and/or subversive approach to writing instruction, especially an approach that upsets traditional argument genres.⁵

But not always.

In his important book *The University in Ruins* (1996), Bill Readings claims that institutions work from a “discourse of ‘excellence’” that replaces earlier notions of the university as the place that operates according to the language of culture. I contend that in the twenty-first-century university, innovation can be thought of as the new “excellence.” In particular, Readings argues the following about “excellence” that I believe also holds true for “innovation” in today’s university:

“Excellence” is like the cash-nexus in that it has no *content*; it is hence neither true nor false, neither ignorant nor self-conscious. It may be unjust, but we cannot seek its injustice in terms of regime of truth of self-knowledge. Its rule does not carry with it an automatic political or cultural orientation, for it is not determined in relation to any indefinable instance of political power (13).

Thus, the word *innovation*, like *excellence*, does not necessarily carry any specific content, but is rather used as an adjective to describe the next best thing in pedagogy worth selling. Readings further notes that this “concerns the question of how the University is to be evaluated” (18). This notion means that, in order for work to be recognized as successful and especially for it to be recognized as exemplary, it must have some connection to innovation.

This book accepts the dual meaning of innovation as both potentially creative and part of a larger corporate terminology and framework. Embracing the idea of innovation in writing instruction and programming allows us to work with, within, and against business-model approaches to education. For writing centers, this adaptation means recognizing our history as a kind of disruptive innovation and using our experience and knowledge about operating effectively on the margins of the university to disrupt other innovations in higher education.

**“A LIKELY PARTNERSHIP SUGGESTS ITSELF . . .”:
PARTNERSHIPS IN/AND THE UNIVERSITY**

Although little empirical research exists that explicates what writing center partnerships look like and how we can create them, the term *partnership* is familiar in writing center studies. Data from a 2016 writing center website corpus sample of 1,298 individual institutions indicates that nearly 25 percent ($n = 322$) of writing centers are using the term *partner* ($n = 167$) in some way, while only 13 percent are using *partnership* (Monty 2016). The use of these terms varies, as some writing centers define what constitutes a partnership and others simply use the word

without explaining the kind of relationship it indicates. Some universities even use *partnership* to refer to a business relationship with an outside, third-party company. This was particularly common at community college writing centers.

The earliest significant mention of *partnership* in scholarship appeared more than thirty years ago, in a 1989 *Writing Center Journal* article titled “Writing Centers and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum: An Evolving Partnership” by Susan Dinitz and Diane Howe. In this article, Dinitz and Howe discuss writing centers, and the work of peer tutors in particular, as being an obvious approach to integrating writing into the curriculum, explaining that following an increase in faculty workshops around writing across the curriculum (WAC), “A likely partnership suggests itself: professors can require students to meet with peer tutors to work on drafts of papers” (45). However, as these authors point out, such requests often come in large numbers, for huge numbers of students, with little attention to the resources and funding necessary to meet these needs. Dinitz and Howe present three models for these partnerships that sound all too familiar still, and the problems that emerge from them: (1) required sessions at the writing center; (2) assigning tutors to classes; and (3) peer group critiques, the most promising of the three, according to the authors, because this approach provides a “more manageable and economic model” (49) that involves the writing center director providing peer review guidelines to students and facilitating an in-class peer review workshop. The hope in this scenario is that “some professors eventually feel comfortable taking on some or all of these roles themselves” (50).

What strikes me about this idea of partnership is the lack of stated collaboration, a central tenet of writing center partnership literature beyond this piece (Eodice 2003; Fitzgerald and Stephenson 2012; Hall 2010; Myatt and Gaillet 2017; Beason-Abmayr and Wilson 2018). While *collaboration* has a long history in writing center scholarship that recognizes its potential drawbacks (Clark 1988; Lunsford and Lunsford 1991; Harris 1995), the term still gets used often, as if we have an agreed-upon understanding of its use. One notable exception is *Writing Program and Writing Center Collaborations: Transcending Boundaries*, in which Alice Johnston Myatt and Lyneé Lewis Gaillet (2017) complicate the term by arguing that we should think about collaboration as existing along a continuum of complexity, approaching it “by design and with a sense of the entrepreneurial” (2). My development of a partnership framework expands on this element of collaboration by engaging directly with the term’s business undertones that administrators and faculty across the

university (in terms of both disciplines and positions) use as they discuss their work with the writing center. While collaboration is an element of the kind of partnership I argue for here, the term does not adequately account for the complexity and challenge involved.

Unsurprisingly, I have found that many of the concerns Dinitz and Howe raised in 1989 in regard to scheduling; faculty development; communication; tutor qualifications, recruitment, and exploitation; student-centered learning; and expense still remain critical concerns for establishing successful writing center partnerships and must become part of the conversation among all parties involved. Perhaps we miss collaboration as part of Dinitz and Howe's notion of partnership because of how this approach was developed and then delivered by writing center administrators, rather than created in early conversation *with* faculty. In other words, there was nothing really collaborative about Dinitz and Howe's partnership. I do not mean this as a criticism, but rather as an observation that raises a couple questions: How have writing center/program administrators positioned themselves (and how should they) in relation to partners across campus? And how often are partnerships or collaborations named as such simply to indicate an interaction between two offices or educational spaces?

Dinitz and Howe point out how these partnership "problems" were then handled and solved internally, rather than being recognized as programmatic, university-wide concerns worthy of support and brainstorming across stakeholders outside the writing center. This practice of developing university-wide writing support structures from within is another trend across writing center/program administration literature (Harrington, Fox, and Hogue 1998; Barnett and Blumner 1999; Cox, Galin, and Melzer 2018). While we may be well positioned to lead these kinds of projects, we may also miss opportunities to establish joint responsibility early on, which is necessary for both building trust and establishing respect.

One thread of scholarship that seems to avoid this misbalance is writing center/library collaborations. Not only are such partnerships especially prevalent, with 65 percent of respondents in a recent 197-response survey indicating a "collaborative relationship" between the writing center and library, but they also work from a clear alignment of goals, including a focus on student success, and often co-located services (Ferer 2012; Jackson 2017; Deitering and Williams 2018). Scholarship surrounding these partnerships often involves researchers from both positions. In other words, both the physical and philosophical positionalities between writing centers and libraries make them compatible. Such is not always the case across disciplines.

If we move beyond writing program scholarship around partnership, two additional areas of partnership literature emerge: academy/community partnerships and academy/industry partnerships. In her seminal text *Rewriting Partnerships: Community Perspectives on Community-Based Learning*, Rachael Shah looks to community partners as valuable knowledge makers who have much to teach academic instructors about how to engage in community-based work. By establishing critical, community-based epistemologies based primarily on more than eighty interviews with community members, Shah argues that partners' experience, participation, and assets make them valuable "holders and producers of knowledge" (30). Despite the vastly different context for her study of partnership, Shah's emphasis on partner knowledge and how that knowledge should inform and shape our institutional work aligns with this book's attention to how the perspectives of Southern Research University Writing Center (SRUWC) partners, who exist primarily outside of English and writing studies, can inform our administrative, pedagogical, and curricular approaches to writing programming and instruction.⁶

Working at the crossover between community partnership and writing centers, Tiffany Rousculp's valuable book *Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center* (2014) uses the phrase "writing partner" to define the role of consultants in the Salt Lake Community College's Community Writing Center. For her, a rhetoric of respect requires an awareness of one's values, strengths, and limits while simultaneously recognizing another person's contribution. She argues:

Respect implies a different type of relationship, one that is grounded in perception of worth, in esteem for another—as well as for the self. Even so, respect does not require agreement or conciliation—as "tolerance" suggests: rather, it entails recognition of multiple views, approaches, abilities, and importantly, limitations (especially our own). In other words, respect needs flexibility, 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. Whereas respect itself may exist as a feeling, a rhetoric of respect requires discursive action. (25)

What I find valuable about Rousculp's work is her direct recognition of the need for respect, rather than simply "tolerance or acceptance" of another person (24) or an assumption that respect is established simply due to the seemingly comforting nature of collaboration. Because of this, Rousculp's "rhetoric of respect" becomes an important lens for understanding how the strategic partnership approach I set forth in this book can work across disciplines.

Similarly, Brizee and Wells (2016) use “partners in literacy” to describe their community engagement work rooted in a writing center that develops online resources for an adult literacy program. These authors emphasize engagement as a necessary component for creating sustainable relationships, rather than a focus on “serving” a community, which often follows a “volunteerism or charity model” (128). Finally, McCleese Nichols and Williams (2019), in their article “Centering Partnerships: A Case for Writing Centers as Sites of Community Engagement,” point out that writing centers are in a strong position for community engagement work in part because their values and practices are compatible, given approaches like “meet[ing] writers where they are” (95) and “thinking strategically, and often, about our position within a larger institution” (98). In these four pieces that emphasize academic/community partnerships, the concept of partnership and the specific role of partner is never recognized as an intentional language choice for naming this kind of collaboration. Yet, this language still does important work in establishing a relationship between the university and the community.

Likewise, texts that explore academy/industry partnerships rarely elaborate on the significance of using the term *partner/partnership*, perhaps because this language is common in the business world. In Bridgeford and St. Amant’s 2015 book *Academy-Industry Relationships and Partnerships: Perspectives for Technical Communicators*, the term *partnership* suggests a general working together with those outside the university. More recently, some higher education experts have recognized the role of public-private partnerships (P3s) in the twenty-first-century university (Marks 2019; Carlson 2019). As Carlson notes in his *Chronicle of Higher Education* report, “The Outsourced University: How Public-Private Partnerships Can Benefit Your Campus,” P3s often allow institutions to focus on the “academic core—teaching and research” while “transfer[ring] much of the rest of their operations to companies that specialize in those relationships” (4), a concept academics tend to call “outsourcing.” Although he highlights the importance of the term *partner* in this relationship, Carlson does not explain how to create a partnership or what qualities make for a successful partnership.

In contrast to most academy/industry literature, Clare Banks, Birgit Siebe-Herbig, and Karin Norton (2016) focus on explicating partnership in *Global Perspectives on Strategic International Partnerships: A Guide to Building Sustainable Academic Linkages*. Focusing specifically on global education and cross-institutional partnerships that span across different countries and languages, these scholars identify strategic partnership as a particular kind of partnership that, when successful: (a) requires more

preparation and forethought than most institutions expect; (b) is rarely bilateral (between two universities), and instead requires support from third parties; (c) works from a recognition of the vocabulary around partnership, arguing that “the more we can adopt globally agreed-upon definitions of different types of partnerships, the clearer expectations will be for potential partners”; (d) involves more creative thinking about *mutual benefit*; and (e) necessitates consideration of ethical issues (ix).

These characteristics of successful *strategic* partnerships align with the concept of internal, academic writing center partnerships I identify in this book. My research suggests that *strategic* partnerships often depend on strategic discourses that help create the relationships and the resources necessary for sustaining writing center work. At the same time, partnerships allow for writing center activity that is tactical, “determined by the absence of power” in unofficial places (de Certeau 2011, 34). This approach enables plenty of opportunities for “trickster” moments and unconventional responses to the unexpected in the writing center (Geller et al. 2007), especially between writers and consultants.⁷ Furthermore, developing strategic partnerships also creates an environment for the kind of subversion Harry Denny (2010) talks about in *Facing the Center*. In reference to Cal Logue, Denny suggests that although “a subversive position might appear as assimilationist, involving what on the surface might be interpreted as a tacit acceptance of institutional protocols . . . it actually involves manipulating discourse and populations in ways that advance individual needs while undermining the status quo” (53). This kind of subversion also involves “the use of language in coded ways that inform insiders and manipulate those in positions of dominance” (54). While I do not consider strategic partnerships to be manipulative, they do involve using language that appeals to university administration, often a kind of language that we would likely not use otherwise.

In this book, I establish a process for building writing center partnerships as a way to sustain, enliven, and protect writing centers in the twenty-first-century university. Given that partnerships must fit within the local circumstances, I offer an in-depth look at one writing center and its variety of partnerships across the university. Drawing on Banks et al.’s concepts of negotiated space, mutual benefits, stakeholder engagement, and transformational partnership, as described later in this chapter, as well as on site-based data collected from one university writing center rooted in strong, cross-disciplinary partnerships, this book presents primary values, strategies, and recommended actions. To get a sense of how partnerships work, I practice a qualitative replicable aggregable

data-driven (qual-RAD) method that adapts traditional RAD writing center research (Driscoll and Wynn Perdue 2012) to fit an anthropological, human-centered, ethnographic design that seeks to understand the science of writing center administration. Although they are not officially part of the strategic partnership structure, using qual-RAD methods to understand the culture of writing at a university by observing, interviewing, and listening to how writing happens across campus—especially through Geertz’s “thick description”—would be an exemplary first step toward laying the groundwork for agency and respect.

After setting a context for developing strategic partnerships rooted in agency and respect within the SRUWC via interviews with the writing center staff and its key disciplinary partners, this book investigates how three partnerships work in response to disruptive innovations. Each case study considers one or more of Banks et al.’s key concepts in light of partnership engagement. Rather than attempting a perfect and replicable model, I aim to demonstrate and reflect on partnerships in practice, with all their complexity, and to offer both strategies for establishing successful partnerships and problems/pitfalls to anticipate and avoid.

KEY ELEMENTS IN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The framework offered in this book depends on several concepts that work together to create a necessary foundation for strategic partnership and the ongoing development vital to sustainability. These concepts are defined below. Figure 0.1 provides a visual representation of how some of these terms work together in a strategic partnership approach.

- **Disruptive innovation:** A new approach, often presented as either cheaper or more user-friendly than what already exists, that challenges the dominant educational paradigm. Presents the opportunity for internal university programs (like writing centers) to create strategic partnerships and to build social capital in lieu of using external higher education services.
- **Social capital:** A relationship-based resource that enables a respected and trustworthy identity established via a shared vision in a mutually beneficial scenario. Often created by building strategic partnerships that increase the likelihood for localized responses to disruptive innovations in higher education.
- **Agency:** The belief that one can act and make meaningful decisions about the teaching of writing.
- **Rhetoric of respect:** A way of acting and speaking that recognizes and values multiple viewpoints, positionalities, abilities, and limitations with a high degree of flexibility, self-awareness, and the

willingness to change or alter one's preferred method or vocabulary to make space for another.

- **Negotiated space:** The shared space in which a strategic partnership exists. Requires openness, honesty, and collaboratively developed, ethical frameworks with attention to weak elements, despite sometimes differing worldviews across partners and/or stakeholders.
- **Mutual benefit:** A situation in which all partners gain value via an emphasis on equity (fairness and justice), rather than equality (sameness). Recognizes three benefit types (direct/indirect, material/nonmaterial, and immediate/long-term) and their potential negative consequences.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** A collaborative approach to project management that requires identifying all potential stakeholders and the various roles they might play as the strategic partnership develops over time.
- **Transformational partnership:** The most radical and successful kind of strategic partnership through which change occurs at both the individual and the institutional or community level. Often involves combining resources, developing collaborative curricula, and dynamic growth over time.

METHOD(OLOGY)

For this project, I needed a method(ology)⁸ that acknowledged the value of rich, site-specific research, participant voices, and the subjectivity-bound perspectives that individuals offer, leading them to tell stories that are simultaneously representing and misrepresenting the realities of a situation. In other words, I rejected entirely the notion of an objective research study or unbiased researcher, both assumptions from which replicable, aggregable, data-driven (RAD) writing center research seems to work. Instead, this research method(ology) aligns with others that center narrative voices through in-depth study (Simpkins and Schwarz 2015; Reich 2018). Alexandria Lockett gives us an important warning in "A Touching Place: Womanist Approaches to the Center" when she argues that "the language of RAD tends to strip the human experience of its nuance and may risk diminishing the various ways we might interpret experience as data" (33). Lockett urges us to recognize that "qualitative, artistic investigation about the human experience is a legitimate form of data collection" (33). Writing center research has begun the important work of including the voices missing from our scholarship by recognizing connections between writing centers and social justice (Hallman Martini and Webster 2017; Greenfield 2019), race (Riddick and Hooker 2019), class (Denny,

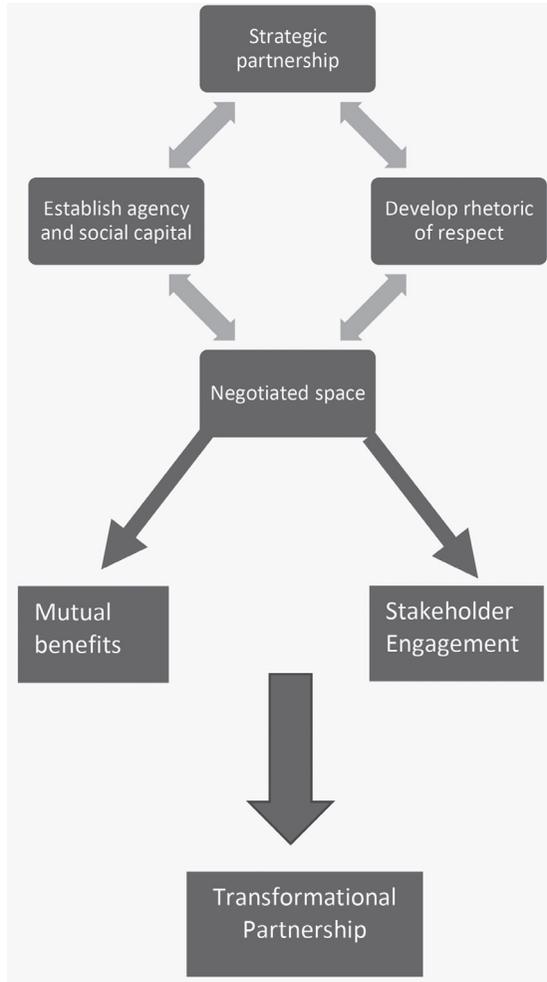


Figure 0.1. Strategic partnership framework

Nordlof, and Salem 2018), and identity (Denny et al. 2019; Webster 2021). In all of these studies, careful attention to human experience(s) within a historical, social, political, and cultural context is central; it is the researcher's responsibility to recognize how that context shapes the stories that emerge.

To follow this trend of writing center research while simultaneously working from an explicit method(ology) that could be adapted and used by future researchers to understand the administrative processes through which writing centers work, I used critical ethnographic methods to develop a qualitative-RAD method (qual-RAD). I worked primarily

Table 0.1. Definitions for RAD and qual-RAD Writing Center Research

<i>RAD WC^a Research</i> (Haswell 2005; Driscoll and Wynn Perdue 2012)		
	<i>Adaption^b</i>	<i>qual-RAD (extensions)</i>
A best-effort inquiry into the actualities of a situation	A best-effort inquiry into the complexities of a situation	Inquiry into the complexities of a situation with an awareness of how the researcher's ever-present perspective and those provided by participants are partially (in)accurate (Heath 1983; Brodkey 1987; Chiseri-Strater 1991; Mortensen and Kirsch 1996; Kirklighter, Moxley, and Vincent 1997; Cintron 1998; Cushman 1998; Brown and Dobrin 2004).
Explicitly enough systematized in sampling, execution, and analysis to be replicated	Explicitly defined research methods and at least partially systematized in sampling, execution, and analysis to be adapted	Clearly defined and adaptable methods for data collection and analysis (Bishop 1999; Cauthen 2010; Heath 1983; Seidman 2012).
Exactly enough circumscribed to be extended	Exactly enough described to be extended.	Specific and reasonable scope appropriate for the study's context and purpose with attention to possible extensions (Beaufort 1999; Bowie and McGovern 2013; Lillis 2008).
Factually enough supported to be verified	Enough concrete data provided to support claims	Concrete data provided through "thick description" that determines the research narrative's form (Brandt 2001; Cintron 1998; Cushman 1998; Geertz 1973; Heath 1983; Lindquist 2002).

^a *The abbreviation WC is used interchangeably with Writing Center and Center throughout this book.*

^b *Bold font indicates changes from the original language.*

from a critical ethnographic approach rooted in the tradition of ethnographic research developed in the field of rhetoric and composition (Brodkey 1987; Brown and Dobrin 2004; Chiseri-Strater 1991; Cintron 1998; Cushman 1998; Heath 1983; Kirklighter, Moxley, and Vincent 1997; Mortensen and Kirsch 1996). These scholars establish critical ethnographic research as a qualitative, empirical approach that uses rigorous research methods including interview, observation, field notes, reflection, and textual analysis; moves beyond description towards critique/action; maintains an awareness of ethnographic text as constructed under the influence of social, economic, political, material, and academic pressures; and requires deep self-reflexivity and awareness of the constructedness and limitations of the ethnographic text itself. This critical ethnographic approach works both within and against writing center studies' commitment to RAD research. Thus, my qual-RAD method differs from traditional writing center RAD research in the ways listed in table 0.1. Since

this book offers a new methodology and one helpful for those interested in creating strategic partnerships, I describe the four major components of qual-RAD below and provide an entry point into the book's method/ology through each.

Component 1: Inquiry into the Complexities: Setting a Context

Inquiry-based research often requires a formal investigation motivated by specific research questions to which the researcher does not already know the answer. The researcher is open to what they may find, and knowledge is co-created with others. Hence, hypotheses may be noted as the researcher's expectations and assumptions, but they are secondary to the study. Research questions evolve as the researcher engages with the subject matter and participants. Yet, there are no "actualities," as traditional RAD might suggest, in this kind of inquiry-based research because the research deals with people. Further, site-based studies are by nature situational and contextual, so there are no actualities. This also complicates any idea of replication in the strict sense of the term.

Rather than attempting to understand the "actualities" of a research situation, qual-RAD seeks to better understand the *complexities*. Complexities remain particular to each study but often involve a close eye toward similarities and differences that emerge in the data: The major themes and the outliers in terms of participant perspectives are equally valuable and worth serious investigation. In addition, the researcher is aware of their own stakes in the project and that their perspective ultimately shapes how the study unfolds. In their 2010 edited collection, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George Marcus argue that we must recognize the always obtrusive voice of the writer and how both the speaker and their construction of culture via written text complicate ethnography (and I would argue other site-based research with people). Given the awareness of multiple perspectives that are always by definition partial, we cannot inquire into the "actualities" of a situation at all.

Instead, we must recognize that a situation's "complexities" require attention to moments of tension and resistance as they emerge both within the researcher and among participants. While our instinct may be to overlook or move on from these moments, they often lead to the most important complexities in qualitative research. Thus, throughout this book, I pay close attention to moments of tension and try to explore them without minimizing perspectives that do not align. Although my goal is to provide a usable framework for establishing strategic partnerships, the

ability to adapt this framework for a particular context involves acknowledging and learning about its limitations, failures, and inconsistencies.

Before beginning to understand the complexities of a research situation, the researcher must closely consider the research context. For me, this meant attempting to step back from my familiarity with the research site so that I could observe and describe it in concrete terms. I did this early on in my project and include the narrative below primarily drawn from observation notes taken in September 2015.

To get to the Southern Research University Writing Center (SRUWC), you have to really want to go there. Because it's physically located on the exact opposite side of campus from the largest student commuter lot, on a hot day in the South it can easily take thirty minutes to walk from the back of the student lot to the front door of the building that houses the center. It almost feels like a crime to walk into such a new, clean building drenched in sweat. The distance from the lot is in part because the writing center is on the newer side of campus, within one of the business school buildings and surrounded by other business school buildings and new student dining areas. The University and Classroom Building, also known as the Insuperity Building, houses the writing center on the second floor. The floor is split between the writing center and the university-wide testing company, the Center for Academic Support and Assessment (CASA), where nervous students line up outside the door with number 2 pencils and thumbprints, waiting to prove their identities so they can take exams.

The writing center has no center. It does have two large writing center-like rooms with small round tables and chairs, and computers outlining the room's border. It also has a series of individual offices, several group conferencing rooms, a room for English TAs, and an office suite area with a front desk, a kitchen, and the offices of the upper administrators.⁹ The wall and carpeting are in neutral shades with no color, signage, or expression of any kind, with one exception: a small suite that includes several Mark Rothko prints, a front desk/waiting room area, a kitchen with two refrigerators next to an almost always fresh pot of Starbucks coffee, and the office of the executive director, the associate director, and one of the lead project managers. Tutors sometimes gather for lunch behind the kitchen in the storage closet, where there's a table inside a small room that holds broken computers and extra paper towels. The large tutoring rooms and small conference areas have clean white walls and some have windows. They are sterile. New. Professional. There are no traces of couches or hominess or comfort. Nothing indicates that when you enter one of the rooms you are in

a writing center. A nervous test taker could easily end up in the wrong place, as could a student writer looking for their writing consultant. It seems like you should whisper there.

All of the SRUWC administrators and full-time consultants are staff members who have little communication with the Department of English and little, if any, formal education or training in the professional field of rhetoric and composition or the sub-specialty of writing center studies. Despite this lack of formal scholarly professionalization, the SRUWC has an impressive campus presence. In its 2015 annual report, the SRUWC documented 22,928 student interactions, collaborated with faculty across campus in fifty-seven writing in the disciplines (WID) partnerships, and led more than thirty workshops. In particular, the SRUWC developed new projects with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) students, created a new online writing center with synchronous writing support, and developed more support for graduate-level writing.

In fall 2015, the SRUWC staff included an executive director, an associate director, four assistant directors, a technology director, four program managers/coordinators, two part-time web developers, three graduate student writing center fellows, and approximately twenty-two peer/professional consultants. Of these staff members, eleven were full-time and many of the others worked at least twenty hours per week. In particular, the SRUWC set its mission as shown in table 0.2, per the SRUWC website. As shown, the SRUWC's mission includes assessment, writing instruction, curricular innovation, community outreach, professional development, and research in the teaching of writing. It does not mention improving student writing. Both student writers and consultants are nearly absent.

In terms of demographics, SRU was among the most ethnically and linguistically diverse universities in the country, both in terms of students and faculty. In 2015, over 70 percent of the student population at SRU identified as non-white, and nearly 10 percent were international students from more than 150 different countries. Faculty at SRUWC were also diverse, with less than 50 percent identifying as white. A more complete breakdown of ethnicity is presented in figures 0.2 and 0.3.

Concept 2: Defined and Adaptable Research Methods

Clearly defined research methods make adapting and extending research studies possible and remove the need for exact systemization or replication. Since qual-RAD works under the assumption that replication is neither possible nor desirable, methods for both data collection

Table 0.2. SRUWC mission statement

Writing is thinking. It is an indispensable activity for every discipline conducting research within a university setting and an essential component of a university education. Ongoing instruction in writing helps to initiate students into the changing intellectual demands of university life and introduces them to the complexities of their chosen disciplines and professions. Because writing provides the tools to discover and articulate solutions to intellectual problems, improved writing remains a continual goal of university education.

To address these concerns, the mission of the University of X Writing Center includes the following activities:

Assessment: developing effective means of evaluating student and institutional writing needs that promote curricular innovation and provide informative directions for both students and teacher.

Writing Instruction: providing instruction in writing that meets the diverse needs of a student population at undergraduate, graduate, and professional level.

Curricular Innovation: promoting the creation of new writing curricula to meet changing student and disciplinary needs, reexamining present curricula to respond to new practices in the field of writing instruction.

Community Outreach: establishing outreach programs and partnerships that make available the results of the Center's inquiries and activities in the teaching of writing and foster collaboration with the region's educational and professional communities.

Professional Development: encouraging the ongoing professional development of faculty and staff across the full spectrum of disciplines.

Research in the Teaching of Writing: fostering the creation and dissemination of new knowledge about the teaching of writing in a large public institution serving an urban, multi-ethnic, multilingual community.

and analysis must be made explicit for both validity and adaptability. One example of clearly defined research methods for data collection in the field of writing center studies is Jackie Grutsch McKinney's *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*. As mentioned in the acknowledgments section of this book, Grutsch McKinney's text provided the exigency for this project, as I was interested in better understanding what I knew was a counternarrative to the writing center grand narrative: the story and workings of the SRUWC. Thus, I designed my qual-RAD study by replicating and adapting Grutsch McKinney's online survey questions for a face-to-face, audio-recorded interview.¹⁰ Yet, these questions had to be expanded for a different setting that was synchronous, face-to-face, and verbal, rather than asynchronous, virtual, and written. Thus, I worked from a semi-structured, in-depth interview format and included additional questions to try to get at more nuanced answers, such as: (1) How long have you been working at the SRUWC and what is your role? (2) Describe your writing center and how you perceive the culture there. (3) Describe yourself as a writing center professional. (4) How do you approach the teaching of writing? (5) What projects and duties do you

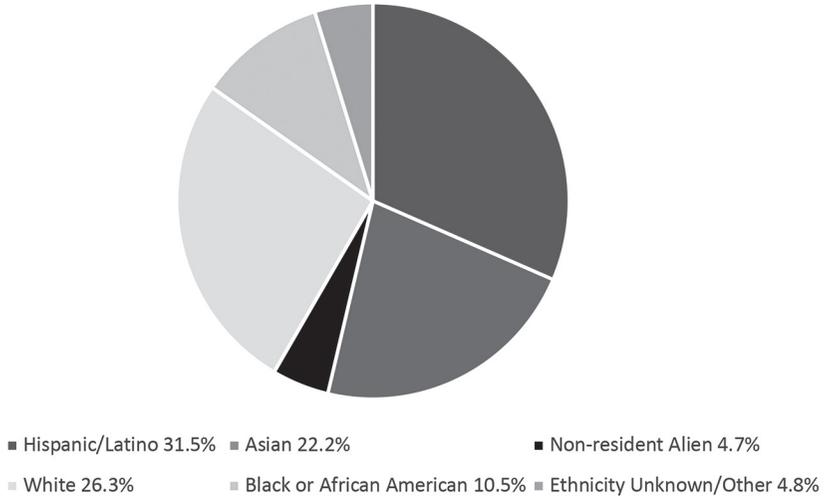


Figure 0.2. Ethnic diversity of undergraduate students at SRU

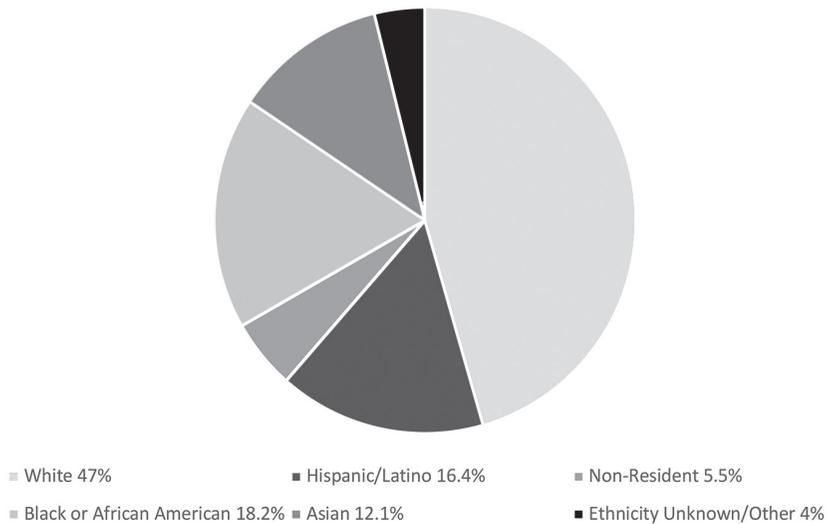


Figure 0.3. Ethnic diversity of faculty at SRU

have at the SRUWC? In addition, some interviewees told stories that moved away from a particular question or topic, even though each interview was coded and analyzed for evidence in its entirety for what Grutsch McKinney identifies as the writing center grand narrative.¹¹

Although qual-RAD requires the researcher to make their methods explicit, there is still room for divergences to emerge as the study

develops in real time. For instance, although I went into each interview with the same set of questions, sometimes the order in which the questions were asked changed, and additional follow-up questions were added in conversation with individual participants. Not every person was interviewed for the same amount of time or the same number of times, and had I sought to make the interviews more uniform I would not have been able to center the participants' voices. I also shared interview questions in advance and told interviewees that anything they wanted to tell me was more important than the questions I had to ask. Offering this statement is one technique I used to challenge the power dynamic inherent in most interviewer/interviewee relationships: The interviewer has the power, thus controlling and dictating how the interview unfolds. Instead, I wanted interviewees to decide what we talked about and to determine their own sequencing and telling of their SRUWC experiences.

This approach to data collection, or qualitative interviewing, draws on the work of ethnographer-folklorist Carl Lindahl (2004), who argues for working from the assumption that the interviewee is always right and that the goal of the researcher is to do their best to represent people on their own terms. While I was upfront about my interest in how participants understood their writing center work, I tried not to let my own agenda determine how our interview unfolded.¹² Another way that I got at this was by reserving interruptive questions I had for the end of the interview. For instance, if an interviewee mentioned a term or an event that they did not explain, rather than interrupting and asking for clarification, I made a note of it and waited until the interviewee was finished talking to bring up my questions. My intention was not to conduct identical interviews with each SRUWC administrator, but rather to understand and represent them as individuals on their own terms.

Much like my approach to interviewing, my observations focused on representing participants on their own terms. In order to do this, I focused on describing and understanding conversations, focus groups, and writing center sessions in the moment. When I had analytical thoughts, I either jotted them down in the margin or tried to reserve them until later. I often took copious notes before and after sessions so that I would understand my own expectations and reactions immediately before and after data collection. Rather than working from a set of specific questions, I primarily focused on describing what I saw and heard. Nearly all observations that included a conversation were audio-recorded, logged, and analyzed according to the methods below.

Some elements of my data collection and analysis were more systematic while still allowing for variance. Rather than fully transcribing

and analyzing each interview through the use of software, I used a logging method developed by Lindahl, who describes logging as a detailed table of contents for the entire interview. The logging method enables the researcher to summarize and paraphrase the interview with attention to key words, while reserving transcription for only the most significant moments. Although some researchers, such as Irving Seidman, warn against selective transcription, the thorough logging and noting of the interview still requires careful listening, documentation of the entire interview, and a fair amount of selected transcribing. This logging method/ology aligns with qual-RAD writing center research because it works from the assumption that a neutral, objective log/transcription is neither possible nor preferable. Thus, interview logs/transcriptions are informed by the researcher's perspective and are deeply interpretive and selective (Riessman 2007). To maintain consistency, the logging should be done by the same researchers who conduct the interviews whenever possible, not outsourced to research assistants, outside agencies, or computer programs. According to Lindahl (2003), interview logs should: (1) follow the order of the interview; (2) focus on the interviewee's words rather than on the questions of the interview; (3) begin a new entry when the topic changes (approximately every one to four minutes or when the interviewer poses a new question); (4) mark each new entry with the time so that the researcher can go back and find the section easily in case they wish to return to it; and (5) use short sentences to describe what is said, along with brief quotations when preserving the language choice of the interviewee is necessary.¹³

When site-based research is approached through inquiry-based methods, the kind of systematization traditional RAD calls for becomes difficult. For a study to be systematized, it must execute a preconceived plan. This kind of structure makes flexibility and adaptability difficult, all the while emphasizing the researcher's plan rather than allowing the participants' voices and knowledge to impact the direction and ultimately the findings of the study. A common practice in qualitative interview research is to give the interviewee an opportunity at the end of the interview to add anything they did not have a chance to mention (Lindahl 2003, 2004; Seidman 2012). Although this material is often positioned as secondary to the researcher's questioning agenda, some of the most insightful knowledge emerges from these moments or others that are similarly unstructured.

For instance, it never occurred to me in my ethnographic study of SRUWC to ask participants about their first sessions, in part because

few of them were meeting with student writers directly at the time of my research. Yet, when those stories became important to several participants, I adapted my interview questions to include one about first consultations. Careful study of these stories indicated a survivalist mentality in the writing center that became an important element of the business-minded culture. Some of these stories are expanded as a part of “thick description” in chapter 2 of this book.

Component 3: Reasonable and Clear Scope with Contextual Awareness

Setting boundaries around qualitative research can be tricky. Given the wealth of data possible through site-based research with people, researchers may struggle to get a sense of a study’s scope prior to data collection. Further, the idea of “exact circumscription” that traditional RAD calls for may never be possible in some qualitative research, since even after the scope is established, the boundaries may be justifiably messy and inexact. Thus, the scope of a qual-RAD study should be determined through inquiry and the complexity of the research situation. Sometimes, a small-scale, in-depth study addresses research questions more fully than a broad sweep with random sampling, although both are valuable to knowledge-making. Explicitly setting a reasonable scope with direct consideration of how future researchers might build from the current study makes extension more possible.

Throughout this project, I regularly had to cut back on the scope because I was getting so much rich material. Although I originally envisioned a multi-institutional study, I quickly realized that I had enough data to tell a rich and complex story of a single site, the SRUWC. Then, within this site I had to narrow my scope even more. While my three years’ experience as a rhetoric and composition graduate student and tutor influenced my understanding of the research site, I conducted formal qual-RAD critical ethnographic research in the SRUWC from fall 2015 to spring 2016 that engaged in several modes of data collection, including over thirty hours of interviews with writing center administrators and disciplinary partners; over forty hours of observation of WC program meetings, professional development activities, and orientations; one focus group meeting; analysis of hundreds of pages of online writing studio consultations for the WC/first-year writing program partnership; and the observation of twelve face-to-face partnership meetings for the WC/engineering partnership. In addition, participants shared numerous documents with me that informed this research, including annual reports, budget data, writing assessment data, assignments, and

syllabi. My data included observation notes; textual analyses of recent annual reports, assignment designs, and memos; audio-recorded reading groups with peer tutors; audio-recorded group tutoring sessions; and audio-recorded interviews with SRUWC consultants, university administrators, and disciplinary faculty.

Within this context, I originally wanted to conduct in-depth interviews with undergraduate peer tutors and students, as well as look at several partnerships in-depth. I knew my project was going to be a critical ethnographic study of a writing center, but I did not realize it would be an administrative-focused project, nor did I know it would focus on theorizing and establishing a partnership approach to writing center work until well into my interviews. Of the thirteen writing center partners Sam (SRUWC administrator) suggested as possible interview participants, twelve agreed to talk with me. I expected to hear from only half. Furthermore, several of them shared syllabi, assessment data, and budget spreadsheets, all materials I did not expect to receive. This wealth of information shifted the scope of my project because I realized that, to best tell an in-depth story well with all the information I had unexpectedly received, I would not be able to extend data collection to as many additional participants. Already, an important story to follow was emerging.

This research narrative includes many participants whose roles vary from significantly prominent and recurring to brief encounters, including sixteen writing center administrators, eight writing center consultants, fifteen university administrators or disciplinary faculty members, eight graduate teaching assistants, seven graduate students, twelve undergraduate students, and, of course, myself. These sixty-seven writers and teachers of writing provide a single yet significant slice of the writing culture at SRU, and of the SRUWC in particular.

Although narrowing a study's scope can be seen as a limitation, it is often necessary in qual-RAD research. This constricting risks a study becoming too localized and larger implications beyond a single site become harder to determine. Yet, researchers must acknowledge these limitations as areas for future research and possible extensions. Most importantly, researchers can justify the narrow scope by providing "thick description" of data (Component 4). Thick description requires close attention to both the big and small "gestures" that occur within a research site so that the researcher notices and is nearly able to interpret data as if they were an internal member of the community under study. The emphasis falls on intricate representation through description, rather than on creating a unified and rational narrative.

Component 4: Thick Description of the Particular

Qual-RAD research emphasizes a deep look into complexities but often within a somewhat narrow scope. So rich data, rather than facts, determine its worth. A combination of fact and verification, as called for in traditional RAD, is not the focus of qual-RAD because this method assumes a research scenario in which fact and verification are subjective.

Clifford Geertz offers a more useful way of thinking about data collection for qual-RAD with his concept of “thick description”: a method that requires the ethnographer to determine the particular context of a culture through a participative and interpretive approach to research that attempts to think and make meaning with, not just about, the members of the culture under study.¹⁴ Geertz recognizes the heart of “thick description” in a moment from Gilbert Ryle’s work where he describes “two boys rapidly contracting their eyelids” (1973, 6). Upon simple observation, the boys’ movements look the same, but closer analysis and interpretation suggest that one boy has an “involuntary twitch” while the other is intentionally “gestur[ing].” Thus, the central question for anthropology is “whether it [can] sort winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones” (16). For Geertz, the aim in understanding a culture should be “inspecting events, not . . . arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns,” and thus “coherence cannot be the major test of validity” (17). The practice of “thick description” and the knowledge it produces is meaningful because of its “complex specificness, [and] circumstantiality . . . [which] makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely *about* [participants], but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively *with* them” (23). Thus, the research narrative itself cannot be expected to fit into a routine format. Instead, the data drives the story.

Geertz’s concept of “thick description,” carefully applied to interview-based ethnographic research and other kinds of site-based research with people, proves useful to a qual-RAD method/ology. Rather than simplifying similarities by way of coding and counting, “thick description” encourages a more nuanced look at differences across similarities, too. Thus, “thick description” in qual-RAD is (1) *specific and circumstantial*; (2) *participative*; (3) *interpretive*; (4) *imaginative*; and (5) *collaborative*.

For this book and the development of a strategic partnership approach to writing center administration, engaging in thick description means emphasizing the site-based research first and foremost over outside research and/or theoretical frameworks. It means that my first commitment is to sincerely represent my research site and the people acting in it, with all of their complexity, regardless of how messy that

project may become. Although interviews and observations are the primary sources of data in this book and factor into each chapter, I also used a range of additional protocols in one or more chapters, which included conducting one focus group; analyzing online studio conversations; studying writing assignments, syllabi, and writing assessment data; and analyzing student surveys and tutor notes. The collection and analysis of these materials were a valuable part of this book's "thick description," because they often enabled me to better contextualize and understand the participants' stories and the cultures in which they worked. These additional materials were also often shared with me during interviews and observations and/or explained to me by participants who explicitly brought them into their stories. It was often through supplemental material or discussions outside of the research scenario I created with my requests and questions that I learned the gestures of the culture, which helped me understand the mindset necessary for creating partnerships.

* * *

Like all research projects, this one began from a particular point of view, and thus with a few biases and assumptions. When I conducted research for this book, I was a fourth-year PhD student in the English Department focusing on rhetoric, composition, and pedagogy, who had roles both within the SRUWC and as a first-year writing instructor in the English Department. I was also a participant-observer in two of the partnerships I describe in this book, as well as a mentor to some of the new hybrid first-year writing instructors I interviewed. My position in relation to both the SRUWC and the participants is complex and varied.

In addition, I recognize that I communicated with the participants and interviewees in multiple settings, multiple ways, and from multiple positionalities.¹⁵ For instance, several of the SRUWC administrators and the English Department hybrid instructors are my friends, who I spoke with informally about their administration and tutoring outside of the formal interviews during conferences, over lunch, and in between meetings. Thus, while I do draw on the formal interviews, I also draw on unrecorded conversations that occurred in more relaxed settings. Finally, I recognize that the project of this book is not only the stories as told by my participants and their work, but it is also a story filtered through my perspective and told by me.

As the writer of this text, I also had to make a few choices that will impact your reading and understanding of this book. First, as most ethnographic studies do, I used pseudonyms in place of participants'

names. Given the diverse context in which this research took place, I took special care to choose pseudonyms that were compatible with participants' real names. Second, I included a participant matrix at the end of chapters 2 through 5 to provide some context for and description of the primary participants in each.¹⁶ In the cases where significant participants had already been described, I noted which chapter included their short bios. I did not provide a participant matrix for chapter 6 because all of the participants had already been included in previous matrices.

Finally, I made the conscious choice to bring in other literature around partnership, specifically Williams's definition of agency, Rousculp's "rhetoric of respect," and Banks et al.'s framework for global strategic partnerships. I found these texts helpful in providing an important structure for understanding participant narratives within a context beyond a single writing center at a single university. They also helped me recognize some of the implicit concepts that emerged by giving me a more intricate terminology through which to think about this research.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

In the chapters that follow, I present a strategic-partnership approach to writing center administration. By looking closely at a writing center with a strong awareness of its place in a twenty-first-century university, I show how internal narratives about writing in chapter 1 (among writing center staff) and external narratives about writing in chapter 2 (among university administrators and disciplinary partners) develop and shape strategic partnerships. In chapter 1, "Establishing Agency: Laying the Groundwork for Strategic Partnership," I provide a more detailed account of the research scene, including a short history of the writing center and its split from the English Department, which was critical in its ability to develop partnerships across the university. Drawing primarily on interviews with writing center staff, this chapter shows how the SRUWC creates a strategic consulting firm environment rooted in agency (Williams 2017) that still enables tactical development among peer undergraduate tutors.

In chapter 2, "Counselors, Tsunamis, and Well-Oiled Machines: Partners Defining Their Writing (Center) Partnerships," I draw on interviews with university administrators and disciplinary partners to show partner perceptions of a twenty-first-century writing center rooted in respect. Looking specifically at the use of metaphor in talk about writing (centers) and the teaching of writing, I show how and why establishing respect (Rousculp 2014) and agency (Williams 2017) in writing center

partnerships is critical for building sustainable relationships across the university. Despite the often-asymmetrical power dynamic between writing centers and partnering departments/colleges, analysis of metaphor use suggests that writing centers provide an invaluable resource.

In chapters 3–5, I use case studies to showcase important partnership concepts: mapping mutual benefit and stakeholder engagement in chapter 3, creating negotiated space in chapter 4, and building transformational partnerships in chapter 5. These chapters are also directly connected to current or potential “disruptive innovations” in higher education and thus show how a writing center might act in direct response to online education, the use of public-private partnerships through outsourcing, and career readiness initiatives.

Chapter 3, “Reworking with the English Department: Partnering Online with a First-Year Writing Program,” focuses on a writing center partnership linked to first-year writing that responds to the disruptive innovation of online education. Given the precarious relationship between the English Department and the Writing Center, I consider how early acknowledgment of mutual benefits across stakeholders leads to the partnership’s quick growth. Yet, uneven stakeholder engagement and a lack of communication also creates an unequal distribution of labor in the development of the hybrid first-year writing/online studio partnership. After presenting data surrounding the value of online writing studios from three key participant groups—graduate teaching assistants (English Department), online studio facilitators (Writing Center), and student writers—I argue that the writing center can effectively and ethically respond to the push for online education through a strategic partnership approach that involves mapping out mutual benefits (Sutton 2016) and a plan for varying levels of stakeholder engagements (Proctor 2016) over time.

Chapter 4, “Engaging Challenges: Partnering as a P3 with the College of Business,” provides an example of the writing center engaging in a small-scale P3 in which, through conversation with the business school, a third party was invited into the partnership. I examine how the writing center took a misstep in its response to the disruptive innovation of P3s by exploring a public controversy connected to outsourcing writing evaluation and (eventually) instruction. By looking closely at the impact of a third-party company on two business college partnerships—one that resulted in total outsourcing and another where the writing center continued to play an integral role in the development of writers—I consider how creating a negotiated space (Helms 2016) early on can help in planning for and anticipating ethical dilemmas in partnerships.

Chapter 5, “Navigating Workplace Realities: Partnering with STEM in the College of Engineering,” shows how the writing center, through partnership, can respond to an overemphasis on career readiness (specifically, the potential disruptive innovation of the “Go Pro Early” movement) by expanding its definition of writing in the university to make room for writing in the profession (WIP). In this partnership, the writing center provides an important role in supporting students who are engaging in multimodal project designs, writing in teams, attempting a kind of clarity that communicates across contexts, and writing for outside (and multiple) audiences. With a close look at this integrated writing curriculum across four core writing courses taught within the college of engineering, I argue for a more cross-disciplinary understanding of writing as WIP that enables the kind of transformational partnerships that are the most sustainable.

I conclude by offering specific action steps for establishing agency, developing a rhetoric of respect for building relationships, and creating strategic partnerships.

* * *

The concept of partnership in general has much to offer writing center administrators, and how partnership works at the SRUWC provides meaningful insight into what such partnerships might look like. Yet, I want to forewarn readers who may be coming to this book for a step-by-step, how-to guide about creating partnerships in their own writing centers. The very method through which this book was created makes such an approach both unlikely and undesirable. Instead, I hope to emphasize the value of creating unique relationships built through mutual recognition of agency and respect. I hope you will find concepts and suggested actions that make you rethink your approach to collaborative, administrative work. And, finally, I hope to offer a language for communicating our invaluable, innovative writing center work across the university.