


This essay is not the first attempt to take the temperature of writing center studies. In a 2001 College English review essay, for example, Jeanette Harris declared in her title that “writing center scholarship [had come] of age.” As a former coeditor of Writing Center Journal and past president of the National Writing Center Association,1 Harris stood as a highly qualified member of the field, offering an assessment of the state of the field’s scholarship. The books Harris reviewed range from pedagogical guides (Podis and Podis;
Rafoth), to explorations of writing centers in new spaces (Barnett and Blumner)—including technologized spaces (Inman and Sewell)—to a postmodern critique of writing center theory and practice (Grimm, *Good Intentions*). Taken as a whole, Harris concluded—from a focus on practice, to “new roles that writing centers are assuming” (663) to Grimm’s “one of the first of its kind in writing center research” as a “single-authored, theoretical study”—this range signifies that “writing centers are increasingly places where people take research seriously, assuming it be as essential as keeping records or training tutors” (663).

Not that all assessments of the field were so celebratory: just four years earlier, Christina Murphy, also both a past-president of the National Writing Centers Association and a widely published scholar on writing center–related topics, infamously declared in her talk at the national conference that writing center research was, essentially, “bankrupt.” As retold by Alice Gillam, Murphy stated that “writing center researchers have aimed low in their research projects and continue to recycle old topics and questions rather than contribute to ‘larger intellectual conversations’” (19). Read against each other, these declarations of progress/stasis characterize well the half-full/half-empty state of writing centers as a disciplinary enterprise that I have seen over the course of my career.

More than thirty years since I set foot in my first writing center as a tutor while pursuing my MA in creative writing and my high school English teaching credential and seventeen years after Harris’s claim, I cannot say with any confidence that writing center scholarship has “come of age” nor is it entirely “bankrupt.” If anything, I wonder what age it might be in currently—gilded, golden, adolescent? And what is the currency of exchange in a potential bankruptcy—New knowledge? Improved practice? Greater institutional and professional standing?

While such scholarship may be unfamiliar to some, I imagine that all *College English* readers are aware of writing centers to varying degrees, comprising a shared familiarity that attests to the variety of spaces writing centers occupy in the higher education landscape. Almost every institution of higher education has one (Salem, “Opportunity”). Nearly all writing centers describe themselves as open to every writer on campus, whether student, staff, or faculty, and eschew strong associations with remediation and writers not prepared for college-level work (Salem, “Decisions”). The field itself has seen the development of international and regional professional associations and conferences (see the IWCA site, writingcenters.org), several peer-reviewed journals, and a steady stream of theses, dissertations, books, and edited collections focused on writing centers. The trappings of academic weight—a broad visibility, a shared sense of identity and a scholarly agenda—are well established.

And yet, amid this semblance of success lies instability or, at least, a deep fear that writing centers are tenuous and have not met the edict that Stephen
North offered in 1984 in the pages of this journal when he challenged writing centers to be “centers of consciousness for writing on campuses” (446). After all, directing one might not be a path to tenure and promotion (Geller and Denny), and focusing one’s research on them is often only a temporary concern (Lerner, “Unpromising Present”), not a research arc along which careers might be made (Geller and Denny). In comparison to writing programs, which generate tuition dollars through required courses and are much more commonly led by tenure-stream faculty, writing centers are campus “cost centers,” commonly run by non-tenure-stream faculty and staffed by undergraduate peer tutors (Geller and Denny). Certainly, writing programs and writing program administrators more generally have plenty of well-deserved anxiety over future resources and academic reputation, but they are not necessarily threatened by a move to consolidate student support services under the Associate Vice Provost for Student Affairs or to move writing tutoring to a third-party vendor, moves that have taken place with some regularity in the last decade (see DeCiccio; Lerner, “Internal Outsourcing”). Most writing centers are small operations, usually meeting with no more than 10 to 15 percent of the student population, not necessarily resourced to help all writers on campus or exert influence as sites of research or for disseminating best practices about teaching and learning. That’s not to say that writing centers are inconsequential. If anything, the reality I’ve known in a career directing, researching, and thinking about writing centers is how rich with possibility writing centers are—whether as sites for literacy research or for consequential teaching and learning of writing. That writing centers and those who direct, staff, and research them might exist in an environment of both success and instability seems deeply interwoven into the ways writing is and is not valued in our institutions and in the culture at large.

A contemporary contribution to this turbulent state is The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors by Nicole Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Rebecca Jackson. In a richly described qualitative case study of nine new writing center directors in a wide range of large and small public and private institutions (including two high schools, a community college, and an HBCU), Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson tell us “about the intricacies and complexities of a job and the intricacies and complexities of a system wherein that job exists” (4). That job is directing a writing center, and the participants featured in this book attest to the job’s difficulties, and, at times, rewards, though the last can be elusive given that “the work is difficult, often untenable, even for those ‘prepared’ for writing center administration” (193). For the coauthors, the scarce currency of writing centers is director labor, and their analytical lens includes three types of labor: emotional, everyday, and disciplinary. No matter which type, we are told of a job in which “the demands or possibilities for directing a center always
exceeded the available resources. No director ever told us they had to find work to do; there was always more work to do than they could complete” (174). Such a statement will likely be familiar to writing center directors and WPAs more generally, as well as the authors’ conclusion that “the tasks the writing center directors are responsible for are labor intensive, ongoing, often unplannable, and . . . highly relational” (171).

Having an infinite amount of work to do and finite resources to do that work might be endemic to many of us in higher education. For writing center directors, however, the work that gets short shrift is the key task of knowledge making, a conclusion supported by earlier research on writing center directors from Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny. Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson found that for their participants, “few . . . reported actively working on scholarship for publication” (174). More specifically, “Few of our directors were (well) supported in doing disciplinary labor: they were not all given funding for conference travel or purchasing books and subscriptions, they lacked access to databases, and few had time, at least during the study year, to read and write. None had research assistants” (174). In part due to this lack of support for scholarship, as well as the extensive “emotional labor” participants expressed—“labor that . . . must be done, but it doesn’t ‘count’” (187)—the authors tell us that “five of the nine of our participants stayed in the positions they held during the study year” (188). This relatively high rate of attrition represents not just instability for the particular institutions where those writing center directors plied their trade, it does not bode well for a field with already precarious standing. To explain this phenomenon, Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson note that prior training, disciplinary identity, and a robust search process were likely factors for those who stayed in their positions:

Directors who were hired into their positions from open searches, who taught, who had PhDs in rhetoric and composition, and who were on the tenure track were likely in their positions at the end of the study year and a year later. We can’t say for certain that these directors were happier (if that could be quantified) or better at their jobs (also difficult to measure). Our study merely hints that a center might pass through fewer hands, which we’d argue is valuable for the stability and progress of a program and is more likely if these elements are in place. (191)

Of course, that a large number of their participants did not become writing center directors through these channels attests to the stance toward writing centers that many institutions continue to hold: Directing them does not require specialized training, a national search, nor institutional resources to ensure success. Further, “those directors who felt as if they belonged at their institutions—because the institution had promised a long-term commitment through tenure or because they taught and thus forged strong relationships with students
and other faculty—were directors who stayed in their positions” (191). A sense of belonging is perhaps what the real currency is here: without it, writing center directors are eager to move on. But to obtain it requires an expenditure of emotional, everyday, and disciplinary labor that is not always possible. Ultimately, it was up to the individual writing center directors in Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson’s study to create that sense of belonging, not necessarily the responsibility of the institution, their colleagues, or even the larger field. This focus on individual responsibility results in some feeling as if they belong and others not, distinctions quite likely to be based on identity markers and to favor those with already established networks—the people for whom higher education seems like a comfortable place, folks largely white, male, and middle class.

Overall, I am hard-pressed to think of Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson’s book as a recruiting tool for new writing center directors, particularly when they tell us that “writing center director labor is largely invisible institutionally” (195). The relational work that marked those directors who stayed in their positions, then, was largely driven by their own initiative, not by institutional structures created in advance. It seems inherent in the betwixt-between nature of writing centers in the present day—mere academic support or fully invested academic partner? Basement grammar garage or site for meaningful research? Brief stopping point for academics on the way up or career-building context? Certainly, a strong conclusion from The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors is that the former of these pairs is what prevails, that the metric of writing center success in the Golden Age does not rest in the academic discipline or even the administrator in charge, but instead in a fractured set of relationships that provides just enough resources for an institution to feel like they’re doing something to support student writers. In sum, I am impressed by Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson’s research and convinced of their argument; however, I am left with little notion of how to solve the instability they describe.

While I find myself mired in that pessimistic view after reading The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors, the two other books that I review in this essay attest to the ways that writing centers might also be at the forefront of research/practice/praxis despite a lack of institutional support. R. Mark Hall in Around the Texts of Writing Center Work and Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson in Talk about Writing: Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors attest to the possibilities for translating everyday practices into theoretically sound collaborative research opportunities (akin to teacher or action research), representing new models of knowledge making, ones not necessarily tied to institutional rewards but to desires to improve the work that we do. In Around the Texts of Writing Center Work, for example, Hall takes the stance that writing center research/knowledge making is easily woven into staff training,
reflection, and practice. Situated within larger social theories of learning and Vygotskian activity theory more specifically, *Around the Texts* offers examples from Hall’s writing center staff education and research program. The *Texts* in the title are richly varied, including: a “list of tutoring practices” that his staff develops and uses for peer-to-peer observation and assessment; transcriptions of sessions themselves, which act as points of reflection—framed through activity theory—for consultants to better understand their practices; tutors’ post-session summaries, which, when shared, become a kind of script for a “community of practice” (Wenger); a series of tutor blog posts for the purposes of reflection; and an assignment from a tutor education course, which provides another occasion to tutors to reflect on their experiences and their growing understanding of writing center work.

Each of these texts and tasks are quite common in writing centers nationwide, and perhaps Hall’s largest contribution here is not necessarily what we learn from his staff’s research but the ways that any writing center might look at everyday practices as points of inquiry. Unlike most other sites on campus, the strong role that writing center staff, particularly undergraduates, play in these research endeavors offers powerful examples of writing centers’ unique contributions to knowledge making. It is important to note, however, that Hall’s stance is not simply to plant undergraduates in fertile fields of writing center research: 

We need to take care to cultivate a culture of inquiry, with deep and sturdy roots, particularly among novice tutors, in which high quality RAD [replicable, aggregable, data-supported] research has adequate time to mature and flourish. Novices need to become acquainted with relevant conversations in the field before framing research questions. Research, for both novices and veterans alike, needs time to percolate. (9)

This cautionary is certainly sensible for any kind of research endeavor, but perhaps even more so if writing center staff are to engage in inquiry that is impactful and long lasting. In these ways, Hall reminds us of the knowledge-making opportunities in writing center work and the ways that our understandings of learning and teaching writing and all of the complications that those activities involve and express can be viewed in every tutoring session, every tutor reflection, every interaction, no matter how seemingly mundane.

In many ways, Mackiewicz and Thompson offer another example of everyday writing center practices as sources for new knowledge about learning and teaching writing in *Talk About Writing*. Like Hall, their research is rooted in social theories of learning, particularly Vygotsky’s idea of the “zone of proximal development.” And, also like Hall, their aim is to improve writing center practices based on systematic inquiry of current practice. Where their approach differs is that the object of their inquiry is narrower and deeper: they examine ten writing
center conferences at Auburn University that both tutor and student participants evaluated as “highly satisfactory (five or six on a six-point scale)” (2). And even more specifically, they examine the language tutors use in these conferences to achieve their goals, a rich microlevel sociolinguistic analysis intended, in the authors’ words, “to analyze experienced tutors’ talk in satisfactory conferences in order to consider ways to improve current tutor-training practices” (9).

Mackiewicz and Thompson create their framework for analysis from a broad array of literature in linguistic, educational, and psychological research, practice, and theory. They are also detailed and transparent about the development and application of their coding scheme, a welcome model for all such research (Smagorinsky). Their analytical scheme focuses on three kinds of tutor talk: instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding. Each of these broad moves has multiple subtypes (e.g., instruction consists of telling, suggesting, explaining, and exemplifying), and we are presented with extensive examples of each, as well as “conclusions and implications for tutor training” at the end of each chapter. In that way, Mackiewicz and Thompson constantly remind us that the purpose of their rigorous research is to gain understanding of what effective practices look like in writing centers and apply that understanding in broad ways. An additional implication is that writing center pedagogy is a patterned genre, replicable and researchable across multiple sites and with multiple participants. Mackiewicz and Thompson are inviting readers to apply their analytical scheme to a much wider variety of sites in which writing tutoring occurs—essentially all levels of education and all types of institutions—to build foundational knowledge of what “effective” tutoring might look like.

While I find both *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work* and *Talk About Writing* extremely useful guides for other centers to engage in meaningful research, one absence is particularly striking and emblematic of their inward turn: Both books pay little to no attention to issues of identity (e.g., race, class, gender), or of writing centers as perpetuating status quo literacy practices (Grimm, “The Regulatory Role”), or of the frequent encounters with students who represent “difference,” particularly when it comes to nonnative English writers. Contemporary writing center scholarship has not shied away from these challenging and important issues (e.g., Greenfield and Rowan; Geller et al.; Denny), but they are strikingly absent in Hall’s and Mackiewicz and Thompson’s books. I bring up this critique not merely to fulfill the obligations of this genre, but to point out that the role of writing centers in higher education is far from settled. That two recent books promoting writing center scholarship from “everyday” practices do not point out how those practices are high stakes for certain members of campus communities and how the work in writing centers is never race, gender, or class neutral might indicate how nascent a discipline writing center studies
is. My colleague Kyle Oddis and I have argued elsewhere (“The Social Lives”) that writing centers might represent “anti-disciplinary” spaces in their focus on getting certain kinds of work done and on creating collaborations with campus partners who are not necessarily valued by how much scholarship they produce (e.g., study abroad offices, honors programs, community engagement), but by the agency they create for students to learn and grow. Whether nascent or anti-disciplinary, my point here is that writing centers are an academic enterprise that represents both the best values of our institutions and transmission of the worst of those values. Whether untenable working conditions for new writing center directors, a lack of institutional support, or structural barriers to knowledge making, the elements for stability and success are not evenly shared.

I’ve argued previously that the twentieth-century literature on writing centers is marked by accounts of writing centers as “punishment” and writing centers as “possibility,” often at the same time (“Punishment and Possibility”). Harris’s 2001 celebration of writing center scholarship and Murphy’s 1997 declaration of research “bankruptcy” represent another manifestation of this dual identity. My reading of Working Lives, Around the Texts, and Talk About Writing is that these books continue this trend. Writing centers offer solid, intellectual career paths for some and burnout and frustration for others. Writing center research offers opportunities to develop a “community of practice,” to make new knowledge about what writing centers do and how they do it, but this knowledge is created in the face of reward systems that will not necessarily value it. I have no crystal ball to predict what writing centers will look like in the unsettled future of higher education, particularly as many institutions face increasing pressure to focus on “excellence” over access and fail to meet the needs of students least prepared for college-level writing. An inward focus for writing centers might very well generate the kinds of knowledge that represents disciplinary identity and meet disciplinary aspirations, but the larger mission and the values of inclusivity and social justice that many of us share will be far more difficult to realize.

Writing center work does not exist in a vacuum; our centers are situated in a current climate of higher education contraction, dwindling state and federal funding, and the effects of long-standing efforts to remove remedial instruction from four-year institutions. In other words, it is not enough (and perhaps never has been enough) to pay close attention to what is happening within the (basement?) walls of the writing center. Writing centers are structurally and symbolically part of larger entities vying for “ownership” of writing (Hesse), a scenario in which writing centers are a currency, an often-devalued one. Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson powerfully reveal this state of affairs, though we are not left with a plan for action to address the problem. Hall and Mackiewicz and Thompson offer ways we might turn inward, focusing our lenses on improving
and learning from our work in systematic, theoretically sound, and rigorous inquiry. But if that inquiry ignores the structural problems that keep writing centers and many students at arms’ length from our institutions, it is difficult to see the point.

Note

1. The National Writing Center Association officially changed its name to the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) in 2001.

Works Cited


