

## CHAPTER 9

# “OH, I GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS”: SHORT-TERM WRITING CENTER/ COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

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Throughout this collection you have read about long-term WAC partnerships between universities, community colleges, high schools, and other institutions that have been successful over many years, and others that have been learning moments for those involved. When I first became a writing center director, these kinds of long-term partnerships sounded exciting, but they also felt a bit overwhelming and possibly even impossible to achieve with *my* present writing center and resources. What I found, however, was that I could start small and build (see Chapters 2 and 8 for examples of such progressions). Over the years, I have come to value the affordances and returns of short-term collaborations between my WAC-based university writing center and local schools and community groups, as well as more distant partners who can collaborate electronically. All of these collaborations have shown that sometimes partners just need a jumpstart, a little help in conceiving of and planning for the possibilities, to get started with new programming. It doesn't mean that the university or our writing center isn't willing to partner on a more long-term basis; in fact, knowing that we're in the background and willing to help may be the best support for new programs and their participants. Connecting local schools to state and regional writing networks can be ideal, giving them a variety of partnership choices and opportunities. Short-term partnerships also have the advantage of low costs, small upfront commitments (which may be an advantage to a public school or non-profit with an uncertain future), and fewer logistical problems. Despite these low-stakes investments, the payoff can be rich and rewarding for area teachers, students, and community members, as well as the writing center, the WAC program, writing center and WAC staff, and the university.

In this chapter, therefore, I'd like to briefly outline why short-term partnerships are worth your time and energy (and perhaps, your money), then give some examples of various short-term WAC partnerships that have occurred in

or through our writing center, which also serves as our de facto writing across and in the disciplines program. Then I would like to close with a case study of a program at our institution, Grandparents University—a program that illustrates how short-term collaborations can not only be rewarding on their own, but can also grow into larger more long-term partnerships—and a set of recommendations for building your own short-term partnerships.

## WHY SHORT-TERM PARTNERSHIPS

Schools, community groups, and individuals all seek collaborations for a variety of different reasons. Their motivations may come from within their own programs or schools, or may grow from outside pressures and expectations. Some of the reasons I've encountered include the following:

1. Lack of knowledge or experience: The English teacher asked to start a writing center when she has no writing center experience. The committee asked to plan a writing-across-the-curriculum program for its school. The non-profit director with volunteers asking for additional training.
2. The ever-increasing strains of federal and state testing and the consequent drive to “improve writing.”
3. Grant demands to develop partnerships.
4. Teacher or program desires to write in new and different ways.
5. Requests from community members, patrons, students, or parents.
6. Past positive experiences with writing centers, as students perhaps or even as former consultants (often with (y)our writing center specifically).
7. Personal connections with the center, director, or staff of a writing or WAC program.

The motivations of potential partners may not directly match our own objectives, but in my experience, as long as potential partners have complementary goals, the collaborations can be beneficial for both parties—for the day, the week, or the year.

At most colleges and universities, there are a number of different vision and goal statements that blanket the work that we do; you can usually turn to these statements when seeking justification for investments with partners, whether it be for the time you and your staff will donate to the project or the materials, space, or finances needed to make the project successful. At Michigan State University, for example, there are at least three different goal statements that call for investment in the community, for giving students hands-on experiences in the world, and for developing and supporting research: our Boldness By Design campaign (<http://boldnessbydesign.msu.edu/>), the more recent Bolder By

Design campaign, which adds to the original plan (<http://bolderbydesign.msu.edu/>), and our Liberal Learning Goals (<http://learninggoals.undergrad.msu.edu/goals>). In addition, the writing center has its own articulation of these university goals and its own mission guiding the work of the center. As these various statements and goals overlap, four particular goals have risen to the surface for guiding the work in our writing center:

1. The call from our president to move from a land-grant to a world-grant university;
2. The mission of both our university and our writing center to serve the greater community;
3. The culture of family and long-term commitment we strive to develop with our writing center staff and across the university as a whole (Spartans for Life); and
4. The ethos of research in and about writing across the curriculum that we promote through our center.

These four goals consequently guide the collaborations we seek and the partnerships to which we say yes.

These goals do not require long-term commitments, nor do they hinder them; consequently, the opportunity for growth is always present and the rewards of short-term projects are present as well. Many of the potential partners who come to us are exploring their options, so we do not want to scare them away by requiring long-term commitments, or by suggesting ambitious plans that may overwhelm them. Starting small allows both of us to invest relatively small amounts of staff time, energy, and even money as we figure out what works, what doesn't, what the perceived needs are, what the real needs are, and how we can both benefit from working together. Starting small usually means we can test the possibilities and weigh the options in a more timely fashion as well. Large projects must be written into budgets that are planned a year or more in advance, and often require a greater level of commitment and approval outside of the center or program. Often, small projects can be worked in more easily and may then provide useful data if we both decide to pursue a larger project down the road, with each other or with other interested partners.

## **A SAMPLING OF SHORT-TERM PARTNERSHIPS**

To illustrate what I am promoting, I would like to start by describing a series of brief collaborations between our WAC-based university writing center and partners in local and alumni high schools, as well as with community organizations. I hope these descriptions of real collaborations will showcase the possibil-

ities and help illuminate the value of such investments.

## WORKING WITH HIGH SCHOOLS

One common area of collaboration has been with new high school writing centers at both the planning stages and the start-up or fledgling stages. These collaborations may be as easy as an email conversation. Former students, writing center alumni, even university alumni who know we have a writing center at MSU often email and ask for help. They need resources, they want advice, they want to be able to say they can get support, even if it's just consultations, from the university. I have a folder of materials I share with them: proposals used for other high school centers, letters to principals, teachers, and parents, sample surveys, bibliographies, and course syllabi (see Chapter 6, McMullen-Light, for more about such sharing of materials). I also get them hooked into the network of other secondary writing centers and/or WCenter; if working with an alum who isn't local, I try to put this new director in contact with a writing center director in the area where the new center will be. Sometimes these materials and email conversations are all they need or want. If they are somewhat local, however, a visit is often the next step. A conversation in their space helps show our investment and usually prompts more specific questions about logistics and local context. Sometimes this investment leads to other collaborations, and sometimes it ends with the visit, and you have to be okay with it ending at this nebulous spot. You may not ever see the new writing center; you just know that you have done your best to help a new center or director get started and have served your colleagues and community.

Another type of short-term investment may be a bit more hands-on. Recently, for example, two local high schools started writing centers. They had a class and a center in operation before they fully figured out what they wanted to do or how they wanted to do it, so they called our center for help. A number of writing consultants on my staff were happy to go out to the schools and meet with the writing center consultants there. We were able to talk about some basic writing center concepts, such as the difference between revising and editing, helping students understand assignment sheets, working with writers from across the curriculum, when to say no to clients, and how to ask generative questions. We then hosted an open question and answer session that was successful for both of us. The high school students were able to voice some concerns, many of which they hadn't felt free to share with their advisor, while my consultants, many of whom hope to work with or start high school writing centers, learned some important caveats about operating in different types of spaces and contexts. We also invited these consultants to come visit our center at any time—to observe,

to be a part of an event, and to have their own consultations. After the first visit, we tentatively planned to return to these schools in the next year and to host sessions for the staff at our center as a way to model consultations and to maintain this small collaboration. We have already had our first applicant from one of these students who is headed to our university for her freshman year. The authors of Chapter 8 describe such a mutually beneficial exchange, demonstrating the usefulness of understanding the contexts, roles, and experiences on either side of the partnership, and of making both partners responsible for the collaboration. We have returned to the schools and have had the same kinds of discussions and question/answer sessions with the new staff, but we have not been able to work out visits to campus or our writing center—yet, but we’re still hopeful (and patient).

Patience can be important if your hope is to turn a short-term partnership into something more substantial, or into other short-term events. A few years ago, for example, Laurel, one of my former graduate student administrators from another writing center, contacted me. Laurel is now teaching high school outside of Washington, DC, and her school was starting a writing center. She stumbled upon a meeting one summer before the center was set to open and overheard some plans for the new center. Based on her writing center experience and study, Laurel was doubtful that their plan would work. After she interrupted the meeting and spoke up, she found herself the new co-director of the center with a colleague who had no writing center experience, but who was very excited about the prospects. Laurel called me to chat about their revised plans and to brainstorm some possibilities. Over the next year or so, we had a series of conversations about their new center and how the tutors and the program were progressing. When I found myself headed to an IWCA conference just an hour down the road from Laurel, she invited me to come visit her center and meet with her students. I was able to see her center in action, host a robust question and answer session with her tutors, and visit with some of her English classes. I continue to receive updates from Laurel, and I make sure I send relevant resources her way. I’ve also introduced her to some of the new high school writing center directors in my area (and on one occasion, an alum in her area), and she has continued to send me updates on their progress.

However, high school writing centers aren’t the only way to serve area schools. We have also had short-term partnerships with a variety of college prep and student enrichment programs in the area. One summer, we worked specifically with the high school students in the Upward Bound program. Through collaboration with their language arts teacher, we offered a series of workshops on academic writing and research, peer review, and creative writing. Writing consultants then worked with a small team of students who had volunteered to

be the editors of an anthology they were creating from the participants' work. Consultants guided them through the selection and editing processes, as well as the layout processes. With some financial help from our college dean, we then printed the anthologies for them—enough for students, parents, and representatives from their home schools and school system. The anthologies were distributed at a special celebratory event that included an open mic reading of some of the pieces, congratulations from a handful of local school officials, and a reception.

Spending an afternoon or two visiting a school or consulting with students at a local library is another way of investing with local students and schools that requires minimal preparation and commitment on either end. The main task is setting up a mutually viable date and recruiting volunteers to travel to the location in need (note, that you may also need to help student volunteers arrange carpools or figure out how a bus will get them to where they need to go). For example, over the past few years, we have been invited by a variety of teachers and programs to visit their schools and classrooms to consult with students on resumes and personal statements for college applications. Conversations about their writing also lead to discussions about college choices, choosing majors, what to expect when one gets to college, and other worries high school students have. These interactions help alleviate fears and make the high school-college transition easier. A similar endeavor included joining an existing collaboration between our professional writing program and a local elementary school to help them produce videos of stories they had written. The elementary students created the props needed for putting the story on film, shot the video, then worked with the college students to edit the film, including adding sound effects and voiceovers. When the film was complete, we were able to host a showcase night for the video's premiere and a display of the artwork/props used in this science fiction movie. On another day, we joined students from the MSU Poetry Center to consult with local students on poetry writing. These various short-term partnerships take our students into the schools, and also bring students and their families to the university, building good will on both sides and contributing to the overall community.

## **WORKING WITH/IN THE COMMUNITY**

Certainly our schools are a part of our community, but it is also possible to partner with the community in other ways. For example, we have sponsored music literacy retreats for several years. These retreats happen once or twice a year as the members of a local women's community chorus utilize our space to dissect the music they are singing that season. They use the technology of our

center to have multimedia presentations on the composers and lyricists of the music being sung, as well as historical or cultural information relevant to the piece or genre. They brainstorm, write, discuss, and share as their way of understanding the music, so they can put those interpretations into what they sing. It began as a one-time event, because they needed an accessible space with the right equipment, but it has continued for several years. What has come from this is a growing archive of chorus materials and my own personal oral history research project, *Voices of Sistrum*, about the more than twenty-five year history of this organization and its role in the local gay and lesbian and women’s communities.

A similar investment has our center going into the local public library once a week to sponsor a community creative writing group. Here, local writers gather each week—with a lot of variation in attendance—to write, to read, and to give feedback. Participants write poetry, short stories, creative non-fiction, and memoir. A couple of members are even working on novels that they share in pieces week to week. A couple of our consultants attend each week as facilitators and members, and serve as liaisons between our center and the library. Numerous events are growing from this small investment. The members of this group became the core of a writing marathon we hosted this past year, and they plan to host it again next year. They are also producing an anthology of the work written by participants, and twice a year, they come to campus to share their work with a wider audience at our open mic nights, which are scheduled once a semester. Also as a result of this small partnership, the library has begun discussions about us facilitating other workshops for library patrons: resume and cover letter writing, college application help, public speaking—all are topics community members have requested. Similarly, a couple of other libraries in the area have also asked to set up writing groups. Our next group will meet once a week after school at a different library, where area middle and high school students will receive writing consultations with their homework assignments from across the curriculum, as well as language help as needed for the many non-native speakers of English who frequent this library.

Our center also has an entire committee that has grown out of requests from community organizations for workshops on grant writing. Both groups and individuals have asked for help in researching and writing grants and for training their members to help with the grant writing process. Our first response was to create a grant writing workshop that was then given for the first group who asked for this help. When the workshop was requested again, consultants began revising the existing workshop and seeking help from experts across campus. From this endeavor, the grant writing committee grew, which is a popular committee for consultants who want to put to use the knowledge they gained in a departmental grant writing course, for those who want to learn more about grant writing, and for those who

think grant writing skills are important for their career goals. This committee is now creating a series of videocasts about various aspects of grant writing through interviews with experts in our area both on and off campus. These videocasts will be available to the community and will more than likely spark additional requests for workshops and partnerships (both large and small).

## **WORKING ACROSS ELECTRONIC SPACES**

As was mentioned previously, some short-term collaborations are about email support and discussions. Online chat features, blogs, and discussion boards can also be used to facilitate more in-depth conversations with groups of students, consultants, and community members. One semester, for example, we hosted a communal blog that was created to facilitate dialogue between our consultants in training, and new consultants, who were still in training at a writing center in Sweden. The two groups read some of the same assigned readings and were then able to respond to the readings and to each other online—broadening the discussion and allowing the two groups to see the different contexts that were influencing how students read the advice of writing center professionals. This partnership required a series of email conversations before both of our semesters started, agreement on a few mutual readings to assign students, and organization of the electronic platform for the exchange. Likewise, when a colleague from across the country asked for consultants to mentor her new high school writing consultants, I recruited several members of my staff to serve as their online buddies. A simple call for volunteers on our staff listserv yielded more partners than we actually needed. Those who were assigned buddies reported email conversations about readings, sharing consulting stories, answering questions about sessions as well as college in general, and making new friends.

Whether it's an online conversation, a revision workshop in the local library, or a training session at the high school down the road, these short-term collaborations have been important to those involved. My consultants enjoy the opportunities to have experiences with writers outside of our center; they also feel encouraged by the investment they see from other readers and writers in the community and in the schools. Students we have worked with have emailed to say thanks, and to suggest further programming. At orientation just this summer, a student who was not a tutor but who saw us on her campus, stopped by our information table to say, "You came to our school. I'll come check you out this fall." As a bonus, our college likes to brag about our partnerships, and counts our ventures into the schools and communities in their annual outreach figures. These low-risk, short-term collaborations have built a great deal of good will, and have certainly been worth our center's time and attention.



## FROM SHORT-TERM TO LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS: A CASE STUDY

One partnership that started out small and has continued to grow is a hybrid of many of the forms discussed above: Grandparents University. I'd like to use Grandparents University as a case study to further illustrate how short-term collaborations can help you meet your institutional goals, enrich your consultants' experiences, and evolve into something bigger and more permanent.

Grandparents University is a program sponsored by a collaborative of alumni organizations from across our university. For three days, pairs of grandparents and grandchildren live on campus, stay in the dorms, eat in the cafeterias, and attend workshops designed specifically for them. These workshops are intended to highlight all of the various areas of interest across campus and to be hands-on for the participants. During registration, participants indicate their top preferences and then attend approximately four classes as a pair (out of more than fifty offerings from across the curriculum), as well as evening activities for the whole cohort. When the program began in 2006, the writing center offered one workshop on digital storytelling. The participant pairs came in, discussed storytelling and video making, created a storyboard for the brief story they wanted to tell, then filmed or took pictures in order to tell their story. They then worked on our center computers in iMovie to create and edit their videos; consultants were around to help at every stage, but most importantly at the last drafting and editing stage. After Grandparents University was over, consultants completed some final editing of these projects, then participants were mailed copies of their movie on DVD.

The success of this first small partnership then began to grow in both scope and size, and has increased in some way each of the past seven years. As a whole, the Grandparents University program has been successful and has expanded each year, and we have done our part to support and add to this growth. The digital storytelling workshop, for example, has grown into a two-part workshop that happens on two different days, with extended time for each part. This format gives the participants more time to plan and get consultant help with brainstorming and storyboard drafting, then time away from us and across the university to take still and video pictures for their movies. On the second day, they have more time for drafting and editing, including their voice-overs and music; they can then leave with their movie burned to DVD or a jump drive that day—no waiting for a DVD in the mail. In addition, the writing center has added two more workshops to this partnership—one that asks participants to think about the genre of the comic book, and then teaches them how to make their own in the program *Comic Life*. They then create their own comic stories

or scrapbooks during a two-part workshop. In addition, we offer a memoir writing workshop that gets participants started in drafting a life narrative or creative non-fiction piece, and also encourages them to keep a journal of ideas for future writing projects. All of our workshops are well attended and receive positive feedback. But the partnership hasn't stopped there.

Grandparents University reaches a wide number of MSU alumni and community members. As a result, we have had area teachers contact us about doing some of these same workshops for their students. For example, one teacher has brought in two different fifth-grade classes for the Comic Life workshop. Working with composers at different educational and developmental levels has been good for our consultants, helping them stay sharp and truly focused on the needs of their clients in a specific moment. In addition, a number of research projects have grown from our work with Grandparents University. It was a research project that led to the initial expansion of the workshop, for example. Another round of assessment conducted by our facilitators, as they prepared for a conference presentation and utilized participant surveys, led to using two different days for the program, and made sure our participants could leave with their final products. Also, a consultant was interested in how participants' attitudes about technology might change as they went through the workshop, especially the attitudes of the grandparents, who often demonstrated some fear of the technology. A series of pre- and post-attitudinal surveys were used to investigate this research question, and the participants were happy to be involved in such a research project. Because the project is short-term at only three days each year, but is also ongoing with a variety of different participants, it has become a perfect venue for consultants to develop and hone their skills in the areas of research and assessment, making them better students, researchers, and consultants.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING YOUR OWN SHORT-TERM WAC COLLABORATIONS

- **Be open and listen.** Possibilities for partnerships can arise in a wide variety of ways: A conversation at a committee meeting, over lunch, or in the grocery store; a request through our center email or my own personal email account; or a suggestion from a client or consultant. My strategy is to listen specifically for ways our center can intervene or serve. Can we provide a space? Do you need some volunteers? Do you need a workshop that we can provide? More often than not, I try to find a way to say yes that doesn't overly commit us in terms of personnel, time, or money at the beginning of the partnership, because we can always extend and expand at a later date.

- **Do your research.** What are the needs in your community? Attend community events and find out. Attend workshops and committee meetings that are about partnerships, especially events that may feature potential community partners. Invite community members to your events so they can see what you're doing and think about how they could be part of it. Our community creative writing groups grew from a focus group we sponsored with area literacy leaders as we investigated ways to be more involved with our immediate geographic area.
- **Talk about what you're doing.** Word of mouth is one of the best ways to develop new partners. Talking about a partnership with one group may spark ideas with another group. Letting your colleagues across campus and in the community know the breadth and variety of your work will help them think about you when they need the kinds of expertise your center or program has to offer. We are often called upon by other units on campus to provide one event, one workshop, or one day of services as part of a lengthier program that is occurring over time on campus.
- **Advertise what you're doing.** If you have a website, a Facebook page, a Twitter account, or other social media accounts, use them to advertise your partnerships and programming. This again will spark ideas for others, and may prompt potential partners to contact you. It will also prompt volunteers to get involved.
- **Record or count what you're doing.** Count the people you reach with your short-term collaborations, list these outreach contacts in your annual reports, and show how they benefit those involved, including the larger school community(ies). Most directors, whether tenured faculty, administrative staff, or some other label/title, have a charge for service work and possibly outreach or engagement. Count all of the times you consult with area teachers or visit local schools; those you report to will be happy to pass these positive statistics along the administrative line.
- **Play matchmaker.** Don't be afraid to say “no” or “not now.” Sometimes, you aren't the best fit or the solution to a problem. However, if you know which program or person would be a better fit, make introductions and help them get started. The favor will more than likely be returned down the road.
- **Have fun.** Enjoyable, interesting partnerships and collaborations can be contagious and become a point of pride. They get people excited and usually lead to more projects (often bigger projects if that's what you desire); and on a pragmatic note, they can lead to more funding.

My argument here is simple: value the possibilities of short-term partnerships and collaborations. One-time events may be repeated and expand into larger events. Helping one high school may lead to discussions that send other high schools your way. A successful workshop with a community group may open up doors for other workshops and/or other groups. You never know where your short-term WAC collaborations may lead. However, don't be disappointed if the partnership stops with just the one workshop, the single event, or the isolated visit. These singular occasions have their value as well, and should be celebrated in their own right, acknowledging that you and your program are team players invested in your school and community.