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Our Documented Growth as a Field and Community: An analysis of the *Writing Lab*

Newsletter

The *Writing Lab Newsletter* is a serial publication that began as a one-woman effort. Muriel Harris released the first issue in April 1977, hoping to create "a forum for exchanging ideas and information about writing centers in high schools, colleges, and universities." By December of 1984, the mailing list had grown so explosively that Harris was forced to print a warning that only recipients who offered donations toward its publication would remain on the mailing list. The *Writing Lab Newsletter's* increasing popularity and small staff also caused the issues to shift from monthly issues to larger, bimonthly issues in November of 2010. Production is always paused between June and August, as many writing centers close between the spring and fall semesters. In spite of the changes it has undergone in the last thirty-five years, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* remains true to its tagline: "promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing."

The *Newsletter's* original issues served to connect recipients through a printed mailing list, publishing conversational submissions in response to the previous issue's list of questions. Since then, the call for submissions has become a behind-the-scenes process, moved from the actual printed issue to a section of the website. Now including essays on research as well as pedagogy, the issues have developed an air of professionalism. And yet, true to the collaborative ideology on which writing centers are built, student voices are still included alongside those of directors and accomplished scholars. Over time, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* has primarily remained a collection of "articles, conference announcements, book reviews, professional news,

and a column by and for tutors." The following analysis will trace the archive's points of interest over time—a shift toward research and technology has mirrored that occurring in the field. The *Writing Lab Newsletter* has adapted and grown throughout its history, always striving to unify and stimulate conversation within the writing center community.

Foundations: Issues from the Late 1970s

Muriel Harris began working at Purdue University's writing center in 1976, a year prior to releasing the *Writing Lab Newsletter*'s debut issue. At this point in time, writing centers were rapidly gaining popularity across the United States. This expansion is likely due, at least partially, to the Expressivist movement and the increasing diversity on college campuses. These two factors challenged composition professors to provide individualized attention to an ever-widening range of diverse students. Because writing centers foster peer collaboration on a one-to-one basis, they helped to alleviate or at least supplement instructors' efforts. As new writing centers emerged and the field of composition continued to develop and change, the *Writing Lab Newsletter*'s first issues seek to answer the most pressing questions at hand: *Who are we?* and *What, exactly, do we do?*

The first issue, released in April 1977, is dedicated almost entirely to putting writing center directors in contact with one another. Harris was encouraged to start the *Writing Lab Newsletter* after that year's meeting of the 4 C's, so it's fair to assume that the first mailing list includes those who initially expressed interest while at the conference. The first few pages of the first issue are set up to share recipients' suggestions for future issues. Harris prints Amy Richards' suggestion "that we consider the possibility of forming a bank or repository for copies of our own home-made lab materials." Beginning these archives is a crucial step in the writing center community; a collected history began to record and shape the fluid idea of the writing

center. A list of approximately fifty *Newsletter* recipients and their respective mailing addresses follows these suggestions.

The second issue, published in May 1977, includes a call for contributions that creates a slightly more focused picture of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*'s purpose. The most pressing questions identified are: *What resources do you have and use?*, *How do you keep your records?*, and *What teaching strategies do you use to train your staff?* Staff training is a logical interest for anyone developing a new writing center; the interest in evaluation techniques is a marker of writing centers' reflective practice. Without much writing center research already published at this point in time, Harris instead invites others to share their opinions and practices regarding these concerns. To begin the conversation, Harris includes two forms used by Purdue University's Writing Center, providing readers with a model to use or to respond to in discussion.

The third and final issue of the first publishing year was released in June 1977. Announcing its summer hiatus, the *Newsletter* also leaves writing center personnel with questions to consider and resources to use in preparation for the next academic year. The overarching theme of the issues revolves around two more questions: *Who are we really here to serve?* and *What problems are we responsible for tackling?* Specific points of concern, listed as questions for readers to write about, are staff training, how the director's philosophy affects his or her writing center and staff, financing and budget concerns, in-session concerns such as the risk of proofreading, how to best evaluate sessions and our work as a whole, and how to keep records. These questions were also generated at the 4 C's. This issue has a bit more substance than previous ones: Rather than just posing questions, a few contributors share about a paragraph of information on suggested readings. These do not yet take the form of book reviews or

analyses—they merely mention the names of resources and where to find them. These tips include book titles, articles in various publications, upcoming meetings and conferences, and catalogues from which to order educational materials. The issue still includes a list of new members, helping recipients keep an up-to-date network of colleagues across the nation.

The Struggle for Legitimization: Issues from the 1980s and 1990s

The 1980s and 90s comprise the time period in which writing centers fought for their positions on campus communities and to be taken seriously as a legitimate field of study. The *Writing Lab Newsletter* reflects an increase in writing center research during the 80s and 90s, most of which involved evaluating writing centers' effectiveness and expanding writing centers' services. The 1980s are marked by several fundamental developments in the writing center field. In 1983, the International Writing Centers Association was founded in order to provide a forum for representatives from each of the regional writing center organizations to communicate. Additionally, the first National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing was hosted by Brown University in 1984, and there has been an NCPTW conference every year since its inception. As is evident from these great strides in the 1980s, it is clear that writing center theory began to be considered a legitimate field of study. However, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* reflects that this was not achieved without a struggle.

This struggle is evident in the September issue of 1981. Larry Rochelle's "The ABCs of Writing Centers" discusses the many "enemies" of the Writing Center, or the faculty who argue that writing centers give students too much assistance: "The problem with these colleagues is not their moral strictness; no, it is the fact that their 'righteous anger' influences weak-kneed administrators who just might cave-in to their biased anger… and this cave-in just might bury the Writing Center…forever" (7-8). In the early 80s, support from English departments and faculty

was essential to the continuance of writing center funding. This resistance on the part of faculty was documented in the subsequent years. For instance, in the June issue of 1982, Jane P. LeMoine's "Overcoming Resistance to the Writing Center" describes ways to combat faculty and university opposition to writing center work. LeMoine writes, "we wanted to ensure faculty confidence in and cooperation with the Writing Center" and to "avoid faculty skepticism toward the kind and quality of remedial instruction" (6). Discussions of cultivating confidence in writing centers were quite common during the 1980s—perhaps this is because writing centers were initially branded as "separate" from university writing and English programs. They were marketed not as a supplement to writing instruction, but as an alternative to the hierarchical nature of classroom instruction. This branding made faculty skeptical of their purpose and effectiveness. In the November issue of 1982, the unstable grounding of writing centers is made even more evident. In "Redefining the Role of the Writing Center," Muriel Harris writes that although writing labs are a "growth industry," they need to prove this to "budget-slashers": "Yet, in addition to all this forward motion and expansion, we need to remember we are neither secure nor entrenched firmly in 'the system'" (1).

In an effort to solidify their place in "the system," the *Writing Lab Newsletter* reveals writing centers' turn toward research and inquiry into the varied student populations that writing centers serve. There was a persistent assumption that writing centers assisted only underprepared freshmen students in writing courses, and research into the different services writing centers offer to varied populations rectified this assumption. In the September issue of 1985, Nancy Yee details her research in the article, "Writing Proficiency Examinations: A New Perspective on Writing Labs." Yee sent a survey to 76 schools that required students to pass a writing proficiency exam in order to graduate: "One thing revealed by the survey was that the new

writing proficiency requirement was creating renewed interest in the writing lab as an important campus resource" (5). Research similar to Yee's did much to prove that writing centers provide more than basic assistance to a single population of students.

Throughout the 1990s, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* contains articles that focus on expanding services to high school, graduate, ESL, and disabled students. There is also a concentration on collaboration with other university programs, which may have been spurred by increasing Writing Across the Curriculum involvement and interest. This is manifest in articles such as Carolyn Walker's "Communications with the Faculty: Vital Links for the Success of Writing Centers," appearing in the November issue of 1991. Walker expounds upon the necessity of faculty collaboration with writing centers. Walker's point is echoed by Diane LeBlanc and Jane Nelson in the 1998 article, "Writing Center Outreach Programs: Shaping a Collaborative Role," which discusses the collaboration between a University Studies course required of all freshmen at the University of Wyoming and the Writing Center. LeBlanc and Nelson write, "as a major resource on campus, the Writing Center has had significant and direct involvement in the design, evaluation, and continuing development of this course" (5). Throughout the 90s, the negative or wary perceptions of writing centers were changed by repositioning writing centers as integral parts of universities and writing programs. In the 1993 article, "Explaining and Justifying Writing Center: One MORE Example," William Yahner writes that "the main rhetorical imperative for writing center directors may consist more of establishing our place within the mission of the whole university than of explaining ourselves to our English colleagues" (5). This suggests a redefining of what a writing center can provide not only for students, but for universities as a whole.

Looking Forward: The *Writing Lab Newsletter* Today

Through its most recent issues, *The Writing Lab Newsletter* has set its eye on the future and the rapidly changing nature of writing center work. With the widespread availability of the Internet, writing centers have faced a number of challenges regarding the expectations of students—some are computer-savvy and bring in complex assignments from similarly tech-minded professors, while other students may enter the writing center because they have never before used Microsoft Word. At the same time, however, the Internet and various computer software programs have opened up infinite, exciting possibilities for writing centers. The *Writing Lab Newsletter* has taken a particular interest in those who have used technology to creatively solve longstanding problems or to expand writing center services to more students in more places. These articles are a direct response to the changes that technology has implemented in classroom pedagogy and assignments.

In the May/June 2011 issue, we witness a few directors' struggles with technology and their methods of overcoming them. Arlene Archer writes in from the University of Cape Town (Cape Town, South Africa) to address the ongoing challenge "to train tutors to utilize these technologies effectively themselves so that they can deal with the changing nature of assignments," which include using "images as evidence…posters, storyboards, or assignments that include CD-roms or other media" (10).   In order to keep up with these technological demands, directors and tutors must stay informed about their use, their challenges, and their benefits. Many published articles in recent issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* offer sympathy and advice for adjustment to these changes—for example, director Jackie Grutsch McKinney of Ball State University laments her increasingly cluttered Desktop as resources shift from printed to online mediums.

McKinney's purpose for contributing is to share new programs, namely Mendeley and Zotero, that have been developed to help researchers tackle this clutter. Overall, the May/June 2011 issue focuses on the growing student populations, range of assignments, and unique needs of students, while also suggesting tools and tactics to help administrators' daily operations.

 As more students attend college, more colleges have created satellite programs and locations. This has been challenging writing centers to meet the needs of enrolled students who are entitled to services but who are unable to physically visit the writing center. Meanwhile, even on-campus students and staff may find their involvement limited by excessive course credits, internships, student teaching, and jobs. In the October 2010 issue, Matthew D. Klauza of Auburn University proposes an e-mail based mentoring system that helps connect writing center staff despite busy schedules. In the issue that follows, November/December 2010, two graduate administrators from Ohio State University share their own online training program, which includes "self-guided training modules on various tutoring-related topics" (Estes and Martina 2). This allows busy tutors to train independently, remotely and at a convenient time. The online platform also allows students to link to more resources and to contribute to online discussion. In an adjacent article, Jackie Grutsch McKinney suggests using Twitter and other social media as a way to connect with clients. These accounts can reach students with resource links and periodic reminders to visit the writing center.

 Of course, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* still investigates in-person challenges that have been negotiated since writing centers' earliest days. For example, the January/February 2011 issue focuses on how tutors can navigate emotionally charged sessions (Mills), while director Claudine Griggs suggests a refreshing, in-person form of tutor evaluation in the May/June 2012 issue. Not only are new obstacles and questions surfacing in the field of writing center work, but

writing center personnel from all over the world are reframing existing problems and sharing new solutions for them.

The Big Picture: Evaluating the *Writing Lab Newsletter*:

The *Writing Lab Newsletter's* purpose is to "promot[e] the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing," and has effectively accomplished this for over 30 years. This exchange of voices comes from writing centers in graduate schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, high schools, and various other locations. Since its first issue in 1977, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* has played a major role in legitimizing writing center work as a field of study. By sharing different techniques and research, the writing center community has been able to act to solidify themselves as sites where dynamic writing instruction takes place by means of collaboration. True to the collaborative ideologies that undergird all of writing center theory, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* publishes articles from all voices in the field: tutors, professionals, professors, directors, and faculty. Additionally, every issue is available for free in its online archives, therefore excluding no one from gaining access to it.

Writing centers respond to what occurs in the classroom, and the people submitting articles are often interpreting the changes they've witnessed within the field of composition. For instance, as student populations become increasingly diverse and critical pedagogy becomes dominant in many classrooms, writing centers teach tutors how to navigate these complex issues in writing center sessions. This led to many articles in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* that dealt with ethics, politics, and emotionally charged sessions.

The *Writing Lab Newsletter* allows those in the writing center field access to the latest research on recent advancements within the field, which is essential within the ever-changing landscape of higher education. Most importantly, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* paints a clear

picture of the history of writing center work. It reveals the struggle the pioneers in the field faced when trying to solidify themselves as a legitimate field of study, and continues to keep up with the latest technology and increasing diversity of student populations. The *Writing Lab Newsletter's* archives span back to 1977, and therefore provide a recorded, dynamic history. It is a valuable resource not only because of the information it shares, but also because it provides a supportive, inquisitive network of peers and colleagues to which one can turn.

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