

## Director's Column: "Local Work: Identity and the Writing Center Director"

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*"So, after careful consideration, it appears the Writing Center is a Center after all."—email to department chair from associate dean, 2009*

*"And it may be, that after this review process, we end up determining that some Cente— like the Writing Center— aren't actually Centers."—statement to university Center/ Institute directors by provost, 2015*

Four years into my career as a writing center administrator, I found myself involved in a somewhat surreal email exchange with my department chair, dean, and associate dean. The issue at question was whether the writing center was actually a "Center" and thus subject to specific funding and reporting requirements. This debate about our identity lasted for over a year until the dean eventually declared that, in fact, the writing center was a Center.

Six years after this determination, however, I sat in a university-wide meeting of Center directors and heard the provost announce that we each would need to apply to maintain our "Center status." This step, he explained, would ensure institutional alignment with state system guidelines specifying, for example, that Centers "pursue teaching, research, and outreach across a diverse set of scholarly and social topics" and that the work of all Centers be "aligned with local, national and global needs" ("Centers"). Because those characteristics described our thriving writing center, I listened dispassionately—until the provost offhandedly told the packed room that one result of this process might be the realization that some centers—for example, The Writing Center—had never really been centers at all.

I suspect that like many writing center directors, I tend to think I have "heard it all." Rarely, therefore, am I fazed by misunderstandings of what the center is or does. But the provost's com-

ment stunned me. For over twelve years, I had used the writing center's identity as motivation, guidance, and evidence for nearly every aspect of my work. Yet despite those efforts, I now faced the harsh reality that this identity was still too easily misjudged.

Since this experience, I have grown thoughtful about the Writing Center's identity as I have questioned why my work requires me so frequently to explain and re-explain the center within its own institution. In particular, I contemplated the many documents I have created for just this purpose—documents meant to convince others of the Center's worth as I see it. Taken as a whole, such documents form a kind of textual, chronological narrative revealing how a center's identity is constructed over time and providing writing center directors with a useful tool to examine this crucial component of our work. Thus, armed with my array of emails, annual reports, memos, and formal proposals, I undertook some textual soul searching.

As I considered—and was at times surprised by—how I had constructed my center's identity, I realized that what we know in the field of writing center studies may differ in significant ways from what we know within our own institutional contexts and as directors of our own unique, situated writing centers. I want to offer here the lessons that emerged from my self-study in the hope that as writing center directors we might consider more productively and more deliberately the work we do on behalf of our writing centers.

I focused most closely on four formal proposals I wrote between 2005 and 2016 that demonstrate deliberate efforts to present a writing center identity that upper-level university administrators would find compelling. Each proposal had a distinct purpose and responded to a significant challenge or change in the Writing Center and/or the university as a whole: The first (2005) requested an additional faculty appointment for the center when the aftermath of a departmental shakeup left the veteran director fulfilling a role in the chair's office. The second (2006) proposed a fee for first-year composition students as a way to meet the dean's requirement that centers generate a portion of their own funding. The third (2015) was requested by the dean to outline the merger and administration of two very different writing centers following a state-mandated consolidation of my university with a smaller, STEM-focused institution. The fourth (2016) was the application to remain a Center announced by the provost.

I first holistically read each document and considered how I had focused my depiction of the Writing Center; next, I examined

trends in the frequency of my use of recurring words/terms (tallied electronically and proportionally to each proposal's overall word count). As is often the case in any institution, change at my university comes in bursts; thus proposals one and two were written in close chronological proximity as were proposals three and four. Nine years separated the second and third proposals, and not surprisingly, there were marked differences in my perspective and language at the two ends of this time frame.

In general, the earlier proposals discuss a writing center that provides "multi-faceted writing support" that "has assisted thousands of students with all manner of writing-related concerns" and that "has always supported all writers on campus through a pedagogy grounded in the scholarship and disciplinary best practices of writing center studies and composition and rhetoric." In other words, these proposals depicted an excellent writing center—but a writing center that could be situated at almost any institution.

When directors speak of our centers in such broad terms, we no doubt intend to legitimize our work by aligning it with established ideals. We do so at our peril, however, as our audiences are unlikely to recognize those ideals or the worth we attach to them. Furthermore, as Jackie Grutsch McKinney suggests, a consequence of overlooking distinguishing features of our individual centers is that we restrict much of what we could say about them. Indeed, in examining these four attempts at communicating my center's identity, I see missed opportunities in which I failed to highlight meaningful aspects of the Writing Center's crucial role within the university.

Not surprisingly, certain words and terms were used consistently throughout all four proposals: the university's name, the term *writing center* and the words *writing*, *tutors*, *student(s)*, *faculty*, *support*, and *program(s)*, all of which appeared at rate of .33 percent or higher. The trends in the usage of these words, however, are telling. In proposals one and two, *writing center* and *student(s)* appear most frequently whereas in proposals three and four, *writing center* and the university's name are the most often used words. In fact, only in proposal four is *writing center* not the most common term; instead, the university's name is used more frequently.

The most recent documents also introduce for the first time terms prominent in my institution's discourse. Thus, rather than featuring disciplinary language more appropriate for a tutor-training manual, proposal four highlights writing center support to stu-

dents that “complement[s] their coursework, progression to degree completion, and career goals.” Similarly, instead of referencing writing center scholarship to legitimize the work of our center, I highlight the center’s efforts at “connecting with the broader [university] community to foster engagement with writing and highlight the university’s commitment to improving the literacy practices of [the state’s] citizens.”

What prompted this revelatory shift in my writing and thinking? While I would like to credit my own good sense and maturity—and indeed, I think the administrative savvy earned as a veteran writing center director was a factor—this change was also guided by the highly structured application for centerhood itself. Along with requests for a variety of information from center directors, the provost’s office had used the application to highlight university goals, plans, and initiatives. As I discussed key elements of the writing center alongside those of the institution, the relationship between the two became more and more apparent—hopefully to my audience but also, perhaps more clearly than ever before, to me.

As a result, whereas the earlier documents described a more general, ideal writing center, the final two proposals depicted a far more locally situated center recognizable within and unique to its own institution. Taken as a whole, the evolution of the language of these proposals shows a sharp increase in the connections being made between the center and its local context. As writing center directors, attending to these local connections to demonstrate a center’s worth should be the first deliberate step we take when we consider writing center identity.

As my university’s center application suggests, our institutions need and want to be made aware of these connections. Illustrating the role and reach of the writing center within its institution automatically situates its identity in a local context that audiences both understand and value. While writing center studies as a field continues to develop strong organizational and scholarly identities and as we promote and celebrate our internationalization and associations across regions, we cannot ignore the importance that local arguments hold—perhaps more crucially than ever before—for individual writing centers and their directors.



## WORKS CITED

“Centers.” Kennesaw State University, 2016, centers.kennesaw.edu.

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