

# Collaborating, Calibrating, and Control: Writing Center Directors Navigate Institutional Interactions

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It was the best summer ever. I had defended my dissertation and accepted a writing center administrative position for the fall. An invitation from a soon-to-be colleague popped up in my email inbox: “Hey, want to collaborate on this project?” I was flattered and excited. Coming from a very collaborative rhet/comp graduate program and dedicated to the collaborative ideals foundational to writing center work, I was eager to collaborate at my new institution. Two years later, I’m still happy with my position and value close relationships with my colleagues. Yet, I also carry with me two years of tumultuous, conflicted collaboration, different (in kind rather than degree I believe) from the productive dissensus I had previously experienced in teaching, tutoring, and scholarly collaborations. The role of collaboration in the professional life of a writing center administrator (WCA) is nuanced, multifaceted, and at times more confusing than conflicted. This article seeks to explore what collaboration means for WCAs, and how WCAs—those of us who are new, those of us who are newly positioned, and those of us facing new situations—might best collaborate while we’re still calibrating to the environment.

The collaborations we foster in our classrooms, in our writing centers, and in our field are not perfect and, as scholarship attests, are not without conflict. Yet, in teaching, tutoring, and field-based scholarship, we generally have a shared (or shareable) understanding. For instance, we might consider ourselves all Bruffee-fied and Trimbur-ed: we are motivated to collaborate as a way to engage in community, and we understand that collaboration can help normalize difference. In writing center studies, collaboration has been called, “the common denominator of our work” (Eodice 128). Collaboration is indeed our strength, one that Roberta Kjesrud and Mary Wislocki encourage we embrace in negotiations with upper-level administrators.

The critical attention to collaboration in writing center theory is integral to our work. However, when we collaborate with various stakeholders at our own institutions, fundamental differences in understanding can make these cross-campus projects prone to unanticipated conflicts unlike those we experience in teaching, learning, and tutoring. The difference comes, in part, from the inconsistent use of the word “collaboration.” In a cross-disciplinary examination of collaboration, Wendy Bedwell et al. note “the range of what researchers mean by collaboration is vast” (141). They trace conceptualizations of collaboration across ten disciplines and find that “depending on the specialization of the authors, the same term could refer to different forms of interactions, providing little, if any, construct clarity” (129). When writing center staff collaborate with stakeholders across our institutions, we must negotiate new, shared understandings of collaboration.

Collaborating with various campus programs is not an unexpected component of writing center administration. Skimming writing center position announcements on the Modern Language Association’s Job Information List and [writingcenters.org](http://writingcenters.org), I found the word *collaboration* appears quite frequently: “candidates should have a demonstrated ability to work collaboratively with faculty across the disciplines in shaping the composition program;” “This position may also involve collaborating on program development (such as working with other tutoring programs);” “The director will . . . foster strong collaborations with faculty, academic departments, and relevant campus units.” Within the context of the ads, collaboration seems to indicate institutional realities of shared control, shared resources, and perhaps expectations to play nice with whatever comes a director’s way. I do not take issue with these expectations; on the contrary, I appreciate detailed job ads and the sense of institutional context they provide. However, keeping in mind Bedwell et al.’s assertion that there is no interdisciplinary common definition for collaboration, I think the label is often presumptive, causing interacting parties to skip over articulating shared understandings of what their collaboration entails before moving forward. Kjesrud and Wislocki encourage rhetorical inquiry as a strategy for exploring conflict during collaborations with upper-level administrators. I embrace this practice, and think it helpful to 1) extend the practice to all potential collaborations and 2) begin with the simplest of inquiries: seeking shared language of what collaboration is and what the collaborative process entails in a given context.

To gain a more textured understanding of how WCAs engage in collaboration at their institutions, I conducted an IRB-approved

survey and follow-up interviews. Following a query on the WCen-ter listserv, 37 writing center directors completed the survey, answering multiple choice questions that identified types and frequency of campus units with which they collaborated. Twenty-seven directors followed up on their multiple choice answers by sharing stories in writing or via synchronous interview. The survey indicated a prevalence of collaborations with institutional staff and faculty, affirming the importance of understanding differing disciplinary perspectives on collaboration. The respondents' stories speak to the challenges and rewards of diverse collaboration—collaborative practices worth attempting, continuing, and better understanding.

The stories shared below are considered mostly as a composite, in order to explore two questions: When does interaction count as collaboration? What are key differences in institutional collaborations we need to acknowledge and articulate? In this section, I draw on Bedwell et al.'s definition of collaboration as "an evolving process whereby two or more social entities actively and reciprocally engage in joint activities aimed at achieving at least one shared goal" (130). I offer strategies for thinking around four situational components influential in a WCA's commitment to begin, continue, or discontinue a collaboration: 1) collaborative inheritance, 2) collaborative proximity, 3) collaborative labor, and 4) collaborative representation.

### **1. COLLABORATIVE INHERITANCE**

It's a cultural trope that captures an adolescent anxiety: A new kid walks into the cafeteria, tray in hand, trepidation in heart. Where they sit has social ramifications that could last for years. Being a newly hired or newly repositioned WCA looking for collaborators can bring about a bit of that cafeteria anxiety. As we navigate our way through institutional space, new or repositioned writing center administrators wonder: Who are the key movers and shakers? Who has felt marginalized in the past and needs support? Who has a history of controversial actions? While we may not have cafeteria-level concerns with social appearances, we still must consider the ramifications of our collaborative connections. In "Breathing Lessons," Michele Eodice asserts that "we are the relationships we have" (123). This is a nerve-wracking proclamation to read when entering a new environment with few or no established relationships. If we are the relationships we have, should we rush to build them to gain an institutional identity? With this strategy, we may too eagerly agree to collaborate on time-consuming projects that divert our attention from items we value more.

Often, WCAs walk into collaborations that include residual tensions that predate their own work in the area. Survey and interview narratives include ghosts of WCAs past. The survey respondents shared stories of struggling with collaborative projects already in place when they took on the WCA role, projects geared toward the strengths of the previous administrators rather than their own. Other respondents noted that institutional awareness of previous WCA's "strong" personalities clouded collaborative opportunities. The challenges of collaborative inheritance are not limited to new WCAs. Institutional shifts in reporting lines or structure can create a discord of collaborative expectations. Newly positioned WCAs have to renegotiate collaborations as they are reshaping their own programs.

Collaborative inheritance must be acknowledged and explored as we approach an opportunity to collaborate. New and repositioned WCAs must defend and differentiate values at the same time we are imagining and articulating them. Whether we are new to the institution or just new to the partnership, we should inquire into local histories that may influence how stakeholders view the collaboration. Then, we can best engage in the balance of rhetorical inquiry and advocacy Kjesrud and Wislocki suggest to build a new collaborative foundation, drawing on inheritance without losing our own ability to evolve while we contribute. Bedwell et al. argue that an interdisciplinary definition of collaboration "must acknowledge the influence of time" (129). Being sure that all collaborators share an understanding of this influence on collaboration allows a more conscious transition out of what was inherited as well as an informed awareness of evolution as better understanding of institutional context is gained.

## **2. COLLABORATIVE PROXIMITY**

Another element of Bedwell et al.'s interdisciplinary definition of collaboration includes parties working toward at least one shared goal. However, they note that the interests of collaborators need not all be coordinated: "each entity may have differing, and even competing, sub-level goals" (134). What these sub-goals are and how conflicting goals might impact not only the collaboration but also a writing center depends, in part, on collaborative proximity.

### **A) NEAR COLLABORATIONS**

"So, what's the difference between the Writing Center and that other program?" I am using the term "near collaborations" to discuss the collaborative work done between campus entities that overlap in purpose or resources, entities that often face questions of differentiation like the example above. Responding can be

tricky: how do we represent our services as necessary and unique without inadvertently criticizing other programs? It can get even trickier if we have collaborative projects with these closely aligned groups. Writing center scholarship encourages us to find common values with potential collaborators. It makes sense to embrace what is shared in order to articulate outcomes of a collaboration, but too much overlap can cause a different challenge: the need for differentiation. Eodice proposes building collaborations over building empires, but in an era when writing centers are being folded into learning centers and state university systems are consolidating resources, near collaborations should be approached with a complete understanding of differentiated roles and tasks. We may not want to build empires, but most of us want to build something, even if working towards the boundarylessness that Eodice suggests. We can't anticipate how institutional restructuring might fundamentally change our writing centers, but we should be able to anticipate questions of program differentiation, providing answers that fairly represent ours and other programs while also indicating the unique strengths of having an (independent) writing center.

Survey and interview respondents seemed to struggle with near collaborations especially in situations where funding, staff, or space is shared. One respondent mentioned "trying to avoid duplication" as a challenge when collaborating with other learning support programs, and another described a move "to cleave" the writing center from other tutoring services. Additionally, after engaging in collaborative tutor education projects, some respondents noted the challenge of other entities "poaching" writing tutors with the lure of better hours, higher pay, or less work. One respondent even rejected the term collaboration as he described the process, redefining the work as "more accurately, interaction." These challenges of near collaboration illustrate the competing sub-level goals at play: namely, the goal of each entity to thrive as an entity.

In order to foster healthy collaborations that promote strong relationships between similar campus programs, collaborators should tease out their sub-goals in addition to acknowledging their principle, shared goals (often, improving or expanding support for student writers). Identifying the possible conflicts of sub-goals at the beginning of the collaborative process can help participants differentiate their roles in the collaboration, in turn differentiating the priorities and strengths of their independent services. This foundational practice may include some uncomfortable conver-

sations, but near collaborations are too valuable not to pursue. Study respondents found such collaborations include the reward of increased value in writing across campus, a shared language to use about writing, and development of innovative services and spaces. Additionally, respondents find that being literally close, spatially speaking, allows for organic, spontaneous collaborations to occur if one is open to the possibility.

## **B) FAR COLLABORATIONS**

While near collaborations have the challenges of shared territory and the benefits of organic growth, far collaborations have the benefits of distinct territories and the challenges of facilitating connection. Far collaborations are often what people have in mind when they think of collaboration as a means of bringing different perspectives together to come up with something greater than the sum of its parts. In far collaborations, much work comes as finding a shared goal to work toward. Even without the overlapping missions and competing sub-goals common in near collaborations, far collaborations can prove challenging due to distances (mental and physical) participants must traverse. Study respondents noted lack of time, lack of communication, sheer physical distance, and differing priorities as challenges faced when working together with faculty and staff in other departments or divisions. Bedwell et al.'s point that only one goal needs to be shared by collaborators is important to keep in mind during far collaborations. A WCA and another program coordinator might not see eye-to-eye on many issues, but as long as both are able to envision one shared outcome, they need not try to parse out agreement on everything that might happen. The potential benefits of far collaboration are vast. Respondents described far collaborations that culminated in greater visibility, new programs, and production of co-authored scholarship.

## **3. COLLABORATIVE LABOR**

A perhaps obvious characteristic of collaboration requires the work of at least two people. Bedwell et al. assert that "collaboration cannot be one-sided. Rather, it requires active, mutual engagement in the collaborative process at some level from all involved parties" (134). They particularly name delegation (someone directing the work of another) as separate from collaboration. The active contribution required of all parties is something that is not always present in some of the situations that can get labeled as collaborative. Most commonly in my query, two activities mentioned seemed more delegation than collaboration: 1) tailoring reports to correspond to upper-level administrators' values, and

2) preparing and delivering guest presentations and workshops as labor-intensive collaborations. While these activities often do involve multiple parties, some of the respondents' experiences with them seemed to be collaborative only in that an administrator or faculty member had reached out with an invitation. Spot-on reports and guest presentations are integral activities for many WCAs, but they are not innately collaborative, as collaborations are process-oriented, not relationship-oriented (Bedwell et al. 130). We can consider such activities as great writing center PR and demonstrations of good rapport with colleagues as valuable, but we should not necessarily view them as collaborations. Rather, such activities harness some potential for future collaboration, if the faculty member or administrator is interested in extending the connection to work with the WCA toward a shared goal.

While Bedwell et al. argue that collaborations are reciprocal, "engagement or participation from each party does not have to be equal" (134). This consideration is an important one when beginning any collaboration. Unlike writing center collaborations, in which roles are set, and co-authorship, in which equal labor is expected, in other institutional collaborative work the balance may not be so clear cut. One survey respondent noted of one collaboration: "I often feel that I am putting in more work in the partnership," and others echoed the sentiment. Expectations of labor should be discussed in detail at the outset of the project, whether collaborators be representative of the same or multiple levels of administration and staff. When possible, plans should be made to check in on renegotiating roles and workload at key points throughout the process.

#### **4. COLLABORATIVE REPRESENTATION**

In a late-season episode of *Seinfeld*, Elaine's "sidling" co-worker sneaks up beside her to share praise she's receiving from the boss. Sometimes in collaborations (and perceived collaborations) WCAs have to be a begrudging Elaine or a lucky sidler. How collaborations are represented in reports and presentations may not reflect the actual process of the work. Sidlers might pop up to take credit, and to keep the peace, appear collegial, and present the collaboration as a success, a WCA may let them share the credit. Other times, WCAs find themselves being pushed forward into the role of the sidler. One respondent described being presented as the "writing expert" working on a project applying for external funding though they had not participated in constructing the grant application or planning the project. Another respondent was uncomfortable being placed in a position to speak for an en-

tire department when no actual collaboration had taken place. Additionally, Kjesrud and Wislocki note that because of their complexity, “we can’t always tell when collaborations are succeeding or failing” (96). Whenever a representation of a collaboration is being constructed for an audience, it may be helpful to include a depiction of the evolving, active, process of the collaboration. Emphasis on process can shed light on involvement in a way that examining a product of collaboration cannot (Bedwell et al. 130).

In her discussion of connecting writing center assessment to other campus program goals, Ellen Schendel lists many benefits of collaborative work, while warning readers of one thing: “Collaboration at any cost sells out the important work of the writing center; it also won’t allow for genuine, mutually beneficial partnerships between the writing center and other units” (103). This caveat to collaboration is good advice that reaches far beyond center-based assessment projects. In order to be productive, contributing members to our academic institution, WCAs should evaluate opportunities carefully, learning about histories affecting the collaboration; work to gain common understanding of the nature, process, work, and ramifications of the collaboration; and consider how the collaboration might best be represented to other parties. Conducting such inquiry may delay initiation of team projects, but could strengthen their ability to be productive, enriching, and truly collaborative.



## WORKS CITED

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