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"For Writing Centers, By Writing Centers": A New Model for Certification via Regional Organizations

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Certification is an important way to develop academic capital, lend more credibility to writing center scholarship, and help solidify foundational beliefs and approaches to learning as writing center professionals. In this article, we present our ongoing process of developing a certification model rooted in established, writing center-specific educational practices and reaching beyond what is currently available. Using a survey of certification needs, desires, and challenges, we argue for the value of regional organizations—inclusive of colleagues who know this work well and have the potential advantage of proximity and institutional collaboration—as excellent sites for such work. Pursuing certification models specifically tailored to and replicable by writing centers provides the opportunity to reexamine fundamental concepts inherent in professional development that are valuable to both individual academic institutions and the larger writing center community.

Conversations concerning writing center certification pathways began gaining traction in 1992 when Bonnie Devet and Kristen Gaetke offered an informative review of certification organizations. They presented a strong argument for criteria offered by the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), noting its history and focus on individual tutor certification. In contrast, Joe Law posited a need for large-scale, writing center-specific processes, citing the then fairly new National Writing Centers Association (1995). Law as well as Devet and Gaetke recognized the challenges therein—including costs, paperwork, and buy-in—yet both arguments framed such affiliations as ways to bolster the institutional perception of writing center labor: "Unfortunately,

many writing centers are still perceived as ancillary to 'real' instruction and the writing center staff regarded as second-or-third-class members of the academy" (Law 155). Jeanne Simpson and Barry Maid viewed certification (although, like Law, they used the term "accreditation") as a form of "academic capital" (124), which can "lend credibility to writing center scholarship" (125) and potentially help demystify writing center work to those outside of our ranks. "Accreditation," Simpson and Maid argued, "... remains the currency of the academic realm" (128). Throughout this conversation, certification functions as a rhetorical act.[1]

Although accreditation is a national concern within academia, Julie Simon values local landscapes when considering national certification possibilities. After attempting to develop a model for her own program, Simon collaborated with her staff:

> to augment the CRLA list of requirements with a set of tasks that would invite those working on certification to take the initiative in creating and conducting activities designed to support campus literacy in any way they wished to define that literacy. As a result, I ended up with a definition that characterized certification as a process through which tutors would insert themselves into the system not as a mere cog, but as something akin to a wrench. (1)

Such a process directly mirrors writing center practices, offering "an approach to certification that would allow tutors to move from the margins of academic life to the center of our center" (3).

With these thoughts in mind, we began exploring certification models with both hope and skepticism. Our questions echo Simon's: "How will a certification program further our center's practical and theoretical goals? What should certification offer tutors beyond a line in their credentials file? How might it benefit our individual program and our discipline?" (3). Like Law, we value field-driven expertise, with criteria developed by writing center professionals. On the other hand, like Devet, as well as Simpson and Maid, we held reasonable doubts about the labor in preparing the type of large scale, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)-level work (involving site visits and other well-intended but time-consuming practices) that Law proposes. Along the way, like Simpson and Maid (drawing on a WCenter listserv comment by Lisa Ede), we worried that an accreditation model could "be misused" (131) and easily reinforce a problematic misunderstanding of the university as a corporation.

As directors at radically different centers—a historic, small liberal arts college and a large, regional comprehensive university—we es-

pecially appreciated Simon's sense of local flexibility. For example, Transylvania uses a required practicum course and bi-weekly staff meetings to support undergraduate tutor development, as classes are the coin of the realm in a small college setting. In contrast, EKU implemented the Developing Excellence in Consultant Knowledge (DECK) system, a hybrid, systematic, and scalable education program that promotes collaboration between consultants with a mixture of online, metacognitive activities, and discussion-based, in-person seminars (Morin and Ralston). Such differences in training reflect local landscapes.

We question the value of certification not directly anchored in writing center experience that goes beyond individual sites. Organizations such as CRLA, National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA), and Association for the Tutoring Profession (ATP) are long-standing and well-designed. As administrators, we applaud how these groups use scaffolded learning, formal outcome planning, and documentation/reflection, and we admire how these organizations value institutional stability, ethical behavior, and diversity training. Those organizations should continue to be seen as worthy sites of support. However, they are not explicitly designed to review writing center and institution-driven practices (which might include teaching composition processes or foundational understandings of writing center ethos to peer tutors). One could argue that there is little mention of "writing" at all.

As we developed our shared understanding of accreditation challenges (via readings, survey work, and ongoing conversations with colleagues), we considered how regional organizations like the Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) might offer the ideal audience, able to draw upon the rigor of peer review with important localized knowledge of writing center training practices, trends, and needs without the potentially cumbersome logistics of a national or international site for certification. In recent years, regional writing center organizations have grown in both size and status. SWCA, for example, now features its own peer-reviewed journal, *Southern Discourse in the Center*, and hosts an annual conference with over 250 attendees per year. These organizations maintain rigorous criteria for events, yet are small and familiar enough for both experienced and new writing center professionals. Regional organizations allow program leaders the chance to validate their efforts or learn emerging approaches employed in one center that might be beneficial for another. Regional accreditation agencies such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) and others value third-party assessments; MSCHE explicitly includes its rubric focused on assessment by third-party

providers. With these considerations in mind, we turned to our good neighbors in the Southeast.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS: ESTABLISHING A NEED

Our process began with several informal conversations at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in Tampa, FL, when SWCA board members reviewed existing frameworks and shared their perspectives on potential certification approaches. This early input shaped ongoing considerations, including:

- needs of writing centers in the Southeast;
- opportunities to show the value of writing center practices on the institution's campus and regionally;
- ways to link localized writing center work with best practices;
- implications of certification processes to demonstrate value; and
- values placed on certification processes by potential participants.

While the conversations proved productive, they also suggested complexity. Participants involved at that stage realized the need for input from disciplinary leaders to shed light on the benefits and drawbacks of a certification program, in addition to the design, requirements, or language used to describe the process. Discussions also revealed the need to consider the variety of institutional sizes and missions represented. With these considerations in mind, we designed an IRB-approved survey with 26 questions, which was distributed to SWCA members during the spring 2017 semester with a response rate of 21.7% (40 responses).[2] The survey questions allowed us to demarcate the priorities of writing centers in the region. Although we recognize that writing centers might pursue certification for many reasons, the survey offered leaders the opportunity to share both motivations and concerns.

Of the respondents, 87.2% of centers were not certified through existing organizations. However, 52.5% had explored certification but not pursued it, offering a range of reasons. For example, some reported difficulty in contacting organizations, as noted by one respondent's comment that there is "[n]o . . . easy way to make contact with [the] certifying entity." Others saw the required fees (in light of their own strained budgets) as an impediment. One respondent claimed the fees were prohibitive and the organizations were "not integrated into existing structures of tutor training and professional rewards system[s]." Other respondents found the certification to be "too labor intensive," while the current options "didn't seem to be appropriate." Although time and other resources were noted as significant challenges, participants said that such allocations might be seen as more worthwhile if certification were

more explicitly grounded in the daily work of writing centers: "CRLA didn't seem to know enough about WCs to offer a viable/respectable process."

Importantly, 50% of respondents valued explicit connections to writing center or writing studies organizations in a potential certification process. One respondent reported that "[t]he time and expense required did not offset the net gain of being certified especially outside of writing." Respondents noted that existing certification options "would create a lot of extra work for our tutors without adding a lot of value." In addition, "The certification was too labor intensive and didn't seem to be appropriate." Perhaps most importantly, one respondent noted that existing organizations did not understand writing center work.

The fact that such a large percentage of our respondents had chosen not to follow through on certification implies that if such effort were to be taken on, it would need to directly support intellectual development and day-to-day operations. The potential value that a certification program might add to tutor education was a priority among respondents; specifically, 97.5% listed tutor education as their top priority for certification and 75% responded with evidence of campus impact. In short: to be effective and valuable, certification programs must address and integrate the beliefs and nuances of writing centers.

SWCA representatives have ensured that resources are available to support the growth and development of writing centers, students, and future leaders. It seems only fitting that the organization leverage its collective and growing knowledge to advance the field through a certification opportunity. Given our survey results as well as information gained from conversations with colleagues, it seems that writing centers are best served by those involved in the work at a day-to-day level. Processes—such as certification—developed outside of writing centers lack the direct connection and, ultimately, the ability to contribute to and develop writing center discourse.

FROM SURVEYS TO FIRST STEPS: MAKING NEED A REALITY
We offer a three-step certification program that aligns with priorities revealed in our survey. These steps have been recently integrated into SWCA's framework. The suggested model is not limited to this specific regional organization and can easily transfer to similar organizations. The process follows multiple stages to ensure appropriate consideration by SWCA's certification committee, which reviews and archives submissions.

Material Submission

First, applicants are asked to gather materials that speak to their writing center's work and the mission of their institution. Submission materials include an application letter, a suggested two-page memorandum explaining institutional and writing center contexts, and a brief preview of supporting materials that include writing center tutor education documents: sample modules, syllabi, lists of readings, and other supplemental materials. Applicants are encouraged to show how they make use of their regions' writing center resources (such as attending or presenting at conferences or statewide events, taking part in sponsored activities, and/or using regional support). Furthermore, applicants offer a one-page description of the center's approach to tutoring and supporting writing. Finally, the director or program leader provides a current CV. These materials are received by the chair of the Certification Review Committee and distributed to committee members for review in light of current regional and national practices as provided by SWCA and the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA). Other regional writing center organizations might consider establishing similar committees.

Committee Review with Rubric

Second, the Certification Review Committee uses a rubric (available on the SWCA website) that supports consistent consideration of applications while cultivating a transparent process of peer review that reflects the academic nature of the writing center field. The rubric establishes common goals for certification review while allowing the committee and applicants to consider ways in which their centers promote collaboration among tutors, intentional planning of training (including currency of material, readings, and resources), and evidence of ongoing reflection to better serve the institution and its students.

Committee Response

Third, the committee drafts a response and recommendation to the applicants, which includes a narrative of strengths and weaknesses of the application, along with important feedback for implementation at that center. Importantly, the review process follows academic peer review procedures by providing feedback, guidance, and resources in response to programs that are not successful in their certification application.

Certified centers receive an official, dated letter from the SWCA president and Certification Review Committee chair congratulating the centers on their accomplishment. Following precedents established by the National Association of Communication Centers (NACC), certi-

fied programs are not required to update their status unless prompted by their academic institutions. The organization also issues an official, dated certificate for the institution. Certified centers receive recognition in the SWCA conference program and at the award ceremony each year. Finally, certified centers are issued an electronic SWCA-certified center badge that, as Tammy Conard-Salvo and John Bomkamp explain, allows for display of achievements (5), for their website and a listing on the SWCA website.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Writing centers have traditionally leaned toward already pre-existing certification programs from related yet distanced fields of study because none currently exist in our own discipline. Our survey reflects an interest in a peer support and review system, but one that would be worth the effort and that would reflect familiar, field-specific values. Along with conferences, collaboratives, regional gatherings, and other events, certification allows program leaders to validate such efforts as learning best practices or emerging and employing them to benefit their own centers. Scholars of rhetoric and writing have argued for the importance of organization-specific frameworks. For example, Randall McClure and James P. Purdy's recent collection employs the Association of College and Research Library (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* and Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) *Frameworks for Success in Postsecondary Writing* while providing theoretical and practical ways to justify important program decisions and staff development. Certifications are stronger when driven by community participants—in this case, writing center scholars who know the day-to-day challenges of our work.

A certification process is a major undertaking, even for long-standing organizations. While we do not claim that any certification would solve all challenges facing writing centers, the steps that might best represent the significance and complexity of this work would be built out of current writing center practices. Ideally, a writing center certification program should acknowledge evidence that programs offer writing-based, scalable design built upon highly nuanced rhetorical and disciplinary complexities familiar to those in charge of writing support.

Our ongoing study and process focuses on gathering more evidence and input through interviews with selected writing center professionals at a variety of colleges and in various levels of experience via future conferences such as SWCA. We also plan to invite additional insight via a more widespread survey beyond our own regional organization and through SWCA and IWCA focus groups. Such feedback

will further refine the certification process examined in this article. Writing centers will benefit from a field-driven, peer-reviewed certification process supported by colleagues who are both grounded in our discipline's history and practices and, at the same time, sympathetic to local concerns and realities (a consideration that situates our emphasis on writing center professional networks). The rigor and rhetorical focus of certification must fit the culture of individual programs, which, in turn, best serves the larger writing center community. Such a program offers an intentional and beneficial design that is for writing centers, by writing centers.

NOTES

1. The terms "accreditation" and "certification" are often used interchangeably. We use the term "certification" in this article to reflect the nature of regional organizations we discuss and how such organizations differ from SACS or other official "accrediting" bodies. Furthermore, we recognize the potential political problems in having "unaccredited" writing centers.

2. For access to the full survey, please visit the Research & Development area of the SWCA website.

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