# Insourcing and Identity: A Writing Center's Claim to Relevance

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In fall of 2018, outsourcing left its calling card in the form of a link to an external tutoring provider placed within our university's learning management system. Students across our state system's 37 colleges and universities could access this free online third-party service by clicking a button with a dot-com extension from within their enrolled courses. Thanks to various online announcements, printed literature, or campus orientation sessions that accompanied this link's rollout, students soon came to discover a new-to-them option from a twenty-first-century market giant: 24/7 academic help in any discipline, including writing help, with the click of a mouse. As a third-party clearinghouse for academic support in over 40 subjects, this new option promised students quick connection times for help from degree-holding, vetted tutors—all within the institution's already-existing interface.

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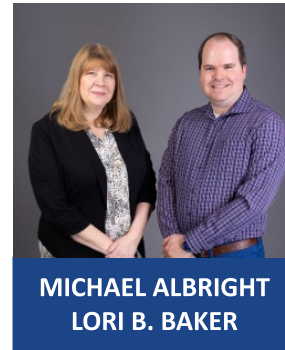
While this gateway to assistance would appear to be a boon to equally busy students and instructors, the rollout of an alternate site for writing help gave our small state school's on-campus Writing Center staff pause. We wondered what it would look like to have another option set up shop in cyberspace next to our more limited campus writing center staffed with undergraduate tutors providing a mix of face-to-face and online tutoring. We questioned how our tutors and services would compare to non-peer tutors available 24/7 synchronously and asynchronously. We fretted over whether this outsourced product would eventually replace our in-house product entirely.

Initially, we responded to the rollout by successfully petitioning for our writing center (along with other campus tutoring options) to be linked equally alongside the new outsourced option. Additionally, we engaged in some minor on-campus PR and rebranding to remind the campus community of the Writing Center and its services. At the end of the first year, we detected no significant dropoff in usage. We were still mindfully monitoring the impact of this new service when a global pandemic brought our in-person university operations to an abrupt standstill. Our Writing Center was able to adapt fairly quickly given that our tutors were already providing synchronous and asynchronous sessions; we simply moved all tutoring hours to those online options. Yet the loss of in-person tutoring, something that we had felt provided a competitive edge, made us even more acutely aware of our center's positioning. Our concerns about the outsourced service's always-on availability amid a global pandemic kairotically impelled us to refigure core elements of our identity and presence. That is, we responded to outsourcing by encouraging its opposite: insourcing.

INSOURCING AS COMPLEMENTARY PRACTICE

Outsourcing, common in the business world, extends to higher education, as institutions have historically contracted external vendors for student services, such as for housing or dining operations. However, only in recent memory have matters of teaching and learning been included in the range of outsourced possibilities with companies handling curriculum, advising, or course design. For students and educators, responses to outsourcing run the gamut, largely based on perceived outcomes and the value of what is gained—or lost—from outsourcing.

To counter these trends in the business world, some companies have made commitments to stem the tide of outsourcing by restricting new contracts or returning previously outsourced content to homebase. This process of returning or maintaining production on shore is "insourcing," and it is often heralded as a victory for domestic production and capital (Compton). The COVID-19 pandemic created a renewed interest in insourcing; CEOs had to seek "more control in an uncertain world" by insourcing talent, programming, and support systems (Gryta and Cutter). A survey of post-pandemic outsourcing trends reveals that "many companies appear keen to build capabilities in-house to mitigate the risk of a transformation failing should gaps appear in service providers' capabilities or performance" (Himmelrich et al. 5).

Our Writing Center has engaged in a similar response by actively identifying opportunities available within our already existing staffing, site, and stakeholder support. As such, we have shifted our work to focus on what we can do as a campus resource to protect against the very sense of dislocation that outsourcing tends to connote or create, effectively "insourcing" in spirit and practice with our tutoring staff to reinforce our presence, increase our reach, and affirm our purpose. In so doing, we shifted from being in perceived competition with an outsourced service to emphasizing our presence and product made possible through our localized stakeholders and campus site.

WERE WE IN COMPETITION?

Since the 1970s, our Writing Center has endeavored to keep up with student needs and populations, adapting or innovating as needed over time. We have always been staffed by 8-12 undergraduate peer tutors, with an occasional volunteer also in the mix. From its inception, our center has served students with any writing issue, unlike some other centers that initially started out with a focus on grammar and sentence-level concerns only. What began as a stand-alone writing center was incorporated into an "Academic Commons" for several years in the early 2000s (though always under separate direction and budget line) and moved to its own space in the library. Historically, 68% to 89% of available appointments have been filled over the past ten years; this range is fairly typical for an open-access center such as ours, with bookings cycling along with paper due dates. However, this customary fluctuation from term to term made it difficult to determine the initial impact of a new outsourced option.

Online tutoring options in the form of email exchange became available in 2006. These additional asynchronous services were initially geared toward a few specific programs that had online components or requested the service for their students. In fall of 2011, an upgrade in the online scheduling system used by the Writing Center allowed for us to provide an online platform readily available to all students. Similar to email, this initial online option allowed students to upload a paper for a tutor to review and embed comments and return. The following year, an online chat option was added. Until fall of 2019, the Center had steadily been running around 55% online/45% face-to-face.

Then came the pandemic. Although our overall usage appeared fairly steady since the pandemic, our online options have remained at over 70%, even with students' return to campus. As a "microcosm of the changes and redefinition of the academy itself" (Murphy and Law 134), the campus writing center occupies a crucial space for tracking evolution and change. We knew that with each passing semester, the outsourced tutoring option became increasingly popular system-wide, leading the central office to revise the contract to provide a greater number of available student sessions. The online outsourced option's ongoing contemporaneous availability made us wonder if this external product would eventually absorb all of our users entirely—especially when the outsourced option was emerging as a stable service offering in terms of its presence and availability.

When it comes to the threat of disappearance, which Murphy and Law address in their research, logistical transformations in an institution's delivery of services naturally invite shifts in practice, as service providers, companies, or vendors tend not to conform to "standards embraced by the writing center professional community" (Reglin). At this point, we knew who we once were but lacked a firm enough grasp on our present or future in terms of our identity. As Mary Lou Odom relates in her column "Local Work: Identity and the Writing Center Director," the establishment of a writing center's identity hinges on how it registers locally. While seeking to "legitimize our work by aligning it with established ideals," writing centers risk becoming so diffuse that "audiences are unlikely to recognize those ideals or the worth we attach to them" (Odom 27). For Odom, the very notion of "centerhood" is only "recognizable" when it's "within and unique to its own institution" (28). Thus, we began to look inward to appreciate our own center's lineage, history, and evolution and to revel in its distinction. It is from this inward position that we actively started to insource and uphold our identity.

WHAT WE COULD DO: RECLAIMING LABOR, PLACE, AND SPACE VIA INSOURCING

With time, any initial fears and the impulse to compete dissipated. We stopped looking beyond what we could control and what lay outside our own virtual and physical footprint. Instead, we focused internally on our presence as a campus resource to make it that much more visible. Lauren DiPaula chronicles a similar journey of maintaining her writing center's presence in terms of narrativity. For her, creating a "counterstory" precipitated action, allowing for an "emergence of what is possible, what might happen next" (7). For us, defining possibilities consisted of us insisting on what we could do instead of what we couldn't.

We knew that remaining open for 24 hours a day, seven days a week was impossible. We were aware that hiring professional tutors with degrees was distinctly impossible and counterproductive to our mission as an undergraduate institution. We resigned ourselves to the fact that our staff of 8-12 peer tutors was dwarfed by a full complement of virtual workers sitting behind computer screens across the country. However, all along, we recognized that there were certain experiences that only we could deliver from within, and that discovery became our small attempt to insource what we needed as a campus from *within* our campus.

One of the first moves we made in-house was to engage in publicity that highlighted our presence as an on-campus resource. We placed folded paper tents on tables at the dining hall and student center—places where, incidentally enough, students receive services that are outsourced to other entities. We made sure to join the announcement loop on the campus monitors by advertising our services and recruiting tutors. Although basic and admittedly low-tech, these moves represented our concerted efforts to underscore our presence for community members.

When it comes to how we tutored, we maintained in-person sessions when on-campus life resumed, while also increasing online sessions and available hours in real-time to correspond to exam periods. We began to enlist the Writing Center tutors to serve their peers beyond the more closed, traditional spaces of dedicated appointment slots or paper reviews. In one effort at collaboration and intentional, scaffolded support, several tutors were selected as Supplemental Instruction leaders for sophomore-level writing courses. While careful to maintain the distinctions between SI and tutoring, these leaders could strategically guide students, when appropriate, to Writing Center services. In a developmental writing course held in spring 2022, a Writing Center tutor was embedded full-time within the section, serving as a point person for the students and the instructor. The tutor was able to allocate hours so that attendance during the scheduled classes and conferences with the instructor was possible. As a result of this arrangement, the students in this section were able to benefit from a consistent, trusted peer who promised one-to-one support in ways that were not guaranteed or even available from outsourced options.

In addition to serving our on-campus and online student communities, our Writing Center made a special push to accommodate another sizable student population: the concurrent enrollment community. Our university serves nearly 100 school districts, delivering university courses to high school students across the state. As enrolled university students, these students have access to key resources from which traditional students benefit, including the Writing Center and the outsourced tutors. We had long been of the mindset that our online tutoring options were available to this population, and, historically, we had a few clients from one or two schools each term. When first faced with the outsourced rival, we made it a point to send more targeted communications to this population. When the pandemic brought learning in the high schools online, we received a strong response from cooperating teachers who wanted to integrate our services as part of their instruction. As a result, we reconfigured our operating hours and calendar within our budget to align with high school schedules that differ from ours. To further our insourcing efforts with concurrent enrollment students, in fall 2023 we revised our appointment form so that we can more accurately track their usage. The benefits of this connection cut across stakeholders. Concurrent enrollment students engage with key university resources without ever leaving their homebase. Writing Center tutors can benefit from new populations of students. And, the university as a whole is able to solidify its connection with partnering schools by making one of its key resources all the more accessible.

These initiatives were made possible by insourcing our already present talent, spaces, and identity. Writing Center tutors benefited from readily-available and local opportunities to be more active and invested on campus via placements within classrooms, online and face-to-face sessions, and outreach to concurrent enrollment clients. Stakeholders on the receiving end were able to benefit from resources that were irreplicable by other available avenues of support. In particular, the embedded placements and supplemental instruction programs accentuated the Writing Center's longitudinal presence within the university. The Writing Center and its people became more than a resource announced during orientation only to be forgotten about weeks later or a final stopover during exam periods, as it was now part of specific courses, their students, and the semester calendar.

By broadening, or reimagining, its reach, the Writing Center was able to rely on its own resources to serve its community in ways that are ultimately inaccessible or unavailable to outside entities. In this sense, collaboration within the university facilitated a certain degree of calibration that allowed us to resee or recognize how some practices we had all along were also vital insourcing practices (Powers 2). This is most apparent in recognizing how the Writing Center tutors

themselves necessarily benefit from the very opportunities they help to deliver. Our tutors exist as part of a scholarly community that simply isn't equivalent to a corporatized environment. They are supported by a faculty director who can interface with other faculty members to ensure a seamless exchange of information and feedback. However helpful they may be to writers, outsourced options do not tend to support undergraduate tutors in the way we can through the practical experiences and networking structures inherent to campus writing centers.

Thanks to dedicated practicums and meetings, the Writing Center offers the space for staff to develop as writers, learners, and tutors. Certain majors require experiences that are inexpensively made possible via peer tutors who know the classes and instructors of the community in which they serve. Moreover, in their roles, they frequently collaborate across departments with their fellow students and professors to engage in academic discourse intrinsic to the university.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the years, our Writing Center has evolved to keep pace with students' needs. The days of exclusive face-to-face appointments yielded to online scheduling and virtual paper sessions that operate alongside traditional, in-person meetings. The fixed presence of the Writing Center gave way to a new, dynamic model of instruction and service, which saw tutors being embedded in classrooms, serving distant student populations, and following their peers throughout entire semesters instead of discrete sessions for specific paper assignments. By focusing on our assets instead of deficits, we were able to avoid entering in what would have been an impossible level of competition. Instead, we found ourselves embracing an identity that was strong because of core elements of institutional place and localized labor. We looked inward to ensure our outward reach by insourcing talent and resources already available in order to remain relevant and present for our stakeholders.

Our work allowed us to engage in what William De Herder calls an "active investigation," which could "break through the sacrosanct practices and designs, challenging center staff to critically reflect on how their centers can transform to meet the demands of new social projects and technologies" (7). Even if the technology in question features thousands of tutors stationed 24/7 to assist students in over 40 subjects, including writing, writing centers can evolve and capitalize on their inherent advantages in proximity and community to exist concurrently and complementarily with outsourced corporate giants. Our campus Writing Center has not only continued to exist since the 2018 inception of a new option but has also evolved to respond dynamically to the exigencies of the university in ways that a more distant and removed online product cannot.

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