THE IMPORTANCE OF FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY
IN WRITING CENTERS: INTERVIEWS
WITH THREE WRITING CENTER DIRECTORS

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THE IMPORTANCE OF FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY
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Thesis

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The purpose of this thesis is to explore what practices and theories are used in three Northeast Ohio writing centers. The goal was to find out how important of a role flexibility and adaptability plays in each center. As a tutor in each, personal experience was used as well as interviewing each director in order to find out the individual pedagogies that were employed. After these interviews were conducted, the results were compared to recent strategies used in writing center theory to see how they are applied to flexibility.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this piece to my family. To my mother, Sharon, who has taught me to never stop pursuing my dreams. To my father, Michael, who has always provided me with advice and support. To my little sister, Alexandria, who has always given me hope. To my grandfather and grandmother, Allen (or as I know him Popsie) and Eleanor, for always being there for me. I could not have done this without you all.
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I. INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

II. INTERVIEWS WITH THREE DIRECTORS

III. REFLECTIONS ON FINDINGS

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LITERATURE CONSULTED
When I first heard about a tutoring course during my undergraduate degree, I thought it would be too much work to handle on top of my fifteen credit hour course load. I already struggled to work full time as a bartender at a local watering hole while tackling a Bachelor’s degree in English with a Writing Minor. Compared to bar tending, the Writing Center's pay was minute and the workload seemed heavy. I was not even really certain what a Writing Center was or what was done there. However, something told me to do it anyways. I was already helping out my friends and classmates with their papers and what was I really going to do with an English degree anyways? Little did I realize then that this humble beginning would not only create a career, but would also inspire a thesis.

The crew at this center was comprised entirely of undergraduate students who were divided into two groups: junior tutors and senior tutors. The junior tutors were the rookies in the center and the latter were more experienced, confident tutors. My first semester was spent taking the tutoring course and observing how the senior tutors conducted their session. I soon began conducting sessions of my own and something splendid happened: I truly began to enjoy the give and take of the time I got to spend with individual students. I enjoyed the work so much that I would stop my own studies, even when it was not my turn in the rotation, to either take extra sessions or help other tutors in
particularly challenging sessions. The students who came in to the center there were
typical of what a Midwest regional campus of a four year university looks like: mostly
younger Caucasians, with a small smattering of nontraditional and English as a second
language students. I was having a blast, but graduation was approaching. I knew that I
would need something more substantial than the minimum wage I was getting paid to
tutor, and moreover, I could not tutor once I graduated. Thankfully, before I graduated,
one of my classmates and coworker in the writing center told me about a nearby two year
college that was hiring professional tutors, and that the director was a fan of the director’s
pedagogy that I was currently working under. Knowing that I wanted to get out of the
service industry as fast as possible and do something with my degree, I was quick to
apply. After a brief interview, I was hired on the spot, and thus began my professional
tutoring career.

The semesters began to melt by at this two year college’s center. Its tutors are
comprised of folks who have at least a Bachelor’s degree and something occurred to me:
in the field of Writing Centers, or that of Composition in general, there is little to no
room for advancement without furthering one’s education to the Master’s and beyond.
How could I do this? I certainly did not think I was graduate school material by any
means. I knew as little about graduate school as I did about Writing Centers when I first
began. One thing I did know for a fact was that I did not want to take out another penny
in loans for a degree that might not be fruitful. My director suggested that I try to get a
Teaching Assistantship at a nearby university. I did not think I stood much of a chance as
I was not that excellent of an undergraduate student, but something told me to try
anyways.
I was lucky enough to be accepted into just such a program. Part of the training rigor there was to work in the writing center a minimum of seven hours per week, for the first semester. The tutors at this, my third writing center, were a mix of faculty members, graduate assistants, and undergraduate students. I had never seen such a center. Not only was the variety of staffing different, but the student population consisted of a majority of foreign students that had challenges I rarely saw in my time at the other two centers. Still, I remained intrigued with writing centers and how they work. In this relatively new field, there are still so many questions to ask and answers to seek.

During my time at these various centers, I read extensively about the narratives that surround writing centers: defining what they are, the stigmas that are attached to them, how to remain nondirective in tutoring practices, and how these spaces are often marginalized, to list but a few. All these methods and theories pointed me towards other, more complex questions: is there a single way to ensure that a center is efficient? For that matter, what does a well-functioning writing center look like? How can we label and categorize something that deals with the process of writing, which is such an individualized structure, to know that it is well-functioning? It could be said that if a student's time in the writing center helps them achieve a better grade on their essays, the center is an efficient one. From the point of view of the tutor, a well-functioning center may be one that allows them to explore different styles of tutoring while constantly learning more about how to work with students on every point of the writing process spectrum. The point of view from the director has to be a complex thing though. Some would say that if a certain percent of the student population used the center, it is efficient. Others would be content if their center helped whatever number of students that came in.
Pressures from outside the center also help define what it is to be considered well-functioning. Colleagues of the director often view the center as a place to send their students if they do not have the time to cover certain issues in class or are having a particularly difficult time expressing an idea to a certain student. From this perspective, it could be said that if the tutors could address said problem, then the center is serving its purpose and is efficient. A final outlook that affects the success of a center is the opinion of the administration. From this point of view, the center is evaluated solely on the numbers of students it services, a vital but problematic evaluation of the center. In their origins, writing centers were often viewed as “fix-it” shops that only served those students who did not possess strong composition skills. Such centers could easily be dismissed if they did not “fix” these writers. Thankfully, as centers become less marginalized and more respected for what they are, administrators no longer look to the number of students who pass through the doors as the sole means of determining what a well-functioning center should look like.

All of these factors led me to start thinking about the three centers I have had the chance to work in during my current academic career. Each school was moderately different from the last, but each center was drastically different from each other. Yet all of the centers are certainly well-functioning. What was it that made them so? They could have easily be unsuccessful, but they are not. I was too close to the subject to be able to see it then, but I believe I know what factor these centers had in common: a director who had properly adapted to his or her student demographic, institution type, and the needs of colleagues. This thesis is an exploration of that very theory. Muriel Harris states this idea
far more eloquently in her article “Writing Center Administration: Making Local, Institutional Knowledge in Our Writing Centers,” when she explains:

[g]eneral theories, practices, and research on writing centers must all be worked into the decision-making processes of structuring and directing a center, but reality is much easier than theory, and the locality of each writing center has its defining features and constraints that impinge on the structure of the center and the solutions to the various problems and questions that arise. A well-functioning, effective writing center folds itself into and around the localized features, building on them (76).

Each institution has different goals for its students; therefore, it is of utmost importance that the director recognize these and do his or her best to meet the individualized needs for his or her center to be well-functioning.

In order to fully understand how these Directors adapt to the various needs of their centers, one must first understand how the field itself came to be, as such narratives make up the common threads and theories that bind these otherwise very different people together. In 2010, Neal Lerner put together an exhaustive article entitled “Chronology of Published Descriptions of Writing Laboratories/Clinics, 1894-1977” in which he attempts to identify the emergence of the very first writing center. What Lerner found is that the initial reference to a center actually has nothing to do with creating a physical center at all, but focuses on the first recorded occurrence of “a setting up a high school according to students ‘individual needs’: ‘The work is now conducted largely by what may be called laboratory methods’” (2). 1894 is the first example of a school adapting to the needs of their students in order to ensure their success, and it is from here that the title of “Writing Laboratory” came into existence. In 1917, the first recorded use of peer review groups is mentioned (4). This idea of peer review is at the very core of writing center theory. Many centers, like the first one that will be explored in the following chapter, are staffed solely by peer tutors. In 1924, a method of teaching was introduced under the
name of the Dalton Plan. This method of teaching “eliminated class hours, set contracted individualized projects, and emphasized one-on-one teacher and student interaction” (5). This is the first record of the focus of student and teacher interaction switching into a one-on-one basis. Along with peer review, one-on-one interaction forms one of the backbones of writing center theory. Before the idea of working with the individual to ensure that the needs of the student are met, the standard course practiced what was referred to as the “recitation method.” That method is just as it sounds: students read and recite the course’s materials in hopes that the material is memorized. Memorization tends to lend itself to the hard sciences and not to the writing process.

It was not until 1929 that the first mention of “English clinics” as physical spaces came to be (6). The “clinics” were thought to be of little value, especially outside of the English department. Clearly, the marginalization of centers took seed in the early years of their conception. The center was looked at as a place for poor writers to go as a means of bringing their skills up to par with the institutional standards of the school they attended. This marginalization went even farther at Yale University when certain “[f]reshmen who are considered deficient in writing are assigned to the Awkward Squad’ rather than required to take a class” (7). The role of centers as remedial spaces for poor students is further propagated by thought processes such as this. It was not until 1936 that college curricula start practicing the “use of a writing laboratory in which students are writing for any course or outside of school needs” (9). The writing center was finally starting to work its way towards what we perceive them to be today: a place that any writer, for any assignment, and at any stage of the writing process can come in to further strengthen writing skills.
As the popularity of writing centers began to grow, so did the need for adaptability of the services they provided. One example of this individualization comes in 1938 when New York University’s Washington Square Writing Center places its “[focus] primarily on professional writing for publication” (10). This does not mean that the perception of writing centers has drastically changed yet, though. In 1939 this skewed view of writing centers can be seen in an article about how the “writing lab at Miami University of Ohio, [is] targeted at remedial students and containing largely drill-and-practice exercises” (10). At this point in writing center history, the primary goal in the eyes of the instructors of the time was that writing centers should correct the errors of the students who use it. This can be seen in Alvin M. Fountain’s hostile account of remedial students in his article *The Problem of the Poorly Prepared Student* (10). This elitist view of writing centers begins to shift in 1941 when Jesse Howard states that “[t]he Writing Laboratory is…a ‘large scale reorganization’ and ‘one of the more popular methods for attacking the problem of undergraduate use of English” (13). The mere use of the word “popular” does not connote negative images. This is the beginning of a shift to making centers more credited. This also marks a true start to the experimental phase of Directors trying to adapt to the needs of their school needs.

This dabbling with what might or might not work has some interesting facets. One of those facets comes in 1942 when Elizabeth M. Campbell wrote her article *The Evolution of a Writing Laboratory*, where she goes as far as to suggest replacing first-year composition altogether and replace it with the laboratory approach (14). Another oddity occurred in 1943, when Iowa State University offered their “clinic” to all students except freshman (14). The remedial marginalization of writing centers continued until
1950 when New York University enabled a “booster” system…similar to contemporary writing centers” (19). Peer review, one of the foundations of the contemporary writing centers, is mentioned for the first time in Ray C. Maize’s 1951 article The Partner Method of Review at the Air Command and Staff School (21). While this individually might not be seminal in itself, it does mark the beginning of the shift to a more modern outlook in writing centers. It can be seen that writing centers were becoming more popular at this point, when Earl L. Sasser conducted a survey in 1952, under the title of Some Aspects of Freshman English, in which he found that “123 institutions show [that they have] ‘clinic service available’” (22). This survey shows that despite the stigma of being a “fix-it” shop for students with poor writing skills, writing centers were beginning to grow in popularity and in use.

One of the major focuses of the modern day writing center is that on what is called the process of writing. In the past, the primary hope was that sending the students to such a place would fix their final product which is why these centers were not called centers but clinics and laboratories. A paradigm shift was starting to happen in the field of writing centers that somewhat mirrors what was going on in the field of composition. Given the relationship between writing centers and composition courses, this was of no surprise. In 1953, Barriss Mills’ Writing as Process “lays out a strong justification for teaching the ‘process’…because ‘laboratory methods also make possible a more or less continuous co-operation between student and teaching during all steps in the writing process’” (23). This mention of process is what begins to pull writing centers out of the remedial clinic perspective and into the light of a center (though they will continue to fight this stigma to this very day). It is not until 1958, when Catherine Tully Ernst writes
A Main Argument, that Brooklyn College even refers to their center by that title. Her workshop program was akin to the methods that are presently being used in schools. Regardless of this momentum beginning to build, many educators still believed that writing centers were of no to little use in the teaching of composition. This belief is made evident in Albert R. Kitzhaber’s 1962 *Freshman English: A Prognosis*, where he states that “remediation is disappearing from four-year institutions, having been consigned to the community colleges, and thus ‘writing labs and clinics are being abandoned’” (29). This article is interesting in particular due to its specification of the differences in four-year and two-year institutions which will be explored in the proceeding chapters of this work.

With all of the focus previously being placed on writing centers primarily for those who have deficient writing skills, it is refreshing to see that in 1965 C. B. Bordwell’s *The Writing Tutorial Across Campus* that “[t]he program was also being expanded outside of comp[osition] to undergrads and grad students” (30). Before this point, very few centers had students coming in for purposes other than their writing courses. This was a major point in stepping out of the past and into future of writing center methods. However, very little scholarship has said much about the tutors who inhabited these centers, up until this point historically. In the mid-1960s, accounts are recorded of tutors ranging from undergraduate students to fulltime faculty, and even faculty members' wives (31). This is an interesting turn in writing center scholarship as so much attention was paid to the remedial nature of the space before.

As the 1970s roll around, the focal point shifts away from remediation and on to making the student more involved in the writing process and how centers can help
legitimize this hope. In George W. Welch’s *Organizing a Reading and Writing Lab in which Students Teach*, he set out to achieve the goal of “convinc[ing] the student that there is such a thing as an academic community of students and that the student himself makes learning happen, rather than that learning is something given to him like a pill or a shove” (33). It should be noted that Welch’s writing center was completely staffed by peer tutors. This rethinking of what centers can and should be is reflected in the scholarship of the time. Arnold S. Daniel and Doris G. Sutton explore this idea in their collaborative piece *The Effects of Two Methods of Compensatory Freshman English*. The article “compares ‘the writing laboratory’ with the ‘remedial English’ or class approach. Lab students had higher grades in subsequent English classes and other classes than non-lab students” (33). This holds significance because not only does it help further concretize the idea that writing centers are beneficial to students regardless of what class work they might bring in with them, but it shows that enough thought was being placed into the inner workings of writing centers that more scholarship was needed to further explore the topic. When a concept has grown enough to require extending the conversation surrounding it, the concept itself has been given more room to grow. This was vital as writing centers were gaining footholds in schools around the nation. In 1976, Philip Sbaratta talks about how the physical space can play into the methods that a center uses with its students. In his article *Teaching Composition in the Portable Writing Laboratory*, he gives “[a]n account of the lab at North Shore Community College (Beverly, Massachusetts), which is ‘a self-contained writing laboratory, in which the only activity for the student is writing and in which the instructor serves as an editor’” (34).
This is an interesting account of writing centers in this time period due to the clearly defined roles of student and instructor.

Writing centers in the late 1970s were moving slowly towards their contemporary counterparts. This is evidenced in Patricia Meier’s piece *A System for Effective Composition Instruction* where she stated that the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s writing laboratory’s program “is neither a remedial program for a selected population nor a drop-in or referral service; rather it is a non-traditional system for achieving the traditional objectives of a freshman composition course” (36). Here, the traditional laboratory system was being moved to the more altruistic writing center that has been adopted in present day. This idea can be further seen in Donald L. Rothman’s *Tutoring in Writing: Our Literacy Problem*, when the concept of altruism wears the mantle of writing that is “an act of knowing and an act of communicating” (37). The writing center as a space where students can learn how to express themselves becomes an idea of the utmost importance to the field. When teaching a composition course, the main purpose is not to prepare the student for the next course, but to help the student expand his or her ability to communicate ideas in a clear and understandable way. Students who come into any given writing center should be able to have an opportunity to experience this growth.

One hallmark of a maturing field is the creation of places solely dedicated to scholarship. The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, created in 1976, and *The Writing Center Journal*, created in 1980, are both spaces dedicated to such scholarship. It is the purpose of these two publications to explore the variety of issues that writing centers encounter. These spaces act as a springboard for ideas or suggestions in the field, as well as a place where resources can be found for those new to the concept of centers. Started as paper
productions, they have since added electronic databases in addition to their print issues. This can be extremely useful as the articles published within their breadth are now archived, and the information can be easily accessed by students and faculty alike. It is important to note the wealth of theory and practice displayed in the field of writing centers; a clear demonstration that writing centers as a field have come a long way since their inception as remedial spaces to “fix” students’ poor writing skills.

However, it was not until 1984, when Stephen North writes the seminal writing center piece *The Idea of a Writing Center*, that the field begins to really stand up for itself and throw down the gauntlet, proving its worth beyond remedial spaces. In this piece, in which his frustration is obvious, North attacks the idea that these valuable places are being pushed aside and not being given the respect they deserve. He uses his writing center as the springboard to inspire hope and change in other centers across the nation. North “worked with writers at any time during the composing of a given piece of writing, and dealt with whole pieces of discourse, and not exercises on what might be construed as ‘subskills’ (spelling, punctuation, etc.) outside of the context of the writer's work” (434). He does not believe that centers need to be regulated to “fix-it” shops for writers with deficient grammar and mechanics. He stood at the very front of the movement to change the way writing centers are perceived, expressing distaste for his colleague’s stoic view of the center as a place that a student would only need to go to when the student had “something like twenty-five errors per page” (434). Even when he is in the middle of rallying for centers validity, those at his very institution turn a blind eye to his efforts. North’s school was one that students would be referred to the center when they had grammar problems, a practice that frustrated him to no end.
Responding to Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord's *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines*, North finds her interchangeable use of the terms “skills center” with “writing center” abhorrent (436). Beyond this, North tackles the tricky situation of the financial expenses within a center and the challenges the director of a budget-less center faces. He makes the claim that it is hard to change the view of what writing centers can be when a director is constantly having to justify the expenses that have to occur to hope to run a well-functioning center. North even takes on the physical space of many centers, which “in some cases [are] literally [a] closet” (437). No review of this article would be complete without the mantra for writing centers that was born from it, one that I personally bring to every session I conduct: “Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (438). The true importance of this article does not come from the many fine points that North sheds light on. The real importance lies in the message he wants the world of academia to see about writing centers: “[i]f writing centers are going to finally be accepted, surely they must be accepted on their own terms, as places whose primary responsibility, whose only reason for being, is to talk to writers” (446). Without this declaration of independence, the field would not be what it is today. North was one the first to clearly define what he believes a writing center should and could be. It is a space for writers, both those who run it and those students who come in, to actively engage one another to help expand the level of communication those writers can possess. North does more than merely give his point of view; he goes as far as to challenge others to rethink their view of writings centers and what they can be used for. North writes this piece to provoke English faculty. He was upset about how writing
centers were being marginalized and calls for his colleagues to see them for the useful resource that there are.

This idea of what a center can do and what it has the ability to do is the subject of Muriel Harris’s *What’s Up and What’s In: Trends and Traditions in the Writing Center*. Harris shows what trends have been up until this point and looks to the future in this 1990 article. This article acts as a wonderful reference guide as to what centers looked like in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As one of the foremost scholars in the field of writing centers, Harris's piece is not one to be overlooked. The first tradition Harris speaks of is that of sharing. By this she means the tradition that if one cannot find an answer or a particular solution to a problem, then those people ask each other for help. This holds true to this very day. In all of my time as a tutor when confronted with a problem or question I did not know the answer to, I simply ask a colleague of mine. This could be a fellow tutor, the director, or even merely an on-line search that led me to the answer. As a participating member of the WClistserv, this sort of phenomena can be witnessed on a daily basis. A graduate student will post a query about research, a Director will ask about new policies, or a general question can be asked out of genuine interest. Creating a comfortable environment is another aspect that Harris brings to light in this section. Here she speaks of writing centers as “havens for students caught in impersonal, anonymous institutions” (29). This concept of welcoming students has also been at the very base of my tutoring training. Without being comfortable, the student rarely can open up to the tutor and sessions are far more labored. Conversely, if the student feels safe in the space and with the tutors, an obvious rapport has been built up and less time (if any at all) has
to be spent allowing the student to settle in. This, in turn, makes the entire center run more efficiently.

Another tradition that is highlighted in the article that still has its place in contemporary writing centers is that of mystification of our colleagues. When Harris wrote this piece twenty-three years ago, writing centers were far less understood and valued than they are today. The passage of time does not negate this tradition, though. Mystification relates to the need to re-explain the value of writing centers each Fall semester. One would think that a facet of the university that started literally one hundred years before this article was written would no longer need to justify its existence, but such is not the case. To this very day, many instructors look at students using the writing center as “a sign of a teacher’s incompetence” or worse “that a writing lab is only for ‘basket cases’ and remedial writers” (29). The list of misconceptions does not stop there either. Some instructors still believe “that the writing lab is only for grammar problems, that tutors write the papers for the students and/or hand them answers they should find themselves, that tutors offer evaluative comments…” and this stigma still holds true (29). In a beginning of the semester meeting just this past Fall, writing center use came up among the fresh concerns of the instructors. One instructor was happy with the means the center uses to help her students and had nothing but praise to share with her colleagues. This quickly sparked the opposite reaction from another instructor who insisted it was the writing center’s job to teach her students grammar so that she might get back to doing her real job of teaching them to write. While it is a shame that this tradition of misidentification and mystification carries on, it does none the less and those who stand to defend and explain the writing center must do so time and again.
Being undervalued is another unfortunate tradition in writing centers. It follows logically that a program that is misunderstood would not have value placed on it. Writing centers have been notoriously underfunded, understaffed, and underappreciated. From their inception as laboratories and clinics, centers have run off of the blood, sweat, and tears of those who actually place value on them. It has been extremely hard to find funding for an academic space that no one even understands. Harris uses the example of writing center administration as “still too often something we are supposed to do with our left hand while focusing our ‘quality time’ on all of our other responsibilities” (32). This statement cuts to the core of how writing centers are undervalued.

The final tradition that Harris wrote about is something that remains at the very foundation of writing center practice: collaborative learning. This is something that I hold of the utmost importance to running efficient tutoring sessions and writing centers on the whole. Tutors have a unique opportunity to work with students in an environment that is something beyond the traditional student/teacher relationship “in which the student is expected to remain passive and receive what the instructor gives him” (32). The writing center is a place to help fortify the student’s authority as a writer and an independent thinker. By allowing this space to be outside of what is traditionally known as academia, the student is given the chance to feel comfortable and gain greater results from their time spent in-session. There is a flipside to this coin though. When a student comes in not to collaborate, but under the impression that the writing center is a proofreading laundry mat (this is the idea that a student can simply drop his or her paper off to be “fixed” and picked up later), he or she is going to be thoroughly disappointed. This is why the tradition of mystification can be so troublesome.
These traditions are all staples of modern writing centers, but what of the trends that mentioned in the article’s title? The first trend in writing centers of this era is a move to towards greater professionalism. When writing centers began to spring up in the 1980s, directors did not often need to have advanced degrees or even much experience with such spaces. As the years continue to pass, the need for more education and time spent with a focus on composition has become a requirement (34). Since this article was published in 1990, the requirement for writing center director’s employment has become, in many cases, multiple years of administration experience or experience working within their own university’s faculty.

Another trend that Harris discusses is that of writing centers moving away from the “remedial only” mindset that still plagues the field (35). This concept cannot be restated enough. Without understanding that writing centers do not exist as punishments or simply for those deemed deficient in their writing skills, there is little room to grow into what they should be. Writing centers should be places where writers come in to strengthen their skills, not have their mechanical issues fixed. When this stigma can finally become a thing of the past, writing centers can focus their work on what really matters: writing.

A trend that I find surprising is the growth of writing centers in high schools. I am only surprised due to the fact that my high school did not have one at my time of attendance. Since then, the school has adopted a grass-roots level writing center to assist its students. This trend bodes well for writing centers overall, though, as it shows that the field is being taken more seriously and that more educators see the value of such spaces. This also shows that the directors of these centers are working towards integrating
writing skills into courses other than English (35). If students can see the value of writing centers earlier in their academic careers this should prove to help reify the idea that these places are of value to them.

Sending tutors into classroom is a relatively new trend (dating back to the 1980s, at least) that writing centers of Harris’s time had begun to see (35). In my undergraduate time as a peer tutor, I would often be sent to a composition class to conduct a workshop. Many times the workshop was remedial in nature, but there were a few instances where I had the chance to work on the “higher order concerns” that writing centers are typically focused on. Even in my professional tutoring career this has occurred. These workshops were named “Studio Sessions” and were quite different than my peer tutoring days, in that they were weekly sessions and built into the formal class structure. I would go into the composition classroom and divide the students into small groups to work with a handful of them at a time. Our time together was far less focused than the workshops. That is, rather than bringing in my own agenda, I would work with the students on whatever concerns they might have had with their writing process. Another facet of this style of work would be when peer response groups would come into the writing center to work together with a tutor. This integration of the writing center into the classroom opens up new perspectives for instructors, students, and tutors alike.

Lerner’s history of writing centers shows that an interesting change in student populations occurred in the 1990s. In 1990, over forty-five percent of the nation’s college population were over the age of twenty-five (35). These students are labeled “nontraditional,” and that number has grown in recent years. Having these types of students has created many new issues that the schools and writing centers have to
compete with. Harris sees these students as an opportunity to help expand the reach of the writing center. This is a valid point of view to this very day. The three centers that will be highlighted in this thesis will show how varying student demographics will always affect the way writing centers can help said students. The two-year college’s center has mostly older, African-American students and must adapt its pedagogy to its clientele. The technology-based four-year university’s center has mostly English as a Second Language (ESL) students and must find the ways in which to reach these non-native speakers of English. The liberal arts four-year university’s center is a commuter campus and must deal with many students who are returning to school and the difficulties of commuters. Adaptability is vital to these writing centers to ensure that they meet the needs of their student demographic.

Since these two powerhouses in the field of writing centers, Harris and North, set forth what contemporary writing centers look like, much debate has occurred about the standards they had set forth with their work. One aspect that cannot be debated is the need for flexibility in writing center pedagogy and practice. Elizabeth Boquet and Neal Lerner reexamined North’s aforementioned seminal piece in their 2008 article “Reconsiderations: After ‘The Idea of a Writing Center.” While they do not agree with all that North had to say, they do agree that “[t]he writing center is the ultimate point-of-need pedagogical scene.” This need for flexibility in order to help create the most efficient writing center possible is at the very core of contemporary methods. The authors make it clear that “[North] champions the flexibility afforded by the writing center setting” and it is this flexibility that is so important to being able to reach the needs of any
given center. Bouqet and Lerner fear that those involved with writing centers might be averted by the thought of a practice that deviates from North’s original description of what a well-functioning center might look like, but stand by the fact that it is vital to maintain physical and virtual spaces where students write in the company of other writers, work at the point of their own needs, talk about why writing matters and in what contexts it continues to matter—although these are not ideals of writing centers only, they are ideals of writing centers.

This idea that concepts can stretch from one part of education to another becomes vital to writing center practice. The importance of writing in all disciplines has created an administrative practice, which many institutions have adopted, called writing across the curriculum.

Writing across the curriculum (WAC) is a concept that has not only shown the importance of written skills in composition courses, but to show how writing is so important in all corners of academia. This has become one of the focuses within contemporary writing centers as well. Another concept being used in centers is that of a focus on first year composition. Both of these practices are highlighted in Michael Pemberton’s 2009 article titled “A Finger in Every Pie: The Expanding Role of Writing Centers in Writing Instruction.” Pemberton writes about how the “array of approaches used by the writing centers to accomplish these goals is impressive, varied, and carefully tailored to fit an institution’s mission, size, and internal politics” (91). He sheds light on what is being done now with these two very different missions within writing center communities.
Pemberton writes about how first-year composition programs have always been in an odd relationship with writing centers. The “higher order” concerns of the writing process (content, organization, flow) have always been relegated to composition courses while “later order” concerns (grammar, mechanics) have been placed into the realm of the writing center. He goes to speculate that the writing center and composition courses must work together if there is to be any chance of true collaboration. Pemberton highlights various ways in which this collaboration can be made possible. For instance, the writing center can send tutors to the classroom to inform the students (and sometimes the instructors, as well) about the services provided by the writing center. Conversely, instructors can plan trips in which the whole class is shown the writing center's facilities (and which may or may not include a brief writing assignment about the center). Additionally, the writing center may provide specialized workshops to reach the specific needs of students/instructors, have tutors act as writing “liaisons” for particular classes, or even have faculty work as tutors to increase understanding of the importance of these spaces (93). Each of the previous possibilities are employed separately by the three directors that are interviewed in the following chapter. These are all ways in which a writing center director can adapt to the needs of their individual institution through collaboration with first year composition programs.

With increased importance placed upon writing in all courses, the implementation of WAC programs has become an essential part of composition and writing center practice in contemporary times. Programs with this design are ideal places to showcase the flexibility inherent within the writing centers' prowess. Pemberton sees this flexibility as essential because “[d]ifferent writing centers use different methods to accommodate
the needs of students and faculty in WAC programs” (93). Writing centers support these programs by inviting any student, from any course, to conference with their tutors for any assignment. With the increasing demand for higher education that has become a norm as of late, however, more than just this approach is required to adapt to the needs of the student demographic, the mission of the individual institution, and the demands of the faculty.

One approach to writing centers supporting WAC programs is to reach beyond the walls of a central location, often through the use of a satellite center. These extra locations exist for a myriad of reasons. These satellite centers have been established “to meet the needs of students who congregate (for academic or geographic reasons) in distinctly different and widely separated campus locales” (93). Pemberton explains that these satellites are not always in libraries or other college buildings; sometimes they are located in residence halls for easier access for the students who use them. In the case of one of the centers this thesis will focus on, there is one satellite center set up in a downtown campus that is actually located in the second story of a high school. This center works two-fold, serving both the students of the college and those students from the high school’s dual enrollment program. This center’s downtown location is vital as many of the students do not possess transportation to make it to the main campus. Pemberton believes “satellite centers can increase the total number of student conferences held on campus and reach a segment of the student body that might otherwise fail to get the writing assistance they want and need” (94). The following exploration will show that this statement holds true.
Another WAC implementation is the idea of conducting workshops. These workshops can take many forms and serve many rhetorical/instructional purposes. One example of how a workshop can be collaborative is when “English faculty to design the workshops, and at the same time, educating them about the rhetorical work that goes on in writing center settings” (94). In this example, Pemberton shows how these workshops can be used as tool to not only educate the students, but also the faculty, about the abilities of the writing center. A second type of workshop (that Pemberton admits is a little less used) is one that is more focused on faculty needs. These commonly only occur when a writing center and WAC program are closely tied to one another. Workshops such as these can highlight the fact that writing is a “transdisciplinary enterprise supported by multiple units across campus” (95). Workshops such as these encourage faculty to participate in writing center activities. This helps to bring more understanding of what centers do to the faculty, and help to show the value of such spaces. Many writing centers even ask the faculty to volunteer an hour a week to work in the writing center or have a contract with them so that some hours are paid for instructor while others are paid for a few hours a week in the center.

As technology becomes increasingly popular in education, it follows logically that academia must follow suit. In supporting this, writing centers offer help to WAC programs through means of providing online resources to help writers. Pemberton notes that one advocate of this approach is Irene Clark. She believes that “the Writing Center should assume a proactive role…through frequent contact and classroom involvement [and] by creating an interactive virtual space…that faculty and students…can access and contribute to easily” (95). One such example of this would be Purdue University’s online
writing lab (OWL), which has become a standard resource for students and faculty alike. All three of the institutions in this thesis also have online resources for quick reference available to their students and staff. It is vital for writing centers to keep up with advancements in technology so that they do not let themselves become antiquated. By putting information online that will help writers and instructors, it can only help the cause of furthering their adaptability and accessibility.

A recent trend in writing center and WAC collaboration is the use of “writing fellows.” These fellows can range in duty and assignment. Some attend class regularly with the other students and conduct small workshops with them. Other fellows might simply be assigned to a single instructor to help ensure that the curriculum that is desired can be easily followed (Pemberton 96). In some cases, the fellow will be responsible for a studio session once a week. These sessions are conducted either within the classroom or in an outside space and serve the purpose of helping the students in any point in the writing process. These fellows display that importance of a writing center remaining adaptable to the needs of the institution and faculty’s needs.

As writing centers have evolved from their remedial past to their ever-expanding future it is clear that a need of adaptability holds true. Writing centers are beginning to truly be able to hold their own place in academia as they never have been able to before. As the understanding of writing as something not restricted to merely English majors grows, programs like writing across the curriculum (WAC) will present exciting new demands on what the writing center is and can do. No single formula can hope to work for every institution, every instructor, or even every student. With all this uncertainty, how can one even define what a well-functioning writing center looks like? If each center
has a different mission, it makes sense that the answer would vary. Are there any overlaps methods or practice amongst these writing centers? That is the very question this thesis hopes to begin to answer.
CHAPTER II
INTERVIEWS WITH THREE DIRECTORS

The means by which this thesis has set out to answer the question: “What makes for a well-functioning and efficient writing center?” are simple in design. First, I gathered the relevant information within the field of writing centers. Second, I conducted interviews with three writing center directors to see what practices and definitions guide their work. Finally, the information gathered from the directors is compared and contrasted to the literature previously explored to see if there are any connections or correlations. It is my suspicion that adaptability will be the thread that ties together their missions and definitions of what success looks like in a writing center.

The interviews have all been conducted face-to-face in the space of the writing center itself, or within the director’s office. Questions for the interview were emailed to the directors first to ensure that they had proper time to consider their answers and be able to give the full response they intended. For the purpose of recording the interviews, a hand recorder application on a smartphone was used.

Efficiency is a hard term to define regarding writing centers. Each school has its own mission, unique student demographic, and specific demands of the faculty. With these varying components, how can a single definition be devised? The simple answer is that it cannot. Directors have so many different factors to deal with in their centers that
each one’s definition of efficiency would be slightly different than the last. Yet some basic practices and theories must overlap amongst all this diversity. To illustrate this point, I conducted interviews with three directors from different institutions in the Northern Midwest region to see what differences and similarities might occur. Adaptability is what should tie these centers together.

The first writing center director, who for the sake of anonymity and clarity will be referred to as Herman, runs a center on a regional campus of his university. The university is a four-year liberal arts school and has eight campuses altogether (seven satellites and one main campus). There are only two writing centers amongst these: one on the main campus and the second on the regional campus, where this director presides. Herman’s center is entirely staffed by undergraduate peer tutors. His tutors are required to take a Junior Tutoring course in which they read the pertinent literature about the field, observe tutors giving sessions who have already been through this training, and finally begin conducting sessions themselves. While the main campus would have been interesting to research, given the current state of higher education’s more commuter and non-traditional based student body, it seemed more appropriate to focus on a campus that has more of this student demographic than a typical liberal arts school might afford.

Herman was first exposed to writing centers as a PhD student when he applied for a Teaching Assistant position for the sake of stipend. He was placed in the writing center ten hours a week and soon fell in love with the center, his fellow tutors, and the work that was conducted within the space. He initially placed his focus on Victorian Literature, but was soon swayed to market himself within both fields of study. Before his time in the
center, he had no idea what the space did, nor the possibilities that it could possess for helping students become stronger writers.

Herman told me that his pedagogy is student-centered and non-directive in terms of his primary interactions with students. He wants his tutors to remain conversational and not directive. According to Herman, his tutors neither give answers, not do they issue instructions. He ensures that what they do is help students brainstorm and find the options they might not be able to find themselves for their particular problems they bring in. He expressed that his tutors recognize that a majority of students do not even know what to ask for in a session, so he has his tutors define an agenda early on. Herman stated that it is important to note that emphasis be placed on the tutors not taking over the student’s writing, as he feels that would be counterproductive. He indicated that he believes there is not an “ideal text” that the tutors are trained to push onto students. He told me that his desire is that his tutors do not project the paper they would write onto the student’s text. He recognizes that despite students sometimes pushing the tutor to write for them, his tutors focus on allowing the student to retain ownership of their writing.

The student demographic Herman deals with is slightly older than many campuses in his demographic of liberal arts schools and he believes that is in part due to the fact of the large number of non-traditional students that attend his regional campus. He has found that the median age of his students hovers around twenty-seven. While diversity is something he certainly enjoys in the student body, the population is not as diverse as he would like. The campus is fairly representative of the surrounding county, but he worries that some minority groups might be significantly under-represented.
Lower-income students tend not to attend his campus. Herman told me that students who use his center regularly are generally middle-to upper class, fairly well educated, largely Caucasian, and a bit provincial. Very few international students pass through the doors as it would appear that this demographic does not pursue liberal arts as much as others. This lack of getting his tutors to encounter and consider “non-normative” viewpoints during their sessions causes him some concern. He worries that both his tutors and the students they assist might have a limited scope of the world brought about by their upbringing.

Herman feels he meets the needs of this demographic of students by focusing on the greatest needs they have made clear. Reading, thinking, and writing critically have been the most obvious needs expressed by the students. While there are a few students who need developmental writing help, their number is relatively small. Herman still places concern with the limited exposure to cultural diversity within his student population and makes sure that his tutors bear this in mind when working with students. There remains the consistent struggle to get students to step back and consider points of view different from their own as a means of not only writing more effectively, but to become truly educated people. He recognizes the fact that these students cannot afford to leave the university as provincial thinkers and writers.

When asked if he considered his center is a conventional one, his response was mixed. While he considers his methods of collaborative learning and non-directive tutoring on par with current trends, he feels he might push critical thinking regarding issues of difference more than some of his fellow directors. His own scholarship in this area—especially that of sexual identity and how it plays out in the center—shapes his
agenda as a director. It is for this reason that he enjoys writing center scholars such as Frankie Condon and Harry Denny.

Herman faces unique challenges due to his institution type. Due to being located on a regional campus which serves around 5300 students a year, his hope is that he might reach literally every student on campus. He is thankful for the opportunity to attempt to do so. Unlike the main campus of his school, which could not possibly administer to the needs of every student, Herman stresses the interdisciplinary nature of the center and has always resisted descriptions that would solely align him with the English department. This is an advantage to his center as he finds that this lack of a connection does not burden his center with being primarily associated with Composition Studies. This also allows him, since his funds come from the Dean’s office, to expand his efforts in several directions academically. One example of such spreading of the wings can be found in the undergraduate journal that is produced from his center, titled *The Writing Center Review*. The magazine is an interdisciplinary journal, and one that happily publishes articles by undergraduates in all academic disciplines.

Not only does the institution type factor into Herman’s decisions as a director, but the influence of his colleagues plays a role as well. Their influence has both positive and negative effects. When his colleagues attempt to box him and have the center serve their own needs and not those of the students, he must play a role of resistance. He finds that he must resist in positive, non-alienating ways in order to be able to set his own agenda. Many of his colleagues, however, understand what the center is and collaborate with him in positive ways. One such example of this occurred when the issue of developmental writing came to light. Developmental courses have been eliminated at his institution and
replaced with “stretch” courses in order to help those students who require more help with writing. It soon became clear that these courses were not enough for every student, so Herman collaborated with his colleagues in the English department and the Academic Success Center to create a referral-only developmental writing tutor in the Academic Success Center. This tutor has specialized training, background, and experience working with developmental writers. Herman’s tutors could not fill this role, but through collaboration a solution was found. Collaboration as positive resistance helps to ease the tension of his colleagues that want his tutors to be grammarians and developmental writing teachers.

The next question that arose in our interview was: when hiring new tutors, what makes for a viable candidate? The answer to this question is one that Herman has changed as his experience as director grew. When he first started, he was more concerned with the student having completed a certain composition sequence with good grades or via faculty recommendation, but as time passed he saw that these criteria were not necessary to ensure a solid tutor was found. In fact, he saw some exceptional students that should have been fantastic in the writing center fail miserably at tutoring. He now believes it comes down to commitment. Students who are looking for an outlet for their skills and talents, those who respect and work well with others, and those who step up to challenges are the ones who succeed as tutors. There is a complication in tutors who have always been, or have become strong writers, as they may struggle to relate and identify the struggles of weaker writers. An issue with extremely strong students is that they might be too introverted to handle the social demands of tutoring, or to work collegially
with other tutors. Herman prefers energetic, determined, and socially agreeable students for his staff.

Bearing in mind this need for adaptability in tutors, a question needs to be asked: is it possible to train for flexibility in tutoring? Herman attempts to give his tutors a “toolbox” of methods to draw upon so that they might pick the right tool for the right job. He has never encouraged uniform, one-size-fits-all practices. He prefers to talk about a continuum of practices. For example, one student might work quite effectively with a non-directive tutor who asks lots of questions. But another student may be completely baffled by this approach and the tutor needs to be able to switch to provide examples or models instead. Other students may come in bursting at the seams with ideas and merely need the tutor to help them focus their thoughts. Then there is the student that comes in devoid of ideas and full of confusion. These students require the tutor to not only help them find a stake in the assignment, but often times to help them find the motivation to even get it started. For visual learners, the tutor might need to set up charts or diagrams. Auditory learners might benefit from extensive conversation, hearing and articulating ideas. Herman believes training for flexibility is not only possible, but mandatory.

The final interview question is one that holds great importance in the face of adaptability: how would you define a well-functioning center? The answer was certainly not a simple one. Herman finds that to be successful, a center must negotiate the competing demands of all parties involved. Students often want the center to become a last minute proofreading “laundry service.” Faculty often pressures the center to help with “fundamentals,” such as grammar. It is not Herman’s mission to produce “correct” writings, though, but to help create better writers. This means he places his focus on the
long-term goals, even though his clients bring in what they see as immediate, short-term goals. His center attempts to help the students see the bigger picture. An effective center to Herman is one that can have the students leave it excited about their writing and to remove the fixation with surface issues, with the addition of juggling the needs of its faculty.

The second writing center director, who shall be called Barb, operates two separate centers, hardly separated by geographical space (8.1 miles apart), within a two-year college’s writing center parameters. The school has seven campuses and serves roughly 15,000 students. Her center is unusual in the sense that it employs only professional tutors. These tutors have a minimum of a Bachelor’s degree, whether in English or other field. Their education and experience is not limited to just the four-year degree though. Some of her tutors have Master’s degrees and teaching experience as well. It is important to point out that this college recently removed the phrase “of technology” from its title. This is significant because it speaks volumes on what the mission of the school is evolving into. Under the title of a technical school, the student demographic was far different than it is presently. When a school so drastically changes its goals, so must the practices of writing centers change that reside within it. This institutions long-term goal is to become a four-year university. The focus of the center changes from a more remedial space into one that flourishes under altruism’s warm embrace.

Barb’s pedagogy is one that is based in pragmatism. She believes that a director has to be flexible enough to work with what one has been given. One concept she has
developed in her time as both an adjunct Professor of English and as a Director of her center is that of the cultural knapsack that each person carries with them. These are the personal biases, experiences, and values that a person carries with, whether consciously or not. The cultural knapsack that each individual carries around with them plays a massive role in tutoring in the center. This can be seen in the example of every tutor not being an ideal match with every student, in terms of a tutorial session. The same can be said of the inverse: not every tutor will be able to learn from each student. It is important to Barb to recognize this in order to create the most productive tutoring sessions possible. She also looks to other centers and trends to see what she can use for her own center.

What led Barb to her career in writing centers is befitting of her pragmatic style: there was a job opening. Her husband ran the center previously, but left when a faculty position became available. This position was more suited to his professional goals and he quickly made the transition. Barb had just finished her first year as an adjunct and found the possibility of being a director intriguing. She knew that she would have a built-in mentor in the program already and soon found herself running her center. She felt that her studies during her Master’s program had well-prepared her for this career.

The center Barb runs has a student demographic that has an average age of twenty-seven, not wholly unlike Herman’s. It is quite different in the amount of non-traditional students it caters to, though. The number of these non-traditional students is so high that she finds it surprising that more and more young students are beginning to enroll fresh out of high school. It seems to her that the amount of younger students using the center is rising. This is a factor she must keep in mind to be properly prepared for students who are so recently coming from the standardized education that high schools
require. Despite this spike in younger students, Barb has found that a good portion of the student body is first generation college students. There are developmental courses in place and this is reflected in the various levels of ability and socioeconomic status of the students. With all these different levels of writing proficiencies comes the challenge of meeting such a diverse population.

Barb tackles this issue by taking an individualistic approach. Every student that comes through the door of her center is an individual, and she likes to train the staff to open their sessions with a multitude of questions. She feels that it is important to take in mind the cultural knapsack that each student carries with them for effective tutoring. This awareness allows tutors to be sensitive to the student as the unique individual that he or she is to better understand what concerns he or she has about writing and how the tutor can best assist him or her. This not only helps ensure the student is comfortable, but that he or she remain focused on the task at hand.

When thinking of this individualized approach, it made sense to then ask Barb whether or not she considers her center a conventional one in comparison to recent trends and practices. She feels that outside of the solely professional staff, her center falls into a solidly traditional role. The center reaches about eleven percent of the student population and that is average for centers. Her tutors run about sixty percent usage rates, and she finds this ideal, as it leaves a small amount of time for other activities for them such as creation of new materials for student use, self-reflection, and professional development. Her center also sees a small number of ESL students and students with disabilities, which she feels puts her in a fairly traditional role.
When Barb took the position as writing center director, she inherited a center full of professional tutors. She feels that there is not much flexibility within that particular model. She holds onto hope that in the future she might be able to incorporate student tutors, but admits that might not be for many a year to come. The most obvious difference about her center, when compared to the traditional university writing center model, is the use of professional tutors. These tutors are often also adjunct instructors, but certainly not all of them wear both of these hats. Some of the tutors make their living solely from hours at her center. Here, the tutors read the same literature and attend the same conferences as tutors from four-year universities do. It is the educational level of the tutors in this center that separates them from tutors outside of the two-year college model. Another difference that her institution’s influence has on her center is the lack of graduate students filling any role of leadership such as assistant director. Of course, without offering any degrees above the Associates’ level, there are no graduate students to be used.

Two-year colleges, especially those that are attempting to change their institution to a four-year university like Barb’s school, are susceptible to influence in many forms regarding how writing centers are run. One such influence is that of the colleagues that Barb encounters. Like Herman, she feels pressure from them in both positive and negative ways. The role of collaboration is of the utmost importance for Barb, especially when it comes to funding. In addition to this, the English department and the writing center work closely together. Through this work, Barb can make the center relevant. Also, this work provides her with an opportunity to better articulate the center’s mission and how it can fit within her colleagues' classes. This works both ways as the department
can further explain their classes to the tutors and director to ensure that the center can help the students meet the department’s objectives in the courses. Beyond this, Barb feels it is important to reach out to other community members, the Research and Development department for example, to further help whatever students from these courses that might use the center. This acts as an opportunity to mold her center to fit the institution type.

In attempting to meet the needs of students, the institution type, and needs of colleagues, Barb takes certain aspects in mind when hiring a new tutor. Open-mindedness and the ability to listen are the first two skills that she interviews for. Reflection is the next concept she looks for. When interviewing a new tutor, if he or she reflects on their own experiences, this shows Barb that they have spent time thinking about tutoring. Of course not all new hires have tutored in the past. Here she listens carefully to the way they respond to her questions. There is a typical prompt of: “How would you start a tutoring session?” Or: “Have you ever helped a friend with a homework assignment? How did you handle that?” If the new tutor begins his or her response with the asking of questions about the assignment or an attempt of getting to know what the purpose of the paper is, that makes him or her a viable candidate. It is those new hires that have a routine that tend to raise red flags for her. Something that I found very interesting is the fact that those with extensive teaching histories tend to trigger the same reaction to her. The fear is that they will attempt to take over the session and that would defeat the meaning of the non-directive approach that she hopes to foster in her tutors. She wants to ensure that the students are being served as effectively as possible. Those who are flexible enough to escape the role of teacher still make for strong tutors though.
Flexibility is something that all tutors need in order to remain as effective as possible. When I asked Barb if she thought that it is possible to train her new tutors in this ability, her answer was an interesting one. She believes that it possible to learn flexibility, but not so much train for it. Tutors have different levels of flexibility. Some are naturally more flexible than others in their practices, whereas others tend to be more rigid. It is something she feels can be learned over time though. One way to foster this skill is the staff meetings conducted biannually at her school. In these meetings the entire writing center staff as well as many of the full and part time English faculty (and those from other disciples, if they so choose) get together to talk about new happenings and any issues they might have encountered with students. Getting these different opinions out in an open forum, she feels, does wonders for the experience of learning to do new practices. She sees this as a chance to practice two things at once: flexibility and reflexivity. Experience is the best way for a tutor to be able to “switch gears” as is needed in a tutoring session. It is through experience, knowledge, reading new articles, possibly publishing some, going to conferences, and learning the tutoring styles of tutors from different writing centers that cultivates adaptability in tutoring. All of these factors play into the success of a writing center.

This leads to the final question asked of this director: How do you define an efficient writing center? Barb feels it would be a space that majority of the staff’s time would be spent working with the students, but that there would also be enough time for them to explore new ideas, do self-assessment, to converse with other tutors about their practice. It should be a space that contains a lot of energy, and not merely the daily grind, allowing a small amount of time for the staff to get to know one another on a personal
level. She feels this level of personal knowledge transfers to students, who feel comfortable in this setting and become regulars. This rapport does not stop with students, though. From a director’s point of view especially, this concept is important when dealing with other faculty and administration. She does not expect her tutors to deal with administration, but having a director that can properly articulate the center’s mission and do self-assessment is of the utmost importance to her. A successful center is one that is a circle of self-assessment to ensure that what practices are being employed is not only effective, but that they are displaying that the students are learning.

The final writing center’s director conducts her business in a four-year university where hard sciences are the major of choice amongst the student body. For the sake of this thesis, she shall be referred to as Madison. The tutors who comprise this center fill the entire spectrum of professional tutoring identities. There are faculty that are hired in to work part-time or as part of their contract, graduate teaching assistants required to work here for a minimum of one semester as part of their teacher training, and undergraduate students who work in the center in order to further their aptitude of writing.

Madison defines her pedagogy as non-directive. This belief comes from working with her colleagues over time, scholarship from the field of writing centers, and studying the practices of those who have been tutoring for some time. She believes that students should be allowed to retain ownership of their papers. One way of ensuring this ownership is having her tutors not touch or write on the student’s paper. Collaboration is one of the keys to remaining non-directive. By allowing the students to grow through
support, she feels that both the tutor and the student are allowed the space it requires to
learn from one another.

Her interest and the beginning of her studies began during her time in graduate
school in the 1980s. She attended graduate school at the same institution where she
currently directs the writing center. When she was in school, the center was focused on
basic and developmental writing programs. Regrettably, she did not get a chance to work
as a graduate assistant to work in the center, but she did get to learn of it and grew to
appreciate the space for its promise. As a new instructor she sent students to the center
frequently, especially those that found a particular struggle in their writing skills. Being a
new adjunct with a load of approximately seventy-five students, she soon found that she
did not physically have enough time to give them the one-on-one time that they required.
Madison found that those students who made the commitment to regular attendance to
the center took grades from what would have been lucky to pass, easily into low Bs in a
matter of fifteen weeks. This sold her on the usefulness of such a space. Any and every
student can benefit from visiting the writing center.

The student body at her school is an incredibly diverse one. The school has
roughly 30,000 students and is regarded as one of the top institutions for Polymer science
and STEM programs. Admission policy at her institution is not technically open, but
there certainly is a degree of flexibility to it. Well-represented student populations
include traditional eighteen year olds, students who are just returning to school for the
first time in decades, and senior citizens. The largest growing population to visit the
center, however, is non-native English speakers. Last spring semester this population
accounted for twenty-five percent of the total center visits. This is a fact that she revels
in, as it means that these students have not only found the writing center, but that the space is one that they are comfortable with. That is no easy task. Her center serves all of the colleges that the institution has to offer, including Polymers, Business, Engineering, and Education. The tutors in this center see students from all of the colleges and for countless courses varying from freshman composition all the way to PhD theses.

With such a varied student body, how does Madison meet the needs of all of these students with her center? To be put simply, as best as she can. She has taken the minimal budget that she has been provided to create a small library of style guides and dictionaries. Training is targeted towards diversity and a considerable amount of time has been taken regarding working with non-native speakers. To be specific, multiple workshops are in place for both tutors and faculty alike to ensure that the staff are ready for whatever challenges they might confront regarding whichever student demographic they work with. When new obstacles arise at the institution, she adapts the training to match.

Since both the staff and the student body are so multifaceted, does Madison consider hers a traditional writing center? Her answer is that the space is both a little traditional and little unconventional. The view she holds of her center is that it is a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) space with an emphasis on supporting online tutoring. Madison was looking for an online supplement because of the number of freshman composition students who were in distance learning programs at her school. Many of them could not find a way to get to the main campus. She realized that the center was unable to help them and she needed to find a way to correct that. Incidentally, the tech people came to her for support with a totally online graduate level program. They
told her that Ohio was starting a consortium program called E-tutoring. She realized that she could meet both parties’ needs at the same time. Soon she found that not only does the program work quite well, but that there was another benefit to being involved: in addition to getting the writing center online, she could also provide math and science tutors. This program is extremely cost effective and has now around forty schools participating. With all this said, she still is traditional in the sense that she feels that nothing can be more effective than one-on-one tutoring sessions.

Another way her center is non-traditional is that it is not affiliated with the English department. Her center is independent in the fact that it is simply attached to tutoring and not specifically to one department. As a new director she found that the center had been tied with Early College, but that college no longer exists at her institution. After this switch, the center was directly under the watchful gaze of the Provost, but only briefly. Currently, the center finds itself under the Vice President of Student Success. This has turned out to be of a great advantage to her as the immediate supervisors truly believe in academic support. The former administrator held this same belief, but did not carry the academic clout to make much impact. Being independent factors into her effective service to the students due to it allowing her to avoid the politics that are sometimes tied in with being attached to a certain department. Another advantage to this freedom is that collaboration can be done as she sees fit. One of her faculty tutors recently attended the four Cs conference and learned that there is a title for the danger of being connected to an English department: toxic orthodoxy. Toxic orthodoxy is not being able to change to suit the needs of current trends in tutoring and is something Madison will not allow in her center.
Following a similar vein of concern for how administration and department association can factor into the way a writing center can be run comes the question of how institution type can play a role. Due to the diversity of the student population, Madison’s center is a WAC, as previously mentioned. One of her favorite methods of ensuring that she meets the institution’s needs is to explore what other writing centers are doing. The writing center listserv WCenter has been a useful tool in her arsenal as it provides many different viewpoints on the plethora of issues that arise in centers. She is well aware of the fact that hers is far from a traditional student body and recognizes that her approach must be different from that of some schools in close proximity to her. This does not mean that she discredits the usefulness of centers that do not have the same demographic as hers, but that she merely attempts to take what she can use from them and leaves the rest behind. It is vital that she never alienates a population of students that enters her center. For example, at one point in her career she found herself teaching business writing. Madison suggested to her students to use the writing center as a means to strengthen their writing skills only to learn that they were told that writing of that sort was not done there. The looks on the faces of the students who were told that the writing that they brought in was not valued was something that she will never forget. This is one poignant example of why she does not allow any student population to be ignored or disheartened in her center. Her hope is that her colleagues can see the center as a space that any of their students can benefit from.

Madison is in a challenging situation regarding the fact that she employs some faculty in her center and that they play both the role of tutors and colleagues. However, their influence on the way the center runs is a positive one. She finds that they are on the
same page as her own with their ideologies and practices. The staff often attends conferences to ensure that they are remaining current with trends in the field. New articles and practice suggestions are constantly being distributed to tutors in order to preserve the space’s adaptability. Time is made to let the tutors get to know one another so that they might a rapport to better serve the students. Some of the older faculty even foster the younger tutors and act as mentors. This mentoring is one of the most effective ways to train new tutors to prepare them for the experiences they are bound to have.

The hiring process is a trifold one at Madison’s center and she is quite specific in what she looks for in new tutors. In the case of faculty, she prefers Composition teaching experience. This does not mean that she will not consider a faculty member with a Literature background, but she cannot deny that she prefers someone who has actually taught writing. An ideal candidate in the recent past came from the Language Institute and has found much success as a tutor. When she hires a graduate student she looks for a focus on English in their studies. She has some graduate assistants working in her center. She also has other students who have worked for her without their assistantships, but typically soon acquire them. To say that Madison is rigorous when it comes to hiring undergraduate students as tutors is an understatement. These students are required to have a grade point average of no lower than three point five and submit two writing samples for consideration. The samples must demonstrate that they possess the ability to work with outside sources and citation style. It is her fear that without these proven skills that a student may come in for help with citation or format that the tutor is not prepared to deal with. Multiple problems arise from situations like this. First, the student does not receive the help he or she may have needed; second, the tutor feels terrible that they could not
provide help, and third the director then has to deal with the (reasonably so) irate faculty member. She tends to look outside of English for these tutors. Presently, she has two outstanding tutors whose majors are Biology and Biochemistry. A recent trend that Madison finds confounding is the thread on current listservs about only hiring students that have 3.0 grade point averages. To her, it is as if the people who follow this creed are saying that students who maintain a 4.0 grade point average are socially inept, and she finds that hard to stomach. She believes that to be a solid tutor, one must be able to be flexible in their approach.

This then leads into the question of if it is possible to train for flexibility. Madison does not believe so. To her, flexibility is something that only experience can bestow upon a tutor. In the past, she has been subject to mock tutorials and found them of little value. It is easy to come up with the best non-directive answers when the tutor knows that their session is fabricated. Reality is something entirely different, with pressures and stresses all of its own. This is the reason that she has her tutors do observations before they actually take a session themselves. Practices like this come from her time as a teacher. She found that many of the practice runs and lessons she had gone through, when applied to a real classroom setting, left her with a classroom full of looks of disbelief of what she had just said. Flexibility comes with experience. That could mean working with multiple students a day in tutorial sessions. The more diverse the population that a tutor works with, the more quickly that tutor will gain experience, she has found. The same can be said of working at multiple locations. Madison says she learns something new every day at her center.
Madison defines a well-functioning writing center as one that serves its students’ needs efficiently. That is the focus she strives for in her center. She does her best to be as flexible as is required by the diversity of her student body and is possible with her provided budget. Her center exists for the students to help make them stronger writers because the more work someone does with writing, the stronger they become. Madison wants students to find more confidence in their ability to write. If her center can make stronger writers who are more confident with their writing, then her center is a success.

These three diverse directors and centers have shown a variety of differences and similarities. In the following chapter these aforementioned concepts will be explored and probed to see what trends are universal, if any, and which trends may refute each other. It is my hope that some common ground can be found among these centers, despite the differences that they face. Perhaps this will shed light on the current state of writing centers in the North East region of Ohio.
CHAPTER III
REFLECTIONS ON FINDINGS

This chapter will explore the similarities and differences between the North East Ohio writing centers discussed and described in the previous chapter. There is common ground that each center stands on with regards to what works in producing and maintaining a well-functioning center. It will also be of interest to see where these centers differ in terms of practice and what might be learned from such. Perhaps then these differences can be brought to light and their origins discovered. It is my hope that through this reflection on similarities and differences in writing center practices, their constantly changing nature can be better understood. This is not to say that this thesis is an attempt to create or to modify current training manuals, but to merely show how vital flexibility is if one intends to run a writing center that would serve its student demographic, the needs of the colleagues associated with it, and the institution’s goals in an efficient manner.

As it is the goal of this thesis to find commonalities among these three centers, it follows logically that this chapter starts with that focus. All three directors agree on the concept of using non-directive methods for their tutors. The non-directive approach is one that values student ownership and one that persons involved in the teaching of writing would be hard-pressed to refute the usefulness of its technique. With tutors not taking over tutorial sessions, students see the worth of their writing, as well as their ability as
writers. In this process, the tutor will typically ask numerous questions and allow the student to do most of the talking. This also involves the tutor stepping back to allow the student to think at his or her own pace to ensure the students work through the process themselves, rather than accepting the suggestions of the tutor word-for-word. The benefit of this is more than just the aforementioned, though. By not having the tutor take possession of the work, it shows that the tutor is more of a confidant than a person of authority. While some tutors feel comfortable playing the role of the “dumb reader,” (that is, when they feign a lack of knowledge in order to get the student to flesh out the answers to his or her own questions, or to further the idea that the tutor and student are to learn together) the tutor must still remain in a position wherein students knows they can rely on the tutor for the help they seek. Whether or not this commonality is based on the region that the three schools are located in remains a question that only further varied geographical research could conclude. However, it seems unlikely that non-directive tutoring would be limited to the North East region of the country. Upon even the most cursory glance in any school’s tutoring manual, one can find an abundance of non-directive exercises.

One exercise Barb uses comes in the form of having her tutors never write on student papers. Tutors often impart advice for the student and he or she may ask the tutor to write down what was said. While this may seem a relatively simple task for the tutor to achieve, it can be surprisingly tricky. Many students attempt to manipulate the tutor into doing the work for them or even taking the exact words the tutor has suggested. That is to say, students will actually try to get the tutor to write the paper for them. This is why Barb finds it so useful to make the students do the note taking. It is more than simply
ensuring that the student does his or her own work, though. In most cases the students will be forced to put it into their own words. This concept is trifold. First, the students will better remember the suggestions made by the tutor in their own words. The tutor may have used jargon from their field that the student might come back to and not recall what the vocabulary meant. Putting the vocabulary into their own words will help the students be able to recall what such a word means. Secondly, this keeps the student’s ownership of his or her work intact. As with Madison and Herman, Barb values the importance of the student remaining the author and main voice of his or her work. Third, by forcing the student to take his or her own notes, it makes the student more apt to continue the practice in the future and to internalize the suggestions. The hope is that soon the student will be able to start thinking like the tutor and thus grow more as a writer. This idea is at the very core of running a well-functioning writing center.

However, there are a few occasions where directive tutoring is actually encouraged: specifically, when English as a Second Language (ESL) students come into a writing center. It is important to note that the use of directive tutoring, even in these cases, is still used sparingly. Directive tutoring involves the tutor taking more of an authoritative role in a session. This means that the tutor might give more explicit answers and ask fewer questions. Herman and Barb both run centers that get few ESL students, but Madison’s student demographic is almost twenty-five percent ESL students. Her tutors face a far different challenge than when dealing with native English speaking students. The most basic fear that a tutor has when working with ESL students is one based in language. The language barrier often baffles new tutors and experienced ones alike. Without the ability to understand the student, how can the tutor possibly hope to
help him or her? This is but one of several fears that can come to light immediately. One fear that many tutors encounter after working with such a student is the tutor will “merge from a session spent and bleary-eyed, hoping to find someone to talk about the big ideas and not the minutia of English mechanics” (Gillespie, Lerner 117). Another fear is that the tutor’s knowledge of English grammar might not be good enough to impart the proper lesson to the non-native speaking student. Madison’s earlier comment about how mock-tutorials are not as useful as real-life experience seems to ring true here. I can speak from experience that I, at the point in my graduate/professional tutoring career when I felt quite confident in my skills, suddenly found myself overwhelmed when an Eastern Indian student came in to have a session. The aforementioned fears came to life and then doubled with something else: the student had brought her Polymer science thesis in to be examined. Quickly I became an editor of what I knew to be the English language, but in a subject area that may as well have been written in a foreign language. Normally, my approach would have been to focus on the overlying, higher order concerns (flow, clarity, organization), but I swiftly became a line-by-line editor despite my training and experience. In this example, and others like it, directive tutoring was actually a benefit to the student so she did not have to waste the entire tutorial session on attempting to get me to understand her topic.

What ties these two styles of tutoring together? The ability to be flexible enough to recognize when one style or the other needs to be employed is the answer. All three directors agree that they want their tutors to be able to recognize when a student might need more of a push than another. Some students require a more directive nudge to get, say, the brainstorming process started, while others merely need the questioning nature of
non-directive tutoring to get the creative juices flowing. In the same session both tactics might need to be used in order to best serve the student. In order for a director to get his or her tutors to recognize these factors, one must look to the training that he or she provides.

Training new tutors is one subject that the three directors agree upon many concepts, but do not see eye-to-eye in just as many others. Herman firmly believes that he can train his tutors to be flexible by giving them a “toolbox” of methods to draw upon when the need arises. He recognizes the fact that his student demographic is not as diverse as some other surrounding schools, but this does not mean that a student might walk into his center that is not receptive to non-directive tutoring’s questioning nature. While he attempts to train his tutors to value non-directive methods, directive tutoring is not a technique that he entirely dismisses. By training his tutors the value, and more importantly, the time and the place to use either method he feels that his tutors can best meet the needs of the students. This is the reason that Herman believes that flexibility can not only be learned, but that it must be trained.

Barb and Madison view the training of this skill a bit differently. Both directors feel that only experience can instill in tutors the ability to be flexible. Madison disapproves of mock tutorials because they do not have the pressures that come with real life sessions. Even the best athletes can contend that practicing with one’s own team can only simulate what playing in the championship might feel like, and that nothing compares to actually taking the field against the opponent. Barb believes that adaptability not only comes from experience, but also a degree of natural ability. She feels that some people are more naturally inclined to go with the flow than others might be. Some people
naturally gravitate to careers that require more social skills than others. Typically archivists, who spend hours alone each day, do not enjoy the lime light that bartenders might be subjected to. Unlike Herman, who believes flexibility must be taught, both of these directors see experience as the main factor in teaching her tutors to be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the student demographic that takes advantage of the center.

More important than the training, however, is the fact that all three directors value flexibility. The real issue is the utter necessity of flexibility in writing centers. This is not just a requirement of the tutors who work in this center, but of the abilities of the men and women who run these spaces. Without being able to recognize and adapt to the many needs of the institution type and the needs of his or her colleagues, a director would soon find himself or herself too rigid to meet these various demands. Being too rigid would not leave the proverbial “wiggle room” required to maintain a well-functioning center.

How does the institutional type effect the director’s flexibility? In the case of Barb, it actually limits her ability to change the archetype that was already in place when she donned the mantle of leadership. In her two-year college’s writing center, wholly staffed by professional tutors, she hopes to find more flexibility, but she feels the likelihood of her getting student tutors a goal that will not be able to reached for many years. That is the sort of flexibility she would like to have: the ability to hire peer tutors. Such does not transpire in her center, though. This occurs in part due to level of education her school requires for its employees and this remains beyond her control. Her long term goal is to adopt more of a university model of writing center in the future.
Madison’s writing center more fits what Barb is looking for in terms of flexibility. Madison has the entire spectrum of tutors: undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members. Due to the great diversity of the student body, her institution implements the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. She finds that not being tied to the English department factors into the amount of flexibility she needs. This enables her to reach as many of the disciplines as her university provides without a single department having more control of her practices than another. Her biggest fear is alienating one sort of student’s writing or another. During her time as an adjunct instructor, she sent some of her Technical Writing students to the writing center only to find that the students’ writing was not considered critical thinking, and thus was not valued. Now that she runs the center, she ensures that the space can be flexible enough to meet the needs of all students who use the service.

While Herman’s center is tied to the English department, he strives to constantly push back on this association in order to remain flexible enough to maintain a well-functioning center. His center is staffed solely by undergraduate tutors (under his leadership) and, in doing so, fits the classic university model of a writing center. Herman finds that his tutors, being solely undergraduate students, suit his needs well. By resisting descriptions that would rhetorically tie his center to the English department, he maintains a high level of freedom and can flex when necessary. He worries that a tie to any one department might alienate a certain student type from uses his services. His center’s focus on being an interdisciplinary space has allowed him to remain flexible in his practices, despite his tie to the English department. This flexibility is vital to remaining as accessible as possible to all the students who use his center.
Even though the three directors I interviewed for this exploration operate in different institutional structures, their focus on flexibility is what binds them together. Honestly, I found this quite surprising. I was under the impression that a two-year college and a four-year university would have very different standards and practices. Yet, while these directors’ methods might be quite different in achieving the goal of reaching as many students as possible, they focus on adaptability regardless of their particular institution type. What I found rather interesting is how the needs of these directors’ colleagues affect their decisions regarding the writing center.

Madison finds that her colleagues have a positive effect on her decisions in the center. In fact, a good amount of the time these folks help her in deciding what directions to go and which practices to use. She has her faculty-tutors actually train the undergraduate and graduate student tutors. The more experienced faculty, she finds, are excellent mentors for those new to the center and even those who might have brought some experience with him or her. Overall, the influence of Madison’s colleagues falls exclusively into the positive category.

Herman’s colleagues have both positive and negative effects on his decisions in terms of running his center. He is required to find a balance of the expectations of his colleagues and his own sense of what the writing center’s missions should be. When his colleagues attempt to have his center meet their own needs, and not that of the students, he must resist the most. Though this is a negative effect, he must find ways to not alienate them while resisting, enacting a positive resistance. By doing so he can ensure that he sets his own agenda for what the writing can and will do. Conversely, many of his colleagues fully understand the mission of the center and these are the ones who Herman
finds the easiest to collaborate with. One example of such collaboration came in the form of the need for extra help for some of the students who came to his campus under prepared for Composition courses. Normally these students would be placed into a “stretch” course (one that takes regular Composition courses and stretches them over two semesters in order to allow for weaker writers to strengthen his or her skills), but it soon became clear that this was simply not enough for some students. Herman got together with the Academic Success Center and the English department, and created the position for a by-appointment-only professional to work in Academic Success Center who specialized in teaching developmental writers. The benefit of this was two-fold. First, the needs of students were better met through this collaboration. Secondly, Herman’s tutors had some of the built up tension removed from their work due to some of his colleagues expecting them to be grammarians and developmental writing teachers.

Barb’s experience with her colleagues is somewhat akin to Herman’s, in the sense that there are both positive and negative influences. Her colleagues can sometimes expect that her tutors fill the role of developmental writing teachers or that of paid proofreaders, and this can lead to some heated conversations about the purpose of the writing center. Thankfully, her interaction with other faculty is usually positive. She finds that it is of particular importance to maintain a positive relationship with the funding source for the center. By keeping in good standing with her funding department, she can have access to the funds that helps her obtain new resources and to run new workshops. The tie with the English department is another bond she finds valuable. She works with a lot of the faculty contained within the department to ensure that the center’s work remains relevant to coursework and departmental expectations. These two entities
collaborate so that tutors can better know the expectations of the instructors and better serve the students who use the service. Beyond this, Barb makes sure that she reaches out to other communities in the institution, such as Research and Development, to safeguard her center from becoming stagnant or irrelevant to students of any discipline.

There are many challenges for these directors’ in meeting their colleagues’ needs. In some cases the director might have to push back against the wants of his or her fellow faculty. In others, the director must be willing to collaborate to create new methods, or even entirely new positions, in order to meet the needs of his or her colleagues. While all three directors acknowledge having positive interactions with their fellow educators, two of the three are forced to admit that the experiences are not always productive. It would be overly ideal to say that every director would be able to have solely positive experiences, but it is refreshing to be reassured that most fall into this category. It is flexibility to these needs that allows these three directors to maintain well-functioning writing centers and have the ability to reach the particular student demographic that uses the center.

The third part of this exploration of writing center theory and practice deals with how these directors meet the needs of his or her very different student bodies. In the case of Madison’s center, a minuscule budget plays into her ability to gather all the resources she might want to better serve the students. Despite this, she has still gathered a small library of style guides, dictionaries, and other tutoring-related resources. She finds that by using targeted training techniques with her tutors, she achieves the most success. This means that her center’s tutors focus heavily on the realm of non-native speakers of English. Her tutors run workshops regularly to address whatever student needs might
arise, regardless of their field of study. The content of the workshops is ever changing, in order to avoid toxic orthodoxy. The idea of toxic orthodoxy has to do with a pedagogy becoming so rigid that it cannot bend to newfound needs. Madison sees this need for flexibility in order to most effectively reach her student demographic.

Barb’s outlook on catering to her diverse student population is not wholly unlike that of Madison’s. Focusing on an individualistic approach produces the best results for her so far. Her center provides close to six workshops a semester whose content varies from grammar skills to resume building. These workshops help developmental students refresh and learn new skills that their academic career will require. The fact that her college recently made the switch from a two-year technical school to one that is slowly changing its focus in hopes of becoming a four-year school places students who might want to write creatively in a challenging place. In order to help these students flourish, a creative writing journal was created. Here, the students who need an outlet for their creativity can write and be recognized. Individualization requires this director to remain flexible enough to meet the needs of her student demographic.

Herman’s center runs workshops, has an academic journal for all schools of discipline, and focuses on critical thinking above all else. With his student demographic being so traditional, the need for diversity is essential. He finds meeting the needs of his students best requires a push into what some students might find a new realm of thought. The goal is to make the students more culturally diverse and stronger critical thinkers. In order to do this, he and his tutors must be flexible enough to be able to push back on what rigid or normative world views some students might drudgingly hold.
All three directors serve quite different student bodies. In order to accomplish this feat, each one practices slightly different methods. Workshops, places for students to flex their creative muscles, and spaces for pushing back on traditional thinking are amongst these varied approaches. While each one of these directors faces different challenges, it is flexibility that allows him or her to best meet the needs of his or her students.

Barb, Herman, and Madison have all successfully adapted to the structure of their institution type, the demands of his or her colleagues, and the needs of their student demographic. Each has done so in the only way that fit their exact situation. The reason this specification was so necessary to his or her success was the fact that each one of the circumstances was unique. Uniqueness demands an individualized response to best serve the needs that are placed upon it. The only way to bend to the shape is to be flexible. Through interviewing these three directors, I had the opportunity to see just a small smattering of the flexibility it requires to hope to run a well-functioning writing center. Whether or not the demands on the directors is a geographical phenomenon or not would be a matter of further research, and a far greater collection of interviews than was is held within these pages. Still, conclusions can be drawn from this small exploration.

If one were to look at the field of Composition studies, the flexibility that this thesis is exploring follows logically. One only has to look to the origins of rhetorical study, which began roughly two thousand years ago, to see the roots of the methods that are used in Composition today. Yet it took roughly another nineteen hundred and fifty years for Composition study to come about. Writing centers then sprang from the field of Composition shortly thereafter.
As writing centers could not exist without Composition courses to fuel them, it would appear that what is relevant to the one could not but help be relevant to the other. Hybridization is what the field of Composition is moving towards. This is in part due to the constant barrage of new technology affecting the way teachers and tutors present information to their students. Another part is due to the ever changing nature of spoken language. Language itself shifts unendingly, creating whole new dialects and modes of communication. It makes sense then that new means of reaching out to these students must be explored and new studies on the ways in which such is done must follow. This is why such specialized fields as Rhetoric and Technology studies have emerged. With all these new forms of communication, it is no longer acceptable to focus on solely classic forms of rhetoric. While stoic educators might not want to encourage these new forms, the future will not stop for them. It is more important in the current state of education to embrace these new facets and see how they can be used to learn more about the way humans think and interact with each other. The resistance to this is not misplaced or ill-informed; it merely plays out like Plato’s fear of the writing form. It is inevitable that change will occur, and to be the best rhetoricians possible, those who practice it should be prepared to evolve.

The three directors I interviewed all had different backgrounds and pedagogies that they bring to the writing center in which they head. Barb runs a center in a two-year college that is working its way towards a four-year school and that has recently removed the “of Technology” from its title. Students who use her center are mostly students who will transfer after completing core courses and whose focus is more on hard sciences. She has to deal with a high volume of developmental students. Her tutors are solely
professional and she is attached to the English department for funding. Her colleagues
value her and the work her center does for the students. She follows an individualistic
approach to ensure that she remains flexible enough to meet all three of these needs to
create a well-functioning center.

Herman directs a center at a four-year liberal arts university’s regional campus.
His center rarely sees a diverse student population and he ensures that his tutors push the
thinking of the students that use his services. He has had to push back on the needs of his
colleagues in order to ensure that his tutors do not become developmental writing
specialists or grammarians. His attachment to the Dean’s Department for funding allows
him the freedom to remain interdisciplinary, which aligns with his pedagogy anyways.
He has learned to adapt to these three needs in order to make the best possible center he
can.

Madison coordinates her center for a STEM (Science Technology Engineering
Mathematics) four-year university. The center she heads is affiliated with the Vice
President of Student Success and this allows her a degree of freedom to pursue her WAC
endeavors. Her student demographic is comprised of roughly a quarter of ESL students,
some developmental, and traditional students. Some of her colleagues work in the center
and she has had almost exclusively positive experiences with those working within and
otherwise. She has learned to adjust to the three types of demands placed upon her so
that she can reach the students who enter her center’s needs.

All three directors run well-functioning writing centers at very different
institutions. Each one has its own mission and expectations for what service the writing
center will provide. The student demographic is quite varied at each school and comes
with its own challenges. Those who teach at each of these schools also has diverse anticipations for how the writing center will prove useful for his or her students. Each director meets those needs by being flexible enough to take his or her own pedagogies, and combine them with that of others for the best possible outcome. In a sense, the flexibility that the directors show to meet the wants of their student demographic, institution type, and the needs of their colleagues makes them successful writing center directors. Barb, Herman, and Madison have all taken the good of what they have learned from others, and continue to learn, in order to maintain the ability to be flexible.
CHAPTER IV
IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this final chapter is to take a deeper look into the research that has been done thus far and to see what it might mean for writing center study and practice in the future. There are several different implications that this research brings to light. One of the most interesting is the seeming rigidity from the three directors despite their want for flexibility. This can be most easily seen in the desire for non-directive tutoring styles to be employed by tutors. Another aspect of interest is the means of training tutors to ensure that the tutors are best suited to help students. Here it seems that experience would be the best teacher, but not all of the directors seem to follow this practice. Finally, I will provide a brief description of what I would believe to be an ideal way to run a writing center from the research I have conducted.

As a graduate student I avoid certain terms due to a fear that I do not fully understand them and will make a fool of myself when I do. Dogmatic is one such term. The three directors that were interviewed for this thesis seem dogmatic in their belief in non-directive tutoring. That is to say that they appear inflexible when talking about directive tutoring. As was explored earlier, sometimes directive tutoring is what best serves the student and is therefore the most effective practice. This does not mean that these directors abolish such methods in their respective centers. In fact, this brings up an
interesting conversation about the two styles of tutoring. Non-directive methods of tutoring are written about almost exclusively in writing center literature and get to live under the comfortable umbrella of altruism. Directive styles rarely come to light. Yet none of these directors would ever be so rigid that they would not allow what best serves the student. Why is it then that directive tutoring gets swept under the rug conversationally, but still is used as an effective tool in tutoring? Perhaps it is that no one wants to admit that a more direct approach can often help students more than the questioning style of non-direct methods. It may be that the directors know very well that this style can be useful, but admitting to such would have a negative effect on their place in the scholarship of the field. Either way, only further research could hope to answer this question.

The second implication that this research sheds light on comes from the section about tutor training. Only through conversing with the faculty readers did I come across this idea, and it is something that is well deserving of further questioning. The old adage goes that experience is the best of teachers, yet these new tutors coming in are trained in a relatively rigid means. Only one of the directors requires that any experience be had by a tutor prior to them getting hired. Another prefers tutors to be a fresh slate and as undergraduate students, he or she would certainly be just that. The third director likes them to have not taught for a lengthy period of time as to avoid any internalized bad habits from bleeding into his or her tutoring. While these are all valid approaches to training new tutors, should not tutors be like the students and learn through his or her own mistakes? As writing centers sprang from composition studies, should the tutors not be like the writing students? In composition courses the students are made to flounder
with ideas, question themselves, and ultimately learn from the inevitable mistakes. This method seems like it would be most useful to a new tutor so he or she would not only learn from the mistakes that are bound to be made, but to actually incorporate these experiences into his or her own unique style. The most obvious counter argument to this is that the student who came into the center for help would not receive any, but I feel that this is not the case. I can only speak from my own experience, but the sessions that I did not have the answer the student was looking for and was forced to learn with the student had benefits for both of us. As tutors are to be looked at as peers (in most centers), this sense of collaboration benefits both parties involved. Perhaps letting the tutors flounder with the student would be something of true value.

Something that I hardly feel qualified to speculate about, but will from the research that has been thus far conducted, is how I might run a writing center. Having looked back upon the research a few aspects are clear. I would prefer to have a center that employed all three levels of tutors: undergraduates, graduates, and faculty members. I feel that this would provide the most diverse population to meet the needs of the student demographic. While I would champion altruism and non-direct methods of tutoring, I would be sure to explain the importance of a more directive approach. Letting the tutors make mistakes as a means of learning would be something I would also hold in high regard. I would push the tutors to constantly question set norms, explore new methods, and further themselves both as professionals (even the undergraduates) and as people.

This research barely scratches the surface of the importance of flexibility and adaptability in writing centers. Only through countless more hours of research, observation, and the ability of getting to work in many more centers could this thesis
hope to be a more complete work. Further research will be the means by which these implications could ever been remotely explored properly.
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