

Bring the Center to the Library: A Community Writing Center for Oklahoma

Abstract

University Writing Centers (WC) provide invaluable support to university students ensuring success in writing, research, and rhetoric literacy skills. Many University WCs open themselves to their wider community and yet fail to attract and serve that community on a regular basis. In supporting the community through WC practices, it is impractical to expect the community to come to us. Rather, we need to create WCs located in the environment where the community exists. Community Writing Centers (CWC) achieve this by using writing center theory and pedagogy but orienting themselves to be able to serve a non-university audience.

Bring the Center to the Library: A Community Writing Center for Oklahoma is a project which will demonstrate the need for and effectiveness of CWCs in the Norman Oklahoma and adjacent communities. This project will establish a CWC in a Norman public library. Data on the frequency of use and the topics discussed will be collected along with information of writer's self-perceived skill/confidence in writing. Bring the Center to the Library will serve as a touchstone example of an Oklahoma CWC and will provide stories and experiences so that other CWC initiatives may grow on the foundations laid.

Undergraduate Researcher: Miles "Miley" Thompson

Pursuing a Bachelor's of Science in Information Science and Technology from the University of Oklahoma

Undergraduate Writing Consultant at the University of Oklahoma Writing Center

Research Mentor: Dr. Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison

Director of the University of Oklahoma Writing Center

Director of the Expository Writing Program at the University of Oklahoma

Signatures

Student:

Mentor:

Assistant Professor of Writing

Chair:

Director, OU Writing Center & the Edith Kinney Gaylord Expository Writing Program

**Bring the Center to the Library: A Community Writing Center for Oklahoma
2024 Provost's Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Summer Fellowship**

Project Proposal

By Miles "Miley" Thompson

Project Background

Student Writing Centers are essential resources for university students growing their literacy skills in writing, research, and rhetoric. Employing a range of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and professional writing tutors (National Census of Writing, 2017), writing centers provide support in ways that instructors, courses, and other traditional resources are unable to. In my time as a writing center consultant, I have personally witnessed how particular practices, such as a curated lack of the hierarchical structure present in traditional writing teaching environments, and individual, one-on-one attention, often impossible to provide in traditional writing teaching environments, allow writing centers to be a more approachable and accessible resource able to reach students that would otherwise not receive the support they need. This is echoed by the principal resource for peer writing tutors the *Allyne and Bacon guide to peer tutoring* (Lerner & Gillespie, 2004) which in the very first chapter discusses the necessity and effect of trust between consultant and writer. Further, the efficacy of the writing center's positive effect is demonstrated by Salazar's analyzing of writing center studies finding a "meaningful impact on writing generalizable to college WCs and [that] WCs may especially support struggling writers" (Salazar, 2021, p. 55).

Certain writing centers, such as the University of Oklahoma Writing Center, are open not only to university students, but to all community members (Community Writers, n.d.). Yet, in the OU Writing Center, it is rare to serve non-university students (H. Morrison, personal communication, February 23, 2024). In discussion and guidance from the OU Writing Center administration, I theorize that this discrepancy is due to factors such as community awareness of the center's accessibility, and the campus location of the center. Likely, the intimidating, potentially isolated nature of a college campus discourages would-be visitors from using the service (H. Morrison, personal communication, February 23, 2024). The issue of awareness may be addressed through targeted advertising and community outreach projects, but the issue of location requires a different approach; to reach non-university students, we should not expect them to come to us, we should go to them.

Here we find the goal of *Bring the Center to the Library*: the Community Writing Center (CWC). CWC's take the format of Student Writing Centers and target them to a non-university student audience. Often homed in libraries—representative of the longstanding collaboration between WCs and libraries as described in Elmborg & Hook (2005)—and sponsored by universities, such as the Madison Writing Assistance program (Madison Writing Assistance, n.d.), CWCs use writing center theory and pedagogy to support the general public and, in particular, support

underserved populations. Compared to university writing center theory and research, there is limited literature on CWC's. Yet, key examples such as Rousculp's account of the Salt Lake Community College's Community writing center in *rhetoric of respect: recognizing change at the community writing center* (2014) provide evidence of the effectiveness of the CWC to support non-university communities. Further, Dr. Matthew Capdevielle, director of the Notre Dame Writing Center, has demonstrated how community writing centers may be used to train consultants to support university communities while simultaneously supporting non-university communities (M. Capdevielle, personal communication, January 29, 2024). CWCs are uniquely situated to give support to the entire community—both university and non-university; CWCs are a foundational part of how we may support and foster the unique voices of Oklahoma.

Project Description and Goals

Bring the Center to the Library is a demonstration on the effectiveness of and need for community writing centers in Oklahoma. I will, in collaboration with the University of Oklahoma Writing Center, create and lead a public writing center, homed in one of the Norman Public Libraries. The Norman Public Writing Center will be a support location for any and all community members, including students, non-students, employed, unemployed, unhoused and individuals proficient in or not proficient in English. This will be a location where anybody who needs and desires writing assistance and literacy support may receive free assistance in a supportive and writer's voice-positive environment. The goals of the project are twofold: first, to actively support the Norman Oklahoma and surrounding community, second, to provide quantitative and qualitative data on community writing centers, particularly in Oklahoma, to encourage further research be done and more initiative taken to support communities in this way.

Goal 1 Supporting the Community

The Norman Public Writing Center will be a location to build up and support the voices of Oklahoma. I define writer's voice-positivity to be a mindset taken to ensure that the individuality of a writer's voice is valued and encouraged. A fair portion of writing center theory aims to achieve positive social change and equity through valuing a writer's voice and their ownership of their writing. What this practically means is that consultants are trained not to homogenize voices together—to fit an undefined 'academic standard'—but instead work with writers to understand their unique voice and ensure affective communication with their intended audience. The Norman Public Writing Center will be a writer's voice-positive environment where community members may grow their writing skills while ensuring their unique voices are prioritized.

Goal 2 Research Value

The value of the Norman Public Writing Center to the larger research body will be to provide both the quantitative data on given questions, see the research questions below, and the qualitative data of the experiences—that is the stories—of the consultants, the library, and the writers through the center. The use of *stories* aligns with Writing Center Tradition. When

creating a writing center, or any writing support project, we look to the stories of what others have done so that we can build our program to be the best it can be. Currently, there is a deficit in the stories on community writing centers. This project will directly help to fill that deficit by sharing the experiences had within the center so that others may follow and grow on its success.

Logistics

The Norman Public Writing Center will run for a period of 8 weeks, at least 2 days a week, likely a Friday and a Saturday, during the open hours of the library it is housed in. During these hours at least 1 experienced writing tutor will be present and available for walk-in writing support sessions. Each writing session will last up to 25 minutes if there is another writer requesting a session or up to 45 minutes if there is no other writer requesting a session. A walk-in sign-in sheet will be provided where library patrons may sign up for sessions. When currently in a session the consultant on shift will place a sign informing writers that they are currently helping another writer and requesting the writer sign up for the next available slot on the sign-sheet.

I will actively work with the library fostering the Writing Center to ensure that they are satisfied with the service being provided. This means I will ensure flexibility in hearing the unique needs of the community and adjusting as required to best serve them.

Further, advertising of the center will be done through the housing library's event service, a social media account, and advertisements placed at other locations where communities gather—such as coffee shops, restaurants, and community centers. Local high schools will also be informed of the center.

Research Questions

These research questions are selected to provide statistics on the centers activities, and a measure of writer's ability—through self-assessment.

- With the defined time and advertising constraints, how many writers request sessions?
- With the defined time and advertising constraints, what populations are most commonly served by a CWC in Oklahoma?
- Of the writers served by the Norman Public Writing Center, what types of sessions are most commonly requested? That is, what topics are discussed most by the writers and consultants?
- Do writers served by the Norman Public Writing Center experience a self-perceived increase in writing skill/writing confidence?

Methods of Data Collection

Use of the Writing Center

To ensure the efficacy of the data, two methods of records will be used to track the use of the writing center. Firstly, the sign-in sheets will be the initial method, providing a count of every

writer who uses the service. Secondly, after every session the writing consultant will write a brief report on the topics of session and anything of note occurring during the session. 5-10 minutes will be spent on this report. To ensure the writer's privacy, no personally identifiable information will be included in the report. This will allow a sure count of the number of sessions and information on what occurs during the sessions.

Stories of the Center

Next, to collect qualitative data, at the end of a shift, each consultant working the center will write a description of the work they did that shift. 15-20 minutes will be spent on this report. To gain the perspectives of the writers, optional, anonymous surveys will be provided after sessions for the writers to fill at their discretion. At the end of the project, the consultants will be interviewed for their perspectives on the project. These interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. Further, if able, a few members of the hosting library staff will be interviewed similarly for their perspectives. Finally, adult writers will be given the option to provide contact information and the opportunity to be interviewed for their perspectives.

Data Use and Reporting

At the end of the 8 week run of the center, two weeks will be spent organizing and analyzing the data to create a report on the project. depending on the nature and quantity of the data, multiple reports may be written for different audiences, or one paper may be compiled for multiple audiences. Either way, both the quantitative data, answering who came to the center and what was done, along with the qualitative data, on the stories and perspectives born from the center, will reported. One use of this report will be to aid the University of Oklahoma Writing Center in deciding whether to pursue this project's continuation in the fall of 2024—a foundational step in creating a long-term program to support Oklahoma's voices. Further, I will submit an application to present on the project at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing in Buffalo, NY in November 2024 this will bring the results of the project to a national stage, and potential bolster similar efforts and collaborations.

Other considerations

IRB approval has not yet been granted but will be necessary for this project. My mentor, Dr. Morrison, will aid me in applying for IRB approval.

Impact statement

The financial freedom afforded by this fellowship will ensure I am able to devote my full time and energy and pursue this to completion at the best it may be. The impact of the project will be to directly support and foster Oklahoman writer's voices, and provide evidence on the efficacy of such a goal. As a student of library and information studies, and an experienced writing center consultant, I am uniquely qualified to lead this effort. I am eager to take on this challenge and bolster my communities through *Bring the Center to the Library*.

References

- Community Writers*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Writing Center University of Oklahoma :
<https://www.ou.edu/writingcenter/services/community>
- Elmborg, J. K., & Hook, S. (2005). *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration* . Chicago : American Library Association .
- Lerner, N., & Gillespie, P. (2004). *The Allyn and Bacon guide to peer tutoring*. New York : Paerson.
- Madison Writing Assistance*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Madison Public Library :
<https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/engagement/writing/madison-writing-assistance>
- National Census of Writing . (2017). 2017 Four-Year Institution Survey.
- Rousculp, T. (2014). *Rhetoric of respect : recognizing change at a community writing center*. Urbana, Illinois: Conference on College Composition and Communication, National Council of Teachers of English.
- Salazar, J. J. (2021). The Meaningful and Significant Impact of Writing Center Visits on College Writing Performance. *The Writing Center Journal*, 55–96. Retrieved from
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27172214>