



PROJECT MUSE®

Facing the Center

Harry C. Denny

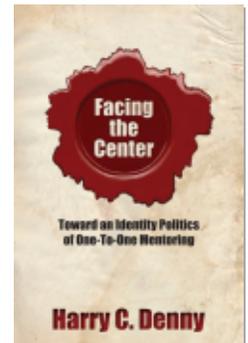
Published by Utah State University Press

Denny, Harry C.

Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring.

Utah State University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/1074.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1074>

6

FACING THE CENTER REDUX

Scene 1: Motivated by survival needs read through accountability measures and institutional programming, a writing center administrator finds himself mapping and charting, qualifying and quantifying all that he does in the name of delivery of instruction and mentoring. Under the mantra of “If you can measure it, you get it,” the director hopes assessment work can capture and communicate the wide-ranging and effective tutoring in his writing center and that it pays off, in no particular order, with greater funding for the center, assurance of its survival, stable employment, a raise, and tenure.

This dilemma—contending with institutional pressures to measure the efficacy of writing center work and to insert accountability into expenditures of energy, time and money—represents a common experience in colleges and universities these days. It speaks into the influence of corporate-style management discourses and philosophy on college education as well as a historical distrust of and ambivalence toward education. Colleges and universities in the U.S. are celebrated for their innovation and excellence, but they’re also assailed as safe harbors for political correctness (from the left and right) and disengaged teaching. These clichés and myths have warranted wide-ranging assaults on colleges and universities: the tenure stream professoriate being replaced by contingent contract labor, students being funneled into overcrowded classrooms, and tuition being increased as state and federal support fails to keep in line with escalating costs. At tuition-driven institutions, pressure to please customers-cum-students and parents jockeys with academic freedom. Professors and administrators balance intellectual and institutional integrity with legitimate fears of dropping enrollments. Such checkbook education produces an uncomfortable paradox: To what extent can learning and teaching operate freely from the influence of not biting the hand that feeds? When taxpayers or their legislative and gubernatorial representatives are able to restrict and expand funding at the shift of political or economic winds, politicized curricula for dubious and genuine means are inevitable consequences.

The Academic Bill of Rights Movement, championed most prominently by David Horowitz, is only the most contemporary version, preceded by New Right radio broadcasters, and before them *Dartmouth Review* and impresarios mocking political correctness debates.

Writing centers and the professionals who work within them contend with the local manifestations of these larger socio-cultural forces. On campus, these tensions commingle with institutional histories and cultures as well as cross-currents within our larger discipline and across the curriculum. How we come to manage and deal with them—our everyday activism—provides critical lessons to our colleagues beyond the spaces of writing centers so long as we never position ourselves (or are positioned) as the site to offload, dump, or take on every difficult problem related to writing and learning. The scenario at the beginning of this chapter speaks into the self-understanding that writing center professionals and our units must interrogate, own, and shape. I've come to learn that my attempts to justify myself and the writing centers I've directed signify my own sense of self and place in the institution and profession. My labor to defend and prove also makes a statement about how institutions and disciplines make sense of those writing centers and me as a professional who directs them, an insight which isn't entirely comfortable or reassuring. Like all the other identities that this book has explored, claiming a writing center identity represents a whole set of negotiations that are never neutral or without consequence. My willingness to chase after proof of a writing center's efficacy casts doubt on my own ethos as a professional and the unit's status and reflects an institution's governing logic about administration and the expenditure of resources. In effect, I become complicit in an institutional positioning that's not fully academic, not totally administrative, and that brackets trust in my expertise for material and symbolic proof of it (greater retention rates, improved grades, more engaged students, etc.). Nowhere else in the academy is such managerial practice so seamlessly naturalized, so readily accepted. I don't know whether that's a productive development or a warning that the larger academe ought to take note of, but I do know that the whole dynamic positions writing centers and their directors quite differently. That reality has consequences for how writing centers are positioned and what status the professionals who run them assume.

Just as we've seen in the other chapters about identity politics, the question of face, center, and margin is critical to understanding writing

center work. However, it's not enough to unpack how we do identity and to what effect in everyday sessions. We've seen that some faces are readily visible, subject to mainstream, dissident, and subversive understandings; others are coded to specific audiences. Those same lessons could extend to the profession. To continue advancing writing center scholarship and the intellectual labor of our units, we need a deep discussion of our positioning on campuses, in our departments, and in our wider profession. Are we on the margins or at the center? To what effect? Do we accommodate, resist, or subvert and for what purposes? Where are we vis-à-vis composition studies and English studies? Are we marginal or central sites for all that the field ponders and represents? What lessons do we teach about the realities of our work that can advance English studies and composition or rhetoric? What can we learn from greater disciplinary rigor? How do we move toward greater agency to traverse margin and center? How can we be strategic about the face we present and its impact? Rarely does a week go by that people don't post on WCenter or our local listservs seeking advice about how they can mobilize support for their writing centers, wishing to know how they can legitimate writing center practices, or wanting the collective wisdom of the community about how to improve a writing center's position in an institution. These queries are legitimate and genuine, but they also reference a certain paucity of standards for what it means to operate in this field that wouldn't wash anywhere else. As Michele Eodice (2009), a former president of the International Writing Centers Association, posed, would physics allow someone to pop up in a professional conversation and ask how to "do" being in the profession? Yet this sort of learning on the job is quite common in writing centers in spite of many arenas and outlets where people can receive professional training or education. What does that tell us about the state of our profession? Too often, we lack the intellectual curiosity or capacity to reflect on and understand what we do, why we do it, and under what contexts our moves work and don't work. Too often, we turn to the larger community and want quick and dirty recipes for what to do in a pinch. Instead, we need to acknowledge that beyond the received wisdom is a history and corpus of scholarship that needs to be engaged, riffed on and reinvigorated with our own lived experiments, observation, and critical interrogation. We need to, more directly, infuse our everyday practices with the currency of academic life: intellectual questioning and theorizing of what's possible. Otherwise, the profession continues on the margin, not by design, but as an effect.

The lived reality for writing center professionals everywhere is that our professional identities are tenuous and enigmatic. They reflect the constantly shifting ground of what it means to claim a career, particularly in a field so young and emergent that no consensus exists for how its identity ought to signify in collective terms. Disciplinarity and professionalism is slippery when people who claim a writing center identity come from a wide range of fields like education, English Studies, communication, TESOL, rhetoric and so on. What does it mean to claim a directorship as part of one's professional identity? Do we go to graduate school to *become* directors, or do we fall into this life (and fall out of it)? What might it mean, then, to be an accidental writing center director? Training can represent quantitative, qualitative, critical, interpretive and creative graduate work, while credentials may range from master's to terminal research and creative degrees. The Writing Centers Research Project reports that a majority of writing center directors have administration as one element of a wider portfolio that can include research, teaching, or oversight of other units.¹⁹ In 2005, only twenty-six per cent of directors held tenure-track positions. A majority of writing center directors occupy non-tenurable faculty or full-time administrative lines, while forty-nine percent possess terminal degrees. Associate and assistant directorships have an even lower representation of full-time staffing (47%), with a sizeable population of graduate students doing double-duty as administrators (20%). This information again begs the question of margin and center. What does it tell us about the larger dynamics at play? What does it say about our status in the academy and to what effect?

Writing centers themselves, the units and spaces that are home to our collective work, must also come to terms with identity in their own way. The spaces take on a character and nature that are quite similar to any notion of identity that people can surely experience. I think of Beth Boquet's noisy writing center (2002) from which she improvises post-structuralist theory and makes a case for these spaces as liminal zones where institutional, educational, cultural and political tensions play out, never resolved. Then there are the writing centers as high tech incubators, spaces where instructional technology meets the hyper-speed of students' literacy demands and needs. How does a

19. The Writing Centers Research Project is currently located at the University of Arkansas. At press time, its website had not yet been released. It was formerly housed at the University of Louisville.

writing center signify when there's no center per se, when the writing center is defused to the margins? Other writing centers are monastic places, viewed in part as garrets where writing is produced in quiet and conferencing isn't dialogue so much as a shuffle of corrected and unmarked papers. Still another face is the writing center as clubhouse or community center. These are the sorts of writing centers where people can enter and everyone knows their name, students have rich relationships, and tutors know each other well and have a strong community. The problem with clubhouses is they foster cliques which lead to exclusionary practices and group-think.

In this chapter's opening scenario, the director is understandably caught in a world of reacting and legitimating. This person is caught up in what Anne Ellen Geller (2005) calls the fungible moments of writing center work, occasions where the tick tock of doing this, that, or the other thing elides any attention to the singularity of events. These epochal moments, as she terms them, make possible time for thinking deeply and for developing a vision of what has been and what is possible. Too often, I'm the director who gets carried away in reacting to the moment or lurching from one crisis and concern to another. I strive to be the director who revels in conversations that make me struggle and reach, and in thinking that forces me to believe and doubt. My failures and successes mount as the years go on. I remain committed to giving fewer answers and less advice and to fostering problem-posing and speculation whenever possible. To close this book, I return to the notion of identity politics, not to offer up transitory solutions, but to invite a sort of activist challenging of ourselves as professionals and writing centers themselves in relation to the themes that I've tugged at throughout.

TOWARD A WRITING CENTER IDENTITY POLITICS

At the beginning of this book, I wrote about identity politics signifying both a tactic and acting as a cover term for social movement organizing that has been going on since the 1960s. Identity politics are the ultimate postmodern expressions: slippery, irreverent, transitory figures. Attempting to pin down such movements to essences is tough, and their histories are rife with struggles to move beyond immutable and legible traits and begin to bump into their symbolic, cultural, and political implications. As I've questioned throughout this book, what does it mean to invoke a racial or ethnic identity in an American context?

How do we understand economic class position vis-à-vis writing and learning? What role does gender play? How do national identities and multilinguality complicate the teaching of a “standard” English? Writing centers themselves intersect with these notions of identity and the complications that come along with them. Identity is central to writing centers, and not just because they are institutional units occupied by the individuals within them—people with multiple identities that impact on everything they do. Writing centers take on the politics of identity and questions of face because how they present themselves has symbolic and material implications that represent a whole range of relations. Typically, people like to write about writing centers by invoking metaphors to better help people process them.

Andrea Lunsford (1991) famously posited writing centers as garrets, storehouses, and parlors. These metaphors index the doing and the action, not the collective persona that our centers come to take on, and not the identities that professionals that inhabit them come to possess. The writing center operates as a community whose identity intersects with the disciplines that inhabit it. Some, like composition and English, have greater profiles and influence than others. Patricia Bizzell (1992), borrowing from John Swales (1987), argues that discourse communities are social collectives loosely structured through and around a shared sense of language. Her definition helps bridge the “social turn” in composition, but creates a space to factor in our postmodern reality. That is, we don’t have collective get-togethers and negotiate terms that determine codes and membership unilaterally. In other words, while writing centers and writing center professionals might constitute a discourse community that shares a language, a good deal of fluidity allows a great range of people to claim that identity or to identify with writing centers. But it’s also that realization that makes things really complicated in writing centers: Ostensibly anyone can claim that identity; there’s not litmus test or rite of entry. Put differently, because we don’t have a code or widely agreed consensus about performativity, nearly anyone can claim our identity. A part of me wonders whether that’s true in other fields, particularly in the humanities. When we move into the sciences, say biology or chemistry, a common language binds them more or less together, so that for example, when they sit in a conference room having professional conversations and what not, they may disagree philosophically and intellectually, but there’s a common ground that seems to bind them. Even in the “softer” sciences, that connection

might bind people too—psychologists have a shared code as do historians and art scholars.

Yet when we turn to English studies, the ability to share a common ground breaks down. Take, for example, my position in English at St. John's. I teach upper-level courses in writing and rhetoric through the department, and graduate pedagogy seminars in a variety of topics in composition studies. Though my actual philosophical and intellectual interests overlap with a number of colleagues, I rarely connect with them because my training isn't rooted in literature scholarship. When I collaborate with faculty from across the disciplines, they frequently approach me with sentence-level concerns foregrounded in their agenda. I've come to understand that as them reading me as an interlocutor and also as them narrowly understanding what's possible. They think, "Hey, all those English people think . . ." Then again, there's something about understanding ourselves as a discourse community, and I'm troubled that there's not really all that much of a community out there. What binds us? What is our discourse connection? As I look out from my office at the floor of our writing center, there is a discourse and there's a community that *does* come together. There's a way that the tutors talk, how they mark themselves, how they place themselves at a table or a couch. It's collaborative and dialogic, but sessions aren't all that make for a writing center identity. There's the moments in the pantry when conversations have the least focus on sessions or conferences. When the tutors are switching into a mode that is a hybrid of youth, college student, and worker. Nonetheless, it feels like a community, somewhere people can feel like they belong. Or not.

During a recent summer, our building on the Queens campus underwent a major renovation that forced the library staff to share our space and resources, a reallocation that went fine until the fall semester came around. Then the Writing Institute became a combined space of library users, the First-Year Writing Program, and the Writing Center, all working on top of one another. We became, for a couple months, a designated campus-wide "quiet" study space. That should have been our first warning: What does it mean to commingle a space already humming with conversation and activities, with a use of space, where people ostensibly seek out silence? Throughout the fall, people got into conflicts over whether they could sleep, eat, camp out all day long, or who could conference where, when, and how. There was a good amount of crankiness, but what impressed me most was how the tutors came

together and made the best of a difficult situation. Instead of being spread out, the consultants often worked on top of one another and came to better know each other and riff off of what their colleagues did in sessions. Another unexpected outcome of sharing space was that we reached a whole new population of students who spent hours in the institute studying, a number of whom began to approach us for support with their writing in disciplines with which we didn't have frequent contact. My point in this story is simple. We face constant moments that we can greet as threats in our writing centers, occasions that we can interpret as assaults to our continued viability and sanctity. Or, we can choose to understand these occasions as opportunities to innovate and experiment.

In this sense, I want to turn to a final exploration that goes beyond the bodies that circulate through the writing center—beyond the typical faces of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality—and toward two other sets of faces that are present and have unique dynamics of their own. Writing centers as institutional units take on a face, a collective dimension with a shared morale and history that transcends the people who often have transitory existences within them. Writing center leadership and staff often turn over, reflecting the ongoing cycles and routines of academic life: people graduate, they advance or change professional trajectories, they retire. A mentor in the field once told me that a healthy writing center succeeds its directors, that an effective writing center persists regardless of its leadership because its process and foundations ought to be sound and self-sustaining in their own right. She argued that predicating a writing center on a single individual, or even a set of them, made it vulnerable to everyday events and dependent on people, whose own ever-shifting needs and demands would inevitably undermine a writing center's stability. This advice was powerful because it forced me to realize writing centers take on an existence larger than the individuals within them, that the face of a writing center isn't synonymous with its directors or leadership. The idea a writing center as an institutional unit co-exists in tension with another entity, one just as crucial and in need of interrogation: writing center professionals. These individuals, whether they're imagined as faculty, administrators, students, tenurable, promotable, or transitory, never neutrally signify within the institution or wider academe. Who comes to direct a writing center, how an institution positions them, and how these individuals position themselves (within the institution) reveal rich

insight on everyone and everything involved. In a sense, these faces and their negotiations provide understanding of the ongoing dynamics of the profession and the building of a discipline that don't have analogs in other established academic fields. How we professionalize ourselves as well as the precedents we establish vis-à-vis other academic intellectual labor have lasting consequences.

PERFORMATIVITY AND THE WRITING CENTER

In chapter 2, I looked into the identity politics of race in writing centers. At the core of that discussion, of coming to know the role racial formation plays in the face of writing centers, is a dynamic centered on performativity, the means by which people enact their identities, racial or otherwise. People of color face a unique challenge in our culture since their bodies in action are always subject to scrutiny on multiple fronts and in ways that reinscribe their subordination in a society that is no less racist in spite of its own push/pull relationship to social progress. White people, who perform the racially-dominant identity formation, simply don't experience the same self-awareness (or collective knowledge) of the cultural and rhetorical implications of how they enact their identities as people of color do (LeCourt 2006, 34). To be sure, I perform my whiteness as seamlessly and hegemonically as my masculinity and American nationality command (I rarely question their naturalness, dominance, or privilege), yet my class and sexual identity operate as subject positions imbued with alterity that complicate the way I move through the world, winnowing the range of possibilities for doing so. In every instance, those components of identity or face impact on how I perform who I am—who I can be—because their material implications and rhetorical possibilities always weigh on my choices, as opposed to the implicit, instinctual effortlessness by which I enact the privilege I possess. Likewise, albeit with a profoundly different history, people of color must negotiate, consciously or not, explicitly or not, how they move their bodies through various racially-encoded spaces and to what effect as accommodationist, oppositional or subversive. That very nexus of race and performance—its attention to action, to doing in relation to audience, not just to being an entity—holds powerful consequences for imagining writing centers and the people who claim those spaces as central to their professional identities.

The Writing Center as a Performative Space

Organizations and institutions have existences and histories that exceed the individuals within them and their physical structures. These units are spaces that perform and are generative in their own right. In my Queens campus writing center, the space ebbs from a frenetic pace to the sleepy library feel that is its core; whereas the Staten Island branch has the vibe of being more cozy and conventional. Both spaces are outfitted with similar furniture, university branding of its coat of arms and quotations from historically significant writers and activists. In this self-conscious affiliation with the larger university identity and mission, these writing centers are fully accommodationist in their spatial performativity: they are positioned to blend in and flow smoothly with the larger Institute for Writing Studies; they are a face that the university venerates, from high profile spaces to strong, stable funding for them to have the greatest success and broadest reach possible. As a result, these writing centers are expected to demonstrate success in material terms, to serve as benchmarks of accountability, efficacy, and institutional collaboration that can be illusive elsewhere at St. John's. This sort of engagement and profile in the wider institution hasn't always been the case as Derek Owens (2008), former director of our writing center and current leader of our larger writing institute argues. The earlier writing center had a more oppositional ethos, a space that reflected its director's and staff's improvisational use of inherited space—comfy, rumpled couches, murals, and a lived-in feel. It was a clubhouse with a history where the tutors felt like they owned and put their own imprint on the space. Against this old writing center the current ones are measured. Not surprisingly, the Staten Island center, with its smaller operation and closer knit staff more closely approximates that old clubhouse without any self-awareness of doing so, while the Queens center chafes under its spotlight and pressure to accommodate its marquee status, romanticizing that smaller, older space all the while. My ideal writing center is one whose accommodationist profile is leveraged for subversive work. It serves as a space for social and institutional change that doesn't necessarily or directly benefit corporatist academic interests. At St. John's, our work building community writing centers and ones in under-served high schools advances that agenda, yet I turn to programs like Camp Completion, an intensive dissertation jump-start workshop at the University of Oklahoma, as an example of

a service that transforms, empowers, and challenges institutional status quo. It becomes a writing center performance parlayed for making tangible difference.

Writing Center Professionals

Closely aligned to the performativity endemic to writing center spaces—how their positioning and action have material and rhetorical referents and consequences—the professionals who work within them present affects that richly signify. While nearly everyone in a writing center has a sort of transitory existence considering the relative permanence of the units, I'm writing here less about the undergraduate or graduate coaches or consultants, and more about the individuals whose professional identities have stakes in writing centers that aren't fleeting. As bodies moving through specific sites, writing center professionals present faces that can conform to institutionally conventional ways, that can systematically challenge them, and that can work to transform from within. However, I fear that writing center professionals too often don't understand themselves in relation to an emergent profession or that our community has yet to reach a critical tipping point of consensus for what it might mean to coalesce as a community, despite its wide-ranging institutional contexts. An accommodationist identity as a writing center professional might involve acting and presenting self in full acceptance of one's position in an institution. For tenure-track faculty, that might mean adhering to the unwritten protocol of weighting aptly and moving forward successfully on teaching, service, research, and even mission fronts, while administrators might encounter a different set of expectations to meet institutional needs (acting as participants in "service" labor, like committee work and institutional advancement bodies). Beyond the school, college or university, reconciling oneself to participate in professional community—attending conferences, dialoguing with colleagues around the country, advancing the profession—is an accommodationist move. Juxtaposed to it, one can oppose, self-consciously or not, by refusing to affiliate oneself to the wider discourse community of writing centers. I often refer to these sorts of professionals as those who "do time" in writing centers; they clock in and out, they may have marginal training and expertise in the field's scholarship, they may be effective, but just don't engage. Oppositional writing center professionals also can be figures who view themselves as contrarians within their institution, stalwart individuals

who contest and push back or who passively resist the cyclical currents of everyday academic life. A subversive performativity as a writing center professional is more difficult to read and imagine; this figure acts on one level according to institutional rhetorical needs, yet she or he also moves toward a sort of everyday activism that demystifies the rituals and conventions of the academy. In this sense, writing center directors who act as mentors, guiding students, colleagues, staff (each of whom own wide-ranging needs, purposes, and motives) through education, possess a sort of leadership that's neither self-aggrandizing nor self-serving. This sort of performance imprints and leaves traces that pay forward.

CAPITAL AND THE FACE OF THE WRITING CENTER

Just as the racial and ethnic faces of writing centers hinge on their performances, Chapter 3's discussion of class revolves around the dynamics of capital, those practices that signify people's economic status. Action and rhetorical finesse shape how individuals, groups and audiences *do* and react to racial difference, but the very possibility to read that or any expression of performativity depends on learning, recognizing, and deploying capital. In the case of economic standing—class—capital is material (how much wealth one has access to) and symbolic (what it means to claim or possess a class-coded identity). The brilliance of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), the sociologist on whom I based this argument, is that the concept of capital isn't restricted to wealth, but extends to social, cultural, and political domains as well. Identities, in effect, emerge in coordination with communities that are defined by shared forms of capital as well as understanding of its use internally and beyond. To claim a working-class identity is about more than how much money one has, but also about a whole constellation of means of signifying or presenting face, particularly in relation to other working-class people and those viewed more broadly as privileged—the middle and upper classes. Ways of marking class identity include how people consume in every imaginable way and how we express ourselves through discourse and symbolic action. Words signify just as powerfully as people's movement through space. In the context of writing centers, class becomes visible—it rears its face—in sessions when students and consultants alike must own their marginality or privilege in relation to the discourses and rhetoric that dominate conventions of academic expression. In those moments of self-awareness of one's own position,

those from working-class backgrounds discover that the language and persuasion of home, neighborhood, or community can be vastly different and seemingly incongruent. The academy beckons people to accommodate its sociolinguistic demands, forcing one to surrender the capital accrued for one sense of identity and agency in exchange for another—a set of codes that flow smoothly with middle-class sensibility. A Faustian bargain is struck where material security is exchanged for affiliation, yet to refuse it—to maintain or take pride in being working class—has real economic consequences (poverty, joblessness, etc.). Counterpoised to both positions, subverting both class assimilation and segregation involves a recognition of how capital operates not just for the privileged, but also for the marginal; in effect, the subversive face is an astute participant in multiple fields of capital, a traveler adept at morphing to the requirements of *any* community of practice.

Writing Center as Unit

Hierarchies exist throughout society, and typically they are associated with collections of people. However, institutions themselves have pecking orders, not just for the individuals that circulate through them (provosts, deans, chairs, full professors, associate professors, doctoral students, undergraduates), but also among their constituent units. Departments, programs, institutes, divisions, and even schools and colleges are never positioned in an egalitarian way vis-à-vis one another. These units operate in ways analogous to classes: they accumulate sheer amounts (history, institutional memory) and different kinds (political, cultural, economic) of capital that differentiate and reflect privilege in significant ways. Writing centers, players in this organization world, experience differential positioning in any number of ways that reflect their reputation and standing as well as institutional values and perspectives. Those that are sited in basements without windows clearly signify differently than those more visible or high-profile on other campuses. This sort of positioning dovetails with the history of the writing centers at Temple University and the University of Minnesota, institutions where the spaces reflect powerful shifts in the currency and sway of mentoring writers one-to-one. Writing centers housed as extensions of academic units and research initiatives exist on a plane separate from those fully identified with student support services. Who an institution staffs a writing center with and at what level, as I'll explore in greater depth below, indicates its positioning and ethos. For example,

units with provisional professionals, inadequate resources, or infrastructure that's substandard or ill-considered speak volumes, even if the people who take up the material and improvise with it are able to make the best of a less-than-ideal situation (as many do). At St. John's, the original writing center operated along those lines for years, becoming a strong, scrappy center that reveled in its very marginality and could do much subversive work outside of the glare of widespread scrutiny. Today, that center and its companion on our Staten Island campus represent a culture shift. Units are now elements of a liberal arts and sciences college and a larger writing institute, meaning they are integrated into curricula in dynamic ways (the first-year experience, writing-across-the-curriculum, athletics, mission work) that the learning centers on campus just are not. What's more, because the institute is incorporated into the university strategic plan, support in nearly every possible material and ideological way is strong. But this level of support represents a local institutional culture that's responsive to creating conditions for academic success and following the lead of faculty, who in turn support the values that a culture of writing signifies. These writing centers also represent a long history: a movement to where they are now and a departure from another era, one much less progressive and innovative around writing and the teaching of it. For other campuses, the push and heft to privilege and support units like writing centers comes from other sectors more firmly identified with institutional administration, whose priorities and leadership can be exterior to faculty and academic units.

Writing Center Professionals

While the concept of an institutional unit accruing capital is abstract and difficult to grasp, the idea is far more tangible for the professionals who inhabit writing centers. Just as writing consultants gain competency and facility as they become immersed in the everyday activity of mentoring and the field's research on theory and methods, professionals also face a learning curve related to the same intellectual, social, political, and cultural capital. Becoming a professional requires consumption of the historical knowledge of the field, and coming to familiarity with an emergent "canon" relevant to one's institutional context (how, for example, operating a writing center in a high school differs from those at two-year colleges, four-year companions, or even research universities). Such collective intellectual capital in writing

centers dovetails with wider knowledge in related fields and disciplines like composition/rhetoric, communication studies, organization and small group communication, literacy studies, TESOL research, linguistics, educational leadership and administration, assessment, and beyond.²⁰ Of course, it's impossible for one to have facility in every conceivable area, so another form of capital represents a person's sophistication with information-seeking behavior, one's ability to know what questions to ask, to whom, where, when, how and to what effect. Credentials jockey with life or cumulative experience for people. Graduate degrees confer and assume a different set of intellectual capital, particularly for higher education institutions, than undergraduate versions, and even advanced degrees signify differentially. Doctoral credentials trump master's work, and under certain contexts, doctoral types have different value and meaning. Even the institutions from which people get their educations represent an often unspoken hierarchy and privileging (Ivy League institutions over all others, elite/selective research institutions over comprehensive ones, private institutions over the publics, etc). Life experiences are also critical: Sheer breadth of experience factors into the capital that one can marshal. I'm a much different consultant and director today than I was when I started out in the early 1990s at Temple. I know more about people; feel more comfortable with silence, conflict, and diversity; and embrace occasions to improvise. But I also have more cumulative experience and knowledge than I could ever imagine back then. More important, my years of working in the academy enable me to understand its culture, structure and process; however, I continue to learn every day from the wisdom and greater maturity of my senior colleagues. This same learning process happens in the larger writing center community through its social networks (virtually through WCenter, real-time through conferences) and institutions (e.g., the IWCA Summer Institute for Writing Center Professionals, *Writing Center Journal*, *Writing Lab Newsletter*).

NORMALIZATION AND THE FACE OF THE WRITING CENTER

Gender and sexuality, the subjects of Chapter 4, further complicate the face of writing centers, and those dynamics are fully indebted to the practices of normalization. Like any other aspect of who we are, gender and sexuality are ubiquitous and require negotiation of privilege

20. For more see Miller (2005) and North (1995).

and marginalization, dynamics fully embedded in what counts as normal (or not) in our spaces, culture, and society. The gendered or sexual faces we present may vary in relation to the different publics or audiences we address, and they enforce what is safe or not, what is allowed and prohibited. The convention around gender hectors all that is *not* to give meaning and understanding to what *is*. It presents a never-ending binary tango that imprints on every interaction. Similar to class, these aspects of our identity aren't always legible or conscious, yet for some of us, our sexual personae are inescapable and carry their own burdens. Writing center practitioners, then, contend with a terrain where learning and mentoring requires pushing students to work against the grain of what they have internalized as natural, hegemonic, and normal. Students must know that some academic writing signifies the personal and reflective as less conventional than the supposedly logical and dispassionate (and vice versa depending on the discipline or context). Interaction styles between consultants and clients can hinge on comfort with the performed or expected genders and sexualities, forcing both sets of individuals to decide whether and when to accommodate or resist the others' needs. In "queering" these dynamics, tutors and students come to know their audiences, reading them for cues of the plausible and fissures where subversion can slide through, not necessarily detectable to the majority. Such moments testify to transformative potential in the liminal space between the mutually constituting discourses and practices of normal and abnormal, a third space and possibility that's allied, loyal, or beholden to neither and both simultaneously.

Writing Center as Unit

Throughout the academy, the frequency and dominance of conversations about assessment are becoming legendary as institutions continue to corporatize their bureaucracies and processes. No college, department, or unit, especially those that want to maintain their internal stature or capital, is immune from the push to demonstrate the efficacy of their work or the value their service, programming, or curricula. Writing centers, as marginal or privileged units in institutions, must negotiate and formalize intellectual labor that they have always implicitly done: Writing centers are committed to problem-posing in the moment, riffing on the needs of their clients, and adapting resources, techniques, theory, and practice to the context. They make, as Brian Huot (2002)

advocates, their everyday assessment practices local, organic, and valid (their questions and answers are congruent with one another). Yet the impulse to normalize seeps in and imprints itself in the compulsion to benchmark and standardize writing centers. In this accommodationist turn, a rhetoric of affinity underwrites the motive to shore up and rationalize local practices by gesturing to some fictive body of practices or precedents that grant ethos by proxy. Of course, good persuasive sense makes the politics of the normal wise practice. Quite often, appeals to the example of peer institutions and the ways they've supported their own campus writing centers (for information on everything from physical space to pay rates and staffing levels) have served me well, yet in almost each instance, my arguments were contested on the grounds of local needs and institutional history. In the metro area, the St. John's writing centers are now among the spaces that other institutions visit to benchmark outcomes (people ask, "How'd you get all this?"), and they leave mollified less by the products of my colleagues' historical labor than by the lessons that process, collaboration, leadership, and institutional change teach. Instead of abject resistance to the impulse to normalize and to document and theorize the range of possibilities, I'm intrigued by what these processes tell us about us and our institutions, and how they might be manipulated to advance and support a writing center that could otherwise be problematic. If a certification process engages a staff in a range of scholarship and literature that complicates and forces deep discussion of writing, language, learning, expression and beyond, what lingering harm can come from such conversations? Still, it's instructive to think about the disciplines and services that naturalize normalization and those that don't and how each are positions vis-à-vis one another on different campuses.

Writing Center Professionals

I write from what feels like the most conflicted of positions as a writing center professional. Unlike many in the field, I am an accidental participant in the sense that I didn't go into undergraduate education or graduate school with the expressed intent to work and build a writing center professional identity. Even more problematic in some ways, my formal training is outside of English Studies. As a social and cultural critic educated in rhetoric and communication, I come to our field as someone trained in mixed methods research, a combination of empirical and naturalistic inquiry, of social science and humanities

values. Friends and colleagues alike often scoff, “He’s really a sociologist,” or “He sounds like a political scientist.” Ironically, I remember professors and peers in graduate school saying, “He seems more like English person,” or “He’s just too much into theory.” But when Frank Sullivan at Temple turned me toward writing centers and when my disciplinary mentors encouraged the move, I recall that they all had a commitment to what it meant to claim any professional identity, even if it meant moving afield of one’s academic training. In a sense, they provided with me a set of professional standards for what it meant to be a participant in the field, to become an engaged director. Early on in my career that meant learning the research in the field—the key questions, debates, figures, the history, pouring through *Writing Lab Newsletter* and *Writing Center Journal* and then moving on into the books (Meyers & Smith’s 1987 *The Practical Tutor*, Muriel Harris’s 1986 *Teaching One-to-One*, Shaughnessy’s 1977 *Errors & Expectations*, Bruffee’s 1993 *Collaborative Learning*, and Elbow and Belanoff’s 2003 *A Community of Writers*) all of which I wedded to my world of theory and criticism. As I’ve gone on, I’ve also learned that being a professional in our field means more than consuming other people’s research, but also doing it (not just the sort that helps me move toward tenure) by learning about the local institution, its culture, and the questions and theory-building that they beg for. Most crucial of all, it means tapping into a network of peers and mentors of one’s own on a local, regional and national basis, and then paying that standard of practice forward to new people in the profession, whether they are graduate students or colleagues.

CITIZENSHIP AND THE FACE OF THE WRITING CENTER

For multilingual writers, coming to a writing center is very much about how performance, capital and normalization impact on negotiating citizenship. In the academic life of American colleges and universities, acting and signifying as a member of any number of its diffuse discourse communities enables the people that circulate through them to feel greater comfort, security and place. From the social life of campus to its academic units, college pulses with odd currents of the eccentric, the esoteric, the conventional, and the innovative. In this climate, people negotiate (or refuse) place or belonging, by being embraced or excluded. It is, as Patton and Carsario (2000) and Fraser (1997), and others theorize, a dynamic where citizenship hinges on a grand game of binaries, of collective identity predicated on who a population allows

and shuts out through its shared and symbolic practices. Multilingual learners, writers, and speakers intersect this contested terrain because education in the U.S. is inexorably tied up with a conflicted history of citizenship and nationality. America struggles with its immigrant past, present, and future. It becomes material in “native” resentment toward ethnic enclaves who seem to refuse assimilation, whether through language or social proximity, as permanent-resident immigrants or international visitors cling to common cultures of “home” that bind and eventually, ironically, enrich the fabric and flavor of the adopted nation. How one becomes “American,” what that identity signifies, for whom, and under what circumstances is rife with identity politics grounded in the nation coming to terms with its own face and the very possibility of reconciling its inevitable diversity (not just a reality, but a goal, a *raison d’être*). As unsettled as this notion is for the nation, on its campuses, the intersection of citizenship and nationalism imprints itself on tolerance for linguistic diversity and students’ rights to express themselves beyond the relatively narrow bands of academic English. Multilingual students, in other words, must struggle with presenting a face that conforms to the monolingual bias and privilege of the American academy, one that compartmentalizes linguistic use and citizenship (identities that are posited as separate and more or less equal), or one that seeks to transform the common calculus of academic citizenship through advocacy of shared embrace of multilingualism. I advocate writing centers align themselves with the latter position (as Grimm (1999) and Pennycook (2007) articulate in their individual works), fostering climates and spaces where transactional learning around linguistic traditions happens and creating opportunities for cross-cultural awareness that promises mutual benefit for consultants and students alike.

Writing Center as Unit

Citizenship understood as a community of shared identity and practices—a common face—feels especially apt in the context of writing centers, but I’d like to understand them as possessing citizenship in two, intertwined contexts: within institutions and beyond. Internally, writing centers are units that are parts of larger collectives of organizational interests. As I’ve mentioned before, writing centers don’t exist in vacuums; they are parts of institutions with rich histories and often dense protocols that must be understood in order for writing centers to grow or adapt to an ever-shifting terrain. Geller et al. (2007),

the writers of *The Everyday Writing Center*, turn to Etienne Wenger's concept of "communities of practice" to speak into the multiple and "shared repertoire[s]" that people daily encounter (Wenger 1998, 6). At local institutions, then, writing centers operate in an environment where the unit is part of a community for which there are normalized practices that require certain amounts and kinds of capital and performativity. For example, at St. John's, the institutional repertoire is punctuated with frequent references to academic excellence, student engagement and social justice. These values intersect with the university's Vincentian mission of advocacy of material change, empathy and support for those marginalized in society. Effective units in the university internalize those values and imbue their practices with them, and the writing centers have shored up their status by doing our everyday academic work through student-centered pedagogy and by actively fostering outreach and mission work that benefits the surrounding area (collaborating with local community centers and helping underserved high schools develop locally-grown writing centers). Beyond striving to be good citizens in the university community, I'm also drawn to the importance writing centers have as citizen-units more broadly, how individual writing centers can model for others a shared practice of innovation and problem-posing. There's something to be said for a writing center where dissent and debate, challenge and criticism can be harnessed and turned toward interactive improvement of the unit. To me, the most cogent example of this sort of subversive face to the writing center is the loud, chaotic space that Beth Boquet describes so well in her 2002 *Noise from the Writing Center*.

Writing Center Professionals

Taking inspiration from Paula Gillespie, Brad Hughes, and Harvey Kail's (2007) ongoing work through their writing center alumni project, my associate directors and I have started conducting digital video exit interviews with our graduating students. Cameron, one of the tutors featured in an interchapter, gave me one of the most powerful sets of sound bites that I plan on using in a montage of advice from former consultants to new ones joining our staff. He counseled his peers to resist judgment and to never be tempted to think they are smarter than someone else. In that sentiment, I heard Cam suggesting that future consultants treat every moment and person with fresh and empathetic eyes and embrace learning as ever-possible and rewarding.

I can't imagine a better professional sentiment or a stronger set of values around which to build a community. He makes me proud in that moment and challenges me to be a better director and leader by performing those values. Professionals in writing centers are part of one of the more cohesive and collegial communities in education. The collective embraces recent converts or discoverers of the field and its possibilities, even if the community itself struggles for consensus about its own direction and future. To be a citizen in the writing center field involves a shared set of intellectual capital and labor as well as a common concern for learning, teaching and mentoring. Because we practice such a broadly inclusive citizenship, it's difficult to pause and consider who and what gets elided in the field and the difficult conversations we must have to move forward or to complicate our repertoire. We professionals in writing centers intensely identify as a community, even a community of practice, but like the national struggle the U.S. faces, we aren't equipped to consider how our citizenship, in spite of its rich promise, is still deeply flawed and in need of interrogation. How do we come to think about who we allow or prohibit? How do we shunt aside specific practices and people and to what impact or effect? This book hopes to spur those discussions, but the possibilities extend beyond the forms of identity on which it has mainly focused. Our citizenship is never fully egalitarian or equitable; our promise lies with questioning why and advocating for something better.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

This book came to closure in the context of Barack Obama being elected and assuming the presidency of the United States. On the night he won, the moment was rich and powerful: Americans of all stripes cried with pride at the promise of what had come to be and what might come to pass as Obama took the stage with his running mate, their families and friends. Broadcast coverage panned enormous crowds in Chicago's Grant Park or cut to New York's Harlem or Times Square, and the monumentality of the experience was palpable. Yet in that moment, I heard over and over and over again commentators heralding a new era, one which they proposed was post-identity, post-race. It was, quite possibly, the worst possible implication to take from Obama's election, yet entirely expected in a society where threshold moments often can be taken as tantamount to social change. I know many voted for that shift, regardless of the party identity of the

candidate, and I also know that that it's too early to tell whether ground has really moved or not in this country. I'm too young to remember the giddy optimism that liberals possessed with Kennedy's election or that conservatives heralded with Reagan's presidency, but today, I'm old enough to be deeply cynical about politics and politicians. In the moments and hours and weeks following Obama's victory, "liberal" California joined scores of other states in banning civil recognition of same-sex relationships, Arkansas outlawed adoption for sexual minorities, and Colorado banned affirmative action. As activists mobilized throughout the nation, outraged and shocked at the election results, I wondered to myself whether anyone could be really surprised that a minority, a barely-tolerated, widely-stigmatized one, would lose a popularity vote with the majority. It had happened over and over and over again, beginning in Oregon and extending to Colorado and beyond, a sure-fire wedge issue to draw social and religious conservatives to polls in swing states and districts. Against that backdrop, in Long Island's outer suburbs and in a working-class Brooklyn neighborhood, men were beaten to death for appearing to be different (as immigrants, as Latinos, as gay men). Throughout the nation, its greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression is sinking in, leaving millions without jobs and places to live, exacerbated by a credit scandal that played on people's dreams of home ownership. At the core of all this hope and fear: race, class, gender, nationality. Like the air we breathe, their dynamics, their politics, their identities circle around and through us.

To close each chapter, I offered what I called "Parting thoughts," meant not to wrap up discussion, but to provide occasions to spur further thought that might carry conversation forward. In this book, I advocate, quite literally, facing the center and attending to the margins, looking to our writing centers and their practices and becoming aware of the ways assimilation, opposition, and subversion come about in them. The faces of our writing centers, how they are marked or not, how are they visible or not, signify the degree to which the local takes up diversity, not just as a slogan, but as a central axis for critical thinking, student engagement, and teaching and learning. I've operated on the assumption that writing centers, even if they have relatively homogenous student populations and staff, don't step outside of the moral and ethical need to take up difficult conversations about identity politics and their practices to police, maintain, and make sense of difference. Our writing centers aren't islands unto themselves, isolated

from the broader currents pulsing through our institutions, communities, and nation. They are very much local sites where macro-dynamics, structures, and systems become tangible and real. It might be nice, though utopian and naïve, to hope that the outside can't or will not intrude into our spaces. I don't think that mindset is realistic; instead, I suspect the harsh reality of the everyday is already present in our writing centers, regardless of whether we choose to recognize or go forth into it, develop opportunities to engage, and ways to process and unpack the commonplace of identity politics. The scenarios that lead the chapters have real referents with actual moments in the writing centers that I have helped lead over the years. When I've shared these experiences, they usually have been a part of a conference workshop that focuses on getting participants to think more deeply about how difference plays out in the context of writing centers. Just as often as not, people will ask me, "Are these made up?" "Are they real?" Once in a while, people will sigh, frowning as they say they've got precious little time for staff development, and with that dismissal, they will say they'd rather focus on nuts and bolts of ensuring sound conferencing is happening. In effect, these people are saying that their writing center doesn't have time or opportunity to think deeply about diversity, that it's exterior to the fundamentals, just not a priority, or merely an exercise in performing and enforcing political correctness.

I understand and appreciate that sentiment and offer this book not as a counter-weight, but as part of a comprehensive curriculum that leads to dialogue where the rich labor of learning and teaching happens. My colleague Anne Ellen Geller and I collaborate quite often and I learn more from our talks and challenging one another than I ever actually share with her. Most recently, we've pushed one another over approaches to teaching content in our graduate course curricula. We were torn between surveying a broad spectrum of content or focusing on key authors who produce sustained work with critical concepts. For the survey, students learn a menu of possibilities yet lack heft and substance, and the critical works approach provides depth and insight but can miss the wider conversations. Neither of us won the other over, and both of our classes had sound learning experiences and provided entrée into the fields of English and composition studies. More importantly, I learned, as I watched our students cycle through each of our classes, that they were picking up our professional values. They learned to cultivate colleagues, to listen and hear, to believe and doubt; they

discovered the power of framing, its arbitrary nature, and its practiced implications; and they pursued research as a conversation with fits and starts, recursive moments and leaps forward. Anne and I hadn't (and likely won't ever) discover the right answer to how we teach graduate courses flawlessly, yet we modeled through everyday practice the modes of inquiry and collegiality that many of our students took up. That gesture, following our example, especially when we weren't doing so self-consciously, is the greatest compliment that they could offer us, because to imitate our collegiality, in fostering community in the ways they are pursuing, makes the pedagogy and change we value both organic and sustainable. For writing centers, it's not the prescriptions for making this or that session effective that matter; rather, it's the processes we make possible, the conversations we reward and make time for, the faces that come to the center, margins that change the center. To them, we're indebted. For them, the writing center exists.