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## Writing Centers Feel the Crunch

[Fall 2003 / Focus](#)

By Lynn Makau, Eliana Schonberg, and Sue Mendelsohn

### Funding Cuts Force Centers to Make Hard Choices

Writing centers are feeling the effects of budget reductions across higher education nationwide. Like other student services that don't offer credits or produce revenue, writing centers are particularly vulnerable to budget cuts. Community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities across the country are asking writing centers to make hard choices—choices that will affect consultant hiring, pay, and benefits as well as hours of operation, services, technological resources, and administration.

### The Higher Education Budget Picture

"Nearly every state is in fiscal crisis," according to the 2002 *Fiscal Survey of the States*. "Amid a slowing national economy, state revenues have shrunk at the same time that spending pressures are mounting—particularly for Medicaid and other healthcare—creating massive budget shortfalls" (qtd. in Palmer and Gillilan 8). As a result, public institutions of higher education are currently confronting what Wake Forest University Chief Financial Officer Louis R. Morrell calls "probably the most difficult period universities have ever had" (qtd. in Pulley, "Another Downer"). A survey by the Center for the Study of Education Policy shows a drop in state higher education funding from a 4.6% increase in 2002 to a mere 1.2% increase in 2003; the 2003 numbers have fallen below the inflation rate, making this the smallest increase in a decade (Palmer and Gillilan 1). (See the *Fiscal Survey's* national summary of higher education spending and state-by-state breakdowns at [http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/grapevine/FY01\\_02.pdf](http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/grapevine/FY01_02.pdf).)

Community colleges are particularly vulnerable. While four-year institutions can make up for cuts in state funding by drawing on federal grants, tuition from non-resident students, and charitable giving, two-year schools depend largely on state support (Hebel). California and Oregon community colleges are some of the hardest hit. California community colleges are deciding where to make cuts after losing \$86 million, or 1.1% of their state appropriations (Hebel). Two-year institutions in Oregon have lost 6% of their state funding (Potter). And rising enrollments are straining budgets even further. "Community colleges end up having to do more with less," says Cynthia A. Barnes, the Education Commission of the States former executive director of the Center for Community College Policy (qtd. in Hebel).

Although private colleges and universities are less affected by state cuts, they are not immune from funding woes. In addition to drops in state grants and funding, declines in charitable giving and university endowments have blended to form a cocktail of financial worries for all institutions of higher education. A National Association of College and University Business Officers survey of 654

colleges and universities found an average 6% loss in endowment investment returns (Pulley, "Another Downer"). And for the first time since 1975, charitable giving to higher education dropped in 2002, down 1.1% from the previous year (Pulley, "Giving"). To compound the problem, several major philanthropic foundations—the Annenberg Foundation, the Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Pew Charitable Trusts—have recently announced cutbacks in grants to colleges and universities (Marcy). Stanford, Duke, Dartmouth, Oberlin, and others are feeling the pinch (Pulley, "Another Downer").

### **Writing Centers' Piece of the Pie**

Budget cuts and rising expenses have writing center administrators looking for ways to save money without decreasing services to students, and consultants hoping that they can keep their jobs. Some budget decreases have been dramatic, resulting in serious cuts of staff, benefits, and student services. At Portland State University in Oregon, an almost 50% decrease of the writing center's budget in the coming year may result in staffing cuts at a center that already lists "numerous" volunteers among its employees (Burnell).

However, the situation is not all grim. Many WCs have sailed through the budget storm unscathed so far. At Duke, for example, Vicki Russell, director of the university's Writing Studio explains, "Our program is only three years old and growing, and the powers that be are very supportive of our efforts." Thanks to a 5.6% budget increase and semester-length stipends, the Studio has added four new tutoring positions.

How can we explain the disparity between the haves and the have-nots? The answer lies in the various ways writing centers are funded: by deans, academic departments, student fees, and/or endowments. Centers that receive their funding from a dean, department, or another administrative unit are subject to the discretion of that administrator. One writing center in a public college saw its budget situation improve markedly when a new dean stepped in. "I've been around colleges for most of my work life," says the director of that center (who wishes to remain anonymous) "and I'm still amazed at how much the success of programs depends on the individuals who hold the purse strings."

The University of Delaware reflects the potential benefits of interdependency between writing centers and academic departments. The Delaware Writing Center staff includes ten teaching assistants on loan from the English Department in addition to half-time faculty consultants and undergraduate Honors Writing Program fellows. The teaching assistants work fifteen hours per week in the Center while they are trained to teach English 101 by the Center's staff. Clyde Moneyhun, the director of Delaware's Writing Center, feels essentially positive about his center's future and notes key changes he foresees to make its expansion possible. As he explains, "I have several irons in the fire to help us expand: a request that some of the half-time faculty go full time, a request for more money for undergrad tutors, etc. We have strong support in upper admin[istration], and I suspect we'll be okay in the future—but one never knows!"

Other writing centers have recognized the benefits of combining different funding sources to build stability and flexibility. For example, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's University Writing Center is funded through a combination of state funds and student fees. The Center has been able to weather both state cutbacks in university funding and periodic decreases in student enrollment (Holland).

Centers funded by endowments have greater stability but are still subject to the whims of the stock market. Stanford boasts perhaps a best-case scenario in which a designated endowment ensures support for undergraduate tutors. The two-year-old writing center there is still expanding and has yet to experience budget cuts (Diogenes).

Rising costs of health insurance and tuition also have affected writing centers. While centers that use unpaid interns or volunteers do not experience these costs, centers dependent on paid undergraduate, graduate, or faculty consultants must meet payroll demands. Some writing centers are forced to make difficult decisions that include eliminating staff, reducing benefits, or cutting back hours of operation. Writing centers at state schools in Texas are deciding how to cope with expense increases caused by cuts in state contributions to health care benefits and a looming increase in tuition. The Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin has a steady source of funding thanks to a student fee, but that funding will have to stretch further to cover the new expenses. As a result, the Center is able to offer fewer positions that carry benefits to graduate students (Blackwood). Lou Rutigliano, writing consultant and master's candidate in journalism, found out this summer that he was going to lose his twenty-hour appointment. Facing the challenge of losing his health benefits and income, he found another job at the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. "If I hadn't had the other job, I would have had to leave school. I can't afford to rely just on my financial aid. My department doesn't have many TA positions, either."

Consultants are increasingly feeling the effects of belt-tightening decisions. Jon Olson, director of the Penn State University Center for Excellence in Writing, lists restrictions on tutor raises and travel to the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing as two ways in which Penn State's Undergraduate Writing Center is "beginning to feel the pinch [of university-wide budget cuts]."

Concerns about job security have changed the ways some consultants are approaching their work. Writing consultant Ellen Crowell, a doctoral candidate in English at UT-Austin, recently started developing a new outreach program for Rhetoric and Composition instructors on campus. Thanks to her efforts, she secured one of the coveted twenty-hour positions for next year. "Initially the Writing Center seemed like a more stable place to work than the English department because I was so unsure whether I'd get [a] teaching [appointment], but then it became increasingly clear that the Writing Center was also going to be strapped. I really had to make a case for how I was going to add to the Center next year."

In addition to budget cuts and growing expenses, rising enrollments are only increasing the demands on universities and colleges already strapped by budget woes. The U.S. Education Department National Center for Education Statistics projects a 15% increase in higher education enrollment over the next decade (vii). Sarah Gardner, coordinator of the Tutoring/Writing Center at SUNY-New Paltz, says her center is already feeling the crunch: "We will soon be moving to a location that is half the size of our current space, to my dismay," Gardner writes. She explains that the move follows a "...rapid increase in student population, which has created a space crunch—so our unfortunate move is only indirectly related to budget."

### **Creative Solutions**

Some writing centers are responding to budget restrictions by partnering with

other academic units and searching for additional funding from off-campus sources. At the University of Northern Colorado the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences is asking the Writing Center to cut 19% from their budget. In response, Director Julie Garbus is trying to strengthen her Center's financial outlook by building bridges across the university. "I'm spending the summer asking deans from the other colleges if they can chip in, which seems only fair," she says, "and exploring the possibility of getting funded through student fees, and soliciting outside donors."

Pooling resources with colleges outside of Arts and Sciences, or whichever college serves as the primary funding unit, can reinforce the connection between the writing center and the various academic departments whose students it serves. These connections can prove fruitful if a writing center's budget is threatened, as Tiffany Rouscoulp learned recently. In addition to serving as a tenured faculty member at Salt Lake Community College in Salt Lake City, Utah, Rouscoulp directs a community outreach program that provides writing support for out-of-school adults. The Community Writing Center (CWC) is located on the street level of a low-income housing and multiple-use development in downtown Salt Lake City, across the street from a homeless services center. Since opening in October 2001, the CWC has worked with nearly 700 writers. Despite its strong record, in May 2003 the director and staff feared the Center was in danger of permanently closing its doors. Rouscoulp describes the situation:

During 2002-2003, everything seemed fine, but at the beginning of May, I was informed that the college was going to close the Community Writing Center entirely. The President's Cabinet needed to find ways to cut over a million dollars and our single-line item—an outreach project—was one of their choices. Amazingly, over the next ten days, two executive deans (deans over individual campuses of the college), three division chairs (over academic areas), and one other administrator with a small budget cut dollars from their own budgets to make up the amount that cutting the CWC would provide. Together, they presented their cuts to the President's Cabinet, who agreed to keep the CWC. Our budget stayed completely intact, didn't lose a penny. I've never seen anything like it: a cross-college effort to save an outreach project.

The experience of the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center is one positive outcome of the current budget crunch. Like the citizens of a beleaguered city, faculty and administrators in some places are realizing the importance of supporting each other within their local academic communities. Crafton Hills Community College, in Yucaipa, California, presents another alternative. There, Writing Center staff were faced with the choice of reducing the services they offered or re-educating their community to use services in a way that would enable the Center to stay open. Opting for the latter alternative, they are encouraging students to schedule appointments in advance, to visit the Center during off-peak hours, and to persuade faculty to volunteer for one hour per week at the Writing Center (Townsend).

### **Lessons for the Future**

In a study by the National Center for Higher Education, Don Boyd concludes that state funding forecasts will remain stormy for the next eight years (4). In the past two decades states have allocated smaller and smaller proportions of their budgets to higher education. The average now stands at 32%, down from

44% in 1980 (Selingo). Boyd estimates that in eight years state revenues will fall an average of 3.4% short of the spending needed to continue existing services (4). In all, these projections suggest that 44 states will face deficits; Florida, Nevada, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming are among those who will be hardest hit (5). The simultaneous jump in college enrollments predicted by the National Center for Education Statistics means that many states will have less money to educate more students.

While much of the budget crisis is beyond the control of individual writing centers, innovative directors are showing that there is still room to maneuver. Although the choices may be difficult, directors have a wide range of options for strengthening their centers' operations and demonstrating to university and external officials the necessity of writing center services.

The responsibility for demonstrating the value of the writing center does not end with its director, however. As consultants find that their once stable jobs are now in question, they too are beginning to make arguments for their own worth. Developing new initiatives to serve student writers and keeping administrators informed of consulting successes on a day-to-day basis are two possible approaches to demonstrating our value.

We invite responses to this article from writing center administrators and consultants. Please share your stories of responses to the budget crisis by writing us at [praxis@uwc.utexas.edu](mailto:praxis@uwc.utexas.edu) We will publish responses in our spring issue.

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