

Sections

[Focus](#)
[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

About Us

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Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Spring 2011 \(Volume 8, Issue 2\) - From Triage to Outreach: Raising the Institutional Profile of Writing-Center Work](#)

Sustaining Argument: Centralizing the Role of the Writing Center in Program Assessment

[Spring 2011/Focus](#)

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In "Why Assessment?" (2009), Gerald Graff argues that the critical conversations arising from regular program assessment are often as important as the actual findings themselves: outcomes assessment, he writes, is not only fundamental to measuring students' performance, but potentially "transformative" in terms of creating a recognizable dialogue about — and a more lively institutional culture of — good teaching (153). Agreeing with Graff's claim, I argue that writing centers should take an active, if not central, role in the assessment of writing program outcomes by positioning themselves at the center of the evaluation process. My experiences as a writing center director involved in our university's less-than-three-year-old writing program assessment has led me to this conclusion.

We currently assess our program through a university-wide interdisciplinary faculty evaluation of students' writing portfolios, compiled from essays that they write in their first three writing-intensive courses. Our **Writing Resource Center (WRC)** was drawn into conversations with writing program administrators to develop this newer evaluation structure due to its contact with a large number of student writers who found the commentary on their essays that they received by faculty assessing their portfolios under the older system to be inconsistent with the responses provided by the classroom instructors to whom the papers were originally submitted. When the evaluation system was restructured to focus less on the individual student writers and more on general program assessment, the WRC remained integrally involved in the process. We organized a two-week summer review process and participated in the evaluation, along the way providing the multidisciplinary faculty evaluation panel with essential context on the portfolio requirements and useful guidelines for assessing student writing.

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Importantly, however, in addition to directly participating in assessment procedures, we have since spearheaded the communication of results to writing program and other campus administrators, and publicized the extent to which outcomes are met to faculty and students through outreach activities such as writing-center sponsored workshops. These activities have led me to reflect on the ways in which not only our own, but other

writing centers might take advantage of the institutional discourses generated

by program assessment. How might the transformative, dialogic spaces opened up by program assessment be useful not only in terms of their pedagogical benefits, but for their rhetorical value in terms of increasing writing center visibility and bolstering institutional legitimacy?

Graff's essay on assessment grew out of his ongoing concern with what he terms "course-o-centrism" or the "curricular incoherence" arising from the lack of a clearly articulated connection between courses or faculty unfamiliar with larger curriculum outcomes. He suggests that this rather isolated view of teaching is upheld, in some respects, in the name of instructional autonomy. Given that a large number of faculty within and between disciplines remain unaware of the varying methodologies of their colleagues, maintaining "a kind of tunnel vision," ultimately it is the students who suffer: "When the assumptions of one course undermine those of the next or have no discernable relation to them at all," significant "educational damage" results for most students (Graff 156-57). Herein lies the value of regular outcomes assessment. Graff argues that outcomes assessment helps teachers determine if and what students are learning, identify as a group what it is students should be learning, and, finally, to work together as faculty to promote the sorely needed curricular coherence, a fundamentally more democratic way of promoting learning. After suggesting that faculty focus on finding common grounds for assessment by measuring students' abilities in argumentation, Graff concludes by citing the compelling personal testimony of an unidentified professor who writes that establishing assessment in his department has brought about the "richest, most intellectually engaging, and most useful faculty discussions" leading to improved practices and a tangible "buzz on teaching and learning" (164). Given their expertise in individualized instruction, it is exactly this buzzing culture of teaching and learning that writing centers are often in a unique position to cultivate and promote.

Promotion, however, entails at least some level of involvement. While an involvement in program assessment entails varying levels of commitment from writing center directors and associated staff, the argument for at least some level of participation in the process is not difficult to make, and it can have immediate benefits. The improved practices resulting from a collaboration between faculty working to assess classroom writing instruction and writing center staff can prove

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indispensable to giving the fullest possible picture of student writing and, therefore, promoting the best possible practices among both classroom and writing center instructors. In our writing center, as is the case with writing centers across the nation, we work with hundreds of students each week and are familiar with faculty writing assignments across campus. We witness a remarkable diversity in terms of learning styles and language proficiency, and are all too familiar with students' writing habits. Who better than writing center staff to collaborate with classroom instructors in the structured measurement of how well we are teaching writing to our students? Regardless of the level of participation, however, merely advocating for an involvement increases the center's visibility,

(re)situating it as a vital instructional center, rather than a remedial lab for deficient students, or a marginalized “proofreading shop-in-the-basement” (North 444). Indeed, the benefits from the rhetorical re-framing of its roles merely in the terms and contexts of assessment can assist in positioning the writing center beyond the unfortunate, still hard-to-shake current-traditionalist dictum that its sole responsibility is to proofread, polish, and produce better papers as opposed to writers.

Yet, it should be noted that positioning the writing center as vital to understanding student writing, and therefore central to writing program assessment, diverges from the ways in which writing centers have typically self-represented with regard to their roles both in the program and in the institution at large. As Eric Hobson points out, writing centers have often distanced themselves from the traditional composition classroom in order to legitimize the type of instruction they perform (176). Such narratives of separation were often generated in response to the more “active marginalization” that writing center staff encountered within English departments when they were first establishing their centers (176). While Hobson acknowledges that there are certain benefits to students viewing the center as a more comfortable space where they can work on their writing and cultivate ongoing instructional relationships, he ultimately argues that “[d]istancing writing center activity from the writing classroom is a tactic that is overstated, overused, and, arguably, less accurate than it once was” (176-77). Indeed, when considering the benefits of increased collaboration with faculty and administrators (some of whom are responsible for budgets), and the potential for the writing resource center to be viewed as an indispensable service in both instructing and assessing student writing, Hobson’s point could not be more valid. The rhetorical positioning of the writing center as a marginalized safe space seems to be irrelevant, at least at my university, to deterring the ongoing perception of the writing center as fix-it-shop and, if anything, has only served to perpetuate the problematic feminization of writing instruction. In making this latter claim, I am following from Sue Ellen Holbrook’s description of the institutional characterization of composition as “nonintellectual, pedagogical, service-oriented work” that, as Susan Miller writes, is still largely perceived as “the counterpart, the handmaiden, and low-order basement attached to vernacular literary study” (Miller 523). In reality, writing centers are and always will be alternative instructional centers utilizing, in most cases, teaching techniques more suited to individualized instruction.

However, there is little value in privileging one means of teaching over another, particularly when the ultimate goal is to promote lasting learning among students who hardly benefit from such a compartmentalization. As Mark L. Waldo puts it, the relationship between writing centers and writing programs working more with students in classes should be “almost symbiotic” (170). As he writes, “[t]hese programs work in close association, each benefiting the other and both forwarding writing as a powerful tool for learning. A purposeful bonding, this type of relationship makes the program and center essential to the academic mission of the university, not peripheral to it” (170). Following this train of thought, I see little reason to frame our work as separate, particularly to the extent such perceived gaps in mission may result in writing centers being denied important opportunities to participate in important programmatic decisions. As mentioned earlier, my work as a writing center director co-leading a midsize research institution’s writing program assessment forms the basis of my assertion. I have witnessed a burgeoning culture of

writing instruction slowly but surely begin to come about as a result of our alignment with program assessment, and have in seen several new spaces open up for the reframing of writing center work. Interestingly enough, the results of our interdisciplinary assessment focused on students' abilities in developing, expressing, and sustaining arguments in their fields. For our panel, as Graff suggested, this was the primary "common ground" on which we all agreed was vital to students' success as writers (162). As a result, the writing center has begun to generate a campus-wide focus on this higher-order concern, seeing in improving students' arguments an opportunity to reposition our own role on campus while simultaneously raising our institutional profile. We have sponsored workshops and faculty luncheon events and have produced materials designed to improve students' skills in critical claim making. Again, while all of these changes are small, the WRC is beginning to move away from its fix-it shop image to a vital instructional center. This is due in large part to our central involvement in outcomes assessment and, more importantly, to our promotion of that role to the campus community.

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