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The California Crash at One Community College

by Diane Putnam

California community colleges were especially hard hit by higher education funding cuts. Diane Putnam explains that those cuts are profoundly affecting the Cabrillo College Writing Center, its students, and its tutors.

A year ago, the Writing Center at **Cabrillo College** in Aptos, California was at the top of its game. Located on the Central Coast near Santa Cruz, Cabrillo was enjoying steady growth in terms of both students and facilities, especially at our **Watsonville Center** just a few miles to the south. The **Writing Center**, in existence since the early 1980s, prepared to greet a new school year with a staff of 25 contract and hourly tutors ready to skillfully render small group and individualized assistance for writers across all sectors of the Cabrillo student population.

Established initially to provide one-on-one tutorial assistance, our writing center had seen tremendous growth in the last five years with the introduction of a sizeable new, lab-based, individualized basic skills program and the development of an online writing lab (OWL). Before these additions, the center already provided a co-requisite group grammar lab for students in our most-populated composition class (English 100), served ESL students at all levels, and tutored students dropping in with papers for any class at the college. The physical space, the Learning Resources Center, is a relatively new expansion to the Library. The Writing Center has a 45-computer writing lab, two-dozen tables where students can work alone and in small groups, a designated ESL lab/room with space to write at tables and computers as well as room to socialize, and three other small classrooms designed for groups of up to ten students.

As fall semester proceeded, enrollment at our Writing Center exceeded 1,300 students and the staff was maxed out as usual in covering nearly 30,000 student hours over the course of one semester. The Center bustled with activity, day and night, as—unbeknownst to any of us—a serious budget crisis was brewing in Sacramento. By mid-fall, the truth was out and the expanding number for that year's state-wide deficit began to cast a pall on the college as the seriousness of the situation began to settle in. Cabrillo, along with the 105 other community colleges in California, faced massive mid-year cuts with more than half the year's budget already spent by December (\$2 million in our case).

A hiring freeze immediately went into place as the school's administrators, unions, faculty senate, and other governing bodies and representatives struggled to get a grip on our grim reality. It was decided to lay off the college's "temporary" staff: folks paid on an hourly basis and/or hired out from temporary agencies, whose salaries constituted nearly a million dollars in annual expenses. At the Writing Center, this decision had a devastating impact, as exactly one-half of our staff were paid on an hourly basis. In the past few years we'd been able to more than double our contract tutors (called Lab Instructional Assistants, or LIAs) to meet the growing demands of new programs and the hundreds of students who were dropping in for help every

semester. With the loss of the temp/hourly tutors, about 30% of our staff hours were eliminated, while at the same time, our basic skills and associate-level English curriculum still demanded that we serve the majority of these students.

To provide the required English labs and crucial tutoring for ESL students, the Writing Center was forced to eliminate other drop-in tutoring for the general school population (except for a three-hour period in the late afternoons, when student traffic was at its lightest). This meant turning away around two hundred students who typically drop in from once to several times each semester with drafts and ideas for papers in English, history, psychology, women's studies, political science, early childhood education, and any other class with writing assignments.

The mental and physical toll on our tutoring staff was tangible by spring. Whenever tutors were out sick, we had no substitutes available, and so "small groups" of ten students doubled and tripled on a fairly regular basis. Tutoring coverage was hugely reduced in the ESL lab and in the computer lab where basic skills students are served. Both labs provide several students at a time with on a one-to-one tutoring, which caused frustration for students already beleaguered by the writing tasks at hand. Morale among the staff and students began to sink, buoyed only slightly by political action, letter writing, and travel to Sacramento for a large (and largely effective) Community College Rally Day in mid-March.

But the mid-year cuts weren't the worst development. As news continued to leak and finally explode out of Sacramento, the 2003-2004 school year promised to be much, much more devastating. As Cabrillo entered spring semester, we were faced with the prospect of cutting another \$4 million from the following year's budget. Every department, office, and instructional division was directed to cut more, and whole programs were reviewed for deletion, especially those funded by state programs that were on the chopping block in Sacramento. These included Matriculation, Disabled Student Services, and the Stroke and Children's Centers. The Writing Center was not spared; we took some more losses in staffing and supplies and began to contemplate trimming more services in the upcoming year.

Today, on the eve of fall 2003, the Writing Center at Cabrillo is a shadow of what it was just a year ago. There will be no drop-in tutoring in writing for most Cabrillo students this year, and English faculty and instructors in other departments who require a lot of writing are anticipating overcrowded office hours. Students in the basic skills program and ESL lab will wait and wait and wait for tutoring assistance, and group labs will be cancelled when tutors are absent. The basic skills instructor and Writing Center director will be more hands-on than ever, instructing significantly more in the lab and online in addition to our coordinative and supervisory duties. In collaboration with Stanford University's Education Program for Gifted Youth, the Cabrillo Writing Center has developed an online grammar lab this summer in an attempt to siphon off 150 students from our face-to-face group labs. (The aim is to reduce some of the daily demand on tutors and replace cancelled evening groups.)

Despite a slight increase in California community college student fees from \$11 to \$18 per unit, enrollment is still up at Cabrillo, and the new online grammar lab at the Writing Center is speedily filling. We hold our collective breath, dreading next year's budget cuts, with no idea what the real-life costs will be to the staff who are losing jobs and the students who are losing services. The

clock has been set back at least ten years as the gains we've made at the Writing Center in providing skilled tutoring, comfortable space, and essential writing tools and resources for all Cabrillo students have all been dealt a severe blow.

While we are a little budget-war-weary at Cabrillo, we are not without hope. Many of our Writing Center students face incalculable challenges in coming to college at all, and with them as our inspiration we'll simply have to do the best we can. We can only hope that we at the Writing Center, at Cabrillo, and in California can make sound and fair decisions about cuts while encouraging innovation and creativity in serving our very diverse (and always interesting) students.

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