REVISING THE WRITING CENTER: A RECONSIDERATION OF WRITING CENTER WORK

by

Nathalie Usha Singh-Corcoran

Copyright © Nathalie Usha Singh-Corcoran 2005

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
WITH A MAJOR IN RHETORIC, COMPOSITION, AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2005
As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation
prepared by Nathalie Singh-Corcoran entitled Revising the Writing Center: A
Reconsideration of Writing Center Work and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling
the dissertation requirement

for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

________________________________________________________ Date: June 6, 2005
Thomas P. Miller

________________________________________________________ Date: June 6, 2005
Anne-Marie Hall

________________________________________________________ Date: June 6, 2005
Michele Eodice

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate’s
submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and
recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

_____________________________________________ Date: June 6, 2005
Dissertation Director: Thomas P. Miller
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the advanced degree at The University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this dissertation are allowable without special permission provided that accurate acknowledgements of the source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted to the copyright holder.

Nathalie Usha Singh- Corcoran:___________________________
# Table of Contents

**Abstract**  
6

**Prologue**  
7

**Introduction**  
10

*Overview of Chapters*  
18

**Chapter One**—Composition and Rhetoric Scholarship Re-envisioned: Contributions from the Writing Lab Newsletter and the Writing Center Journal  
27

*Emergences*  
31

*The Kaffeeklatch or The Writing Lab Newsletter*  
36

*The Writing Center Journal: Shaping a Scholarly Identity*  
45

*At the Frontier Between Theory and Practice*  
57

*Marginalization, the Institution, and Composition and Rhetoric*  
61

*Conclusion*  
67

**Chapter Two**—Narratives of Service: Composition/Rhetoric and the Writing Center  
70

*The German Model*  
73

*The Legacy*  
76

*Service in the Writing Center*  
85

*The “S” Word: Service as Profane and Profound*  
97

**Chapter Three**—The Writing Center as Site of Intellectual Work?  
102

*Which Road Leads to Professional Status?*  
105
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing a History</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Training and the Tenure Track</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSION—CUTTING OUT AND FITTING IN: REVISION AND THE WRITING CENTER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Re-envisioning the Writing Center</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**POST SCRIPT—TELLING A NEW STORY: REVISING MY OWN TALE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This dissertation centers on the value of work in the institution and composition and rhetoric in the same vane as texts such as Evan Watkin’s *Work Time* and Ernest Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered*. The major difference between this project and the others is that I choose the writing center as the site through which I examine academic work. The project is specifically attentive to the hierarchy of research, teaching, and service. It examines how the hierarchy plays out in the center and how writing center workers interpret and apply the hierarchy. While in many instances, the writing centers conform to it, they also resist it and revise it to suit their needs. The institution and composition and rhetoric can learn from and apply their acts of resistance to strengthen higher education as a whole.
Several personal experiences lead me to this project about scholarship, teaching, and service, about the institution, the administration, and the writing center. The first was my experience as an undergraduate peer writing consultant at the University of Arizona’s, Writing Center. I loved my job there: developing and building relationships based on writing, challenging my peers to see anew their arguments and ideas, being challenged by them. The writing center environment was so stimulating that I didn’t notice many of the larger issues that affected my work or the work of the center within the larger university system. The center was underfunded and the administrators, the director who was also the WPA and the three graduate students who were teaching and completing their coursework, were all spread too thin. In retrospect, I recognize the political tensions and place of marginalization from which the center operated (and still operates). Signs of this marginalization were most obvious in the center’s physical appearance: peeling paint, stained carpets, old and broken furniture. It was the English department’s surplus storage space. If they didn’t need bookshelves, books, computers, desks, etc. but didn’t want to get rid of them, they were sent to the writing center. I do not offer this experience as a means to criticize the English department or to accuse the University of Arizona of abandonment or neglect. Writing center scholarship is already filled with twenty-plus years of these kinds of accusations. Instead, my work as a tutor, and much later, a writing center coordinator, situate me as part of an ongoing conversation, and ongoing history. This history is filled with stories that emphasize collaborative learning, student experimentation and exploration, and the meaning of
reading and writing within the university and society at large, and, unfortunately, marginalization.

The last two experiences christen this project’s voyage. In 2002, the English department was holding its annual Spring Conference. One of the invited speakers that year was a well-known writing center scholar. She and I sat together during the keynote address. Before the address began, she asked me what I wanted to do when I completed my program. I told her that like her, I wanted to direct a writing center. She then said to me, rather matter-of-factly and asked, “Why would you want to do that. It’s such a low status job.” Similarly shortly before my comprehensive exams, one of my committee members asked me what my plans were for the dissertation. I hadn’t chosen a topic, but I had chosen a site: the writing center. When I told this, he shifted in his chair uncomfortably and issued a vague warning. He didn’t exactly discourage me from pursuing writing center research, but he did tell me that if I wanted to be considered a scholar and not just an administrator (his words), my future research needed to consider more than writing centers.

Elizabeth Boquet offers a similar anecdote in her article, “Disciplinary Action: Writing Center Work and the Making of a Researcher.” When she told her dissertation committee that she wanted to focus on writing centers, they warned her that her choice would limit her professional career. She might find a position as a writing center specialist but would be “passed over” for any general composition and rhetoric positions. They also told her that “writing centers tend to be the worst of all composition jobs: temporary, underpaid, overworked, vulnerable,” that she will have difficulty publishing
her work because of its “limited appeal,” and that none of her colleagues will really understand it (25). In my situation, the irony is that both of those who warned me have published widely and have had prominent careers in writing program and writing center administration. One could assume that because they have had relative success in their areas, they would encourage others to follow similar career paths. Or maybe there is nothing ironic about their statements at all. Maybe because they’ve endured particular hardships as administrators, they do not want others to suffer the same burden. The warnings and hesitations are not unique to either my own or Beth Boquet’s experiences.

These experiences largely communicated to me that my identity had already been constructed, that I couldn’t choose to be an administrator and a scholar at once. But as I embark upon a future career in writing center administration, I believe that position will invariably place me at the point where the roles converge. In some sense, I’m not disappointing the mentor who believed he had my best interest in mind. While this is a writing center dissertation, writing centers are so entrenched within issues of writing program administration, graduate student professionalization, writing across and within the disciplines, central administration, and issues of service, teaching, and scholarship (among other things). A project that focuses on the writing center invariably explores and examines issues beyond the center itself.
INTRODUCTION

When I began this project, I had intended to focus solely on the writing center director: her/his academic status and role as knowledge maker in academe. I envisioned devoting chapters to the formation and content of writing center scholarship in relation to the discourse of writing center directing. I was going to interview directors and ask them to reflect on their roles in their centers, departments, and institutions and ask them how they viewed themselves as practitioners and scholars. This kind of study, I believed (and still believe), was necessary because little writing center scholarship is devoted to directors and the intellectual currency of their positions. Their status is related to and influenced by general perceptions of the writing center. But as I began my first body chapter, new questions arose, questions such as: what structures or systems were already in place in order to position writing center work, not just directing, as precarious? I felt that before I could explore the director’s role at length, I had to examine what was behind them—the beliefs and attitudes that shaped perceptions of writing center work—and so this dissertation took on a different form. The project still attends to status, but I look at the writing center’s status as a whole instead of a discrete site where that status is represented.

Before I begin my analysis, I must first contextualize perceptions of writing center status. Scholars attribute the low status of writing centers to their historical ties to remediation, their relative youth, and their scholarship. Andrea Lunsford, and Christina Murphy position early writing centers as spaces designed for weak writers. These centers from the 1940s and 50s “were established to address the instruction problems of weaker
students by strengthening their writing and critical thinking skills” (Murphy 276). Their task was to attain “the highest number of measurable results for the largest number of students in the shortest time frame” (277). Historically, centers began to increase on college and university campuses during the progressive era and open admissions—periods in which the number of underprepared writers grew. These scholars argue writing centers were designed to be supplemental, rather than legitimate and unique sites of writing instruction. Despite centers fifty-plus years of growth, they have not yet shaken-off their remedial stigma. One reason is that centers still work with basic writers. For example, basic writing courses and writing centers have partnered in instruction using the studio model. Benedict College, the University of South Carolina, and The University of Michigan, Flint all have active programs in which traditionally categorized basic writing students take a regular first-year composition course and a writing workshop, facilitated through each institution’s writing center. Another reason is that instructors and faculty still see writing centers as supplemental instruction. When I worked at the UA writing center as both a peer tutor and a graduate coordinator, I would often hear students explain to their tutors that they had come to the center because their teachers had told them to get their grammar checked. This example is representative of other writing centers as well. In *Noise from the Writing Center*, Boquet tells the story of an angry faculty member who comes to her office and complains that his ESL student had gone to the writing center for assistance on a paper, but when the student returned the paper to the professor, it “was still dirty, filled with inappropriate usage and grammatical mistakes” (17). Both examples illustrate how writing centers are looked upon as
academic cleaning services. Real writing instruction happens in the classroom, while writing centers exist to clean up the mess or fix the writing problems that instructors and faculty do not have the time or energy for.

Writing centers are also fairly young with respect to other areas of study. We can trace writing center methods to early twentieth century, tutorial instruction: writing teachers would divide their class into smaller groups in order to give each group more individualized instruction. We know that the first free-standing writing centers appeared in the 1940s, and the first publication to focus on writing centers was Robert H. Moore’s 1950 *College English* article, “The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory.” But writing center scholarship did not proliferate until the late 1970s and 1980s with the emergence of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal*. These publications laid the groundwork for other scholarly enterprises: regional, national, and international writing center organizations and conferences, books and edited collections, a summer institute for summer directors, and a digital archive. Projects such as the summer institute and the archive are only a few years old. Because writing centers are so new, they are, the argument goes, unknown and sadly misunderstood.

As a means to educate the institution, and particularly those within Composition and Rhetoric, about writing center work, Stephen North published his 1984 *College English Article*, “The Idea of a Writing Center.” The essay was influenced by frustration, the source of which he says was, “the members of my profession, my colleagues, people I might see at MLA or CCC or read in the pages of *College English.*” They do not understand what he does as a writing center worker; “They do not understand what does
happen, what can happen, in a writing center” (63). North argues that writing centers workers are professionals who offer individualized instruction to writers-in-progress. Others have taken on the duty of reeducation, though now such efforts appear in center promotional materials and mission statements. For example, the writing center at Temple University informs its clientele on their website that “The Writing Center’s goal is to foster a rich and productive environment for writing at Temple, an environment that values the connection between writing and learning, and that embraces the powerful role that writing plays in social, cultural and political life.” Such promotional materials try to make clear that the centers are more than editing services and that critical writing and reading skills are fostered and encouraged. Nonetheless, writing centers, while increasingly integral to colleges and universities, may not yet have the historical institutional presence that lends status.

Writing center voices are not being heard on a large scale, and therefore, still others attribute their low status to their scholarship. A frequent complaint among center scholars is that their scholarship often cites composition theory, but composition scholars do not cite writing center theory, nor do the major composition journals such as College Composition and Communications or College English publish writing center scholarship. In their defense, the journals argue that writing center-specific pieces do not have wide appeal. I recently submitted a writing center-oriented manuscript to CCCs and both reviewers suggested that I instead send the manuscript to a writing center journal because the topic was more relevant to a writing center audience. However, I have a difficult time accepting that the manuscript that I submitted is any less relevant to CCCs readership
than texts on business writing or religious rhetoric. One could easily argue that there are other journals more suitable to those topics as well, and yet essays addressing those topics have recently appeared in CCC.

It could be then that the nature of writing center scholarship is not as rigorous as other kinds of scholarship. At the 1997 meeting of the National Writing Center’s Association, Christina Murphy claimed that there was a “bankruptcy of writing center scholarship” (Murphy qtd in Boquet 55). And shortly before she took over editorship of *The Writing Center Journal*, Beth Boquet stated that she was unimpressed with recent work in writing centers. She found it “uninteresting” (A History 55). Her and Murphy’s comments are in reference to composition’s recent return to the theoretical, which they believe the writing center has ignored. Writing centers are communities of practitioners, and therefore writing center scholarship frequently emphasizes practice. Boquet and Murphy might argue that the focus on practice is at the expense of theory. *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, for instance is a publication devoted almost entirely to the how-to’s of directing and tutoring:

- How to establish a center
- How to promote a center
- How to create a safe and welcoming environments for tutors and clients
- How to maintain center records
- How to work with learning disabled students
- How to generate external funding
If there is indeed a dearth of theory in writing center scholarship, a possible solution is to follow the example set by writing program administration (WPA) scholarship, which has become increasingly theoretical. A recent anthology titled, *The Writing Program Administrator as Theorist: Making Knowledge Work* is divided into three parts: 1) Theorizing Our Writing Programs, 2) Theorizing Writing Programs, and 3) Theorizing Writing Program Administration. One could easily use this text as a template for scholarship on writing centers, replacing “Writing Programs” and “Writing Program Administration” with “Writing Centers,” “Writing Center Directors,” and “Writing Center Directing.” A recent collection of essays, *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*, offers a range of essays that take centers beyond the “do it yourself” models. Many, most notably, Nancy Grimm, believe that a bolstering of writing center scholarship will result in disciplinary recognition. Evidence of rigorous research would indicate to composition and rhetoric and the academy that centers hold academic currency. If the three issues—the center’s ties to remediation, the center’s young age, and the center’s scholarship—result in the center’s low status, then the remedies are fairly simple. Reeducate the discipline, grow and expand the writing center’s reach, and publish more theoretical scholarship. But, writing centers have already been doing these things for at least the past twenty years, and the complaints about the lack of center funding and recognition are the same today as they were then.

I believe that the above problems are indicators of a larger issue: the value of work in English studies and in the academy. Evan Watkins’ *Work Time* examines the value of labor within English departments. He argues that department work is class
based. A faculty member may teach, develop new curriculum, and serve on departmental and university committees, but when a colleague asks what that faculty member is working on, she or he will more likely describe her/his research or scholarship than other academic labor. English departments reap the benefits of intellectual products. A department’s reputation and ability to acquire grants and funding depends on its faculty members’ intellectual labor, for example publications and conference presentations. But those products can only occur if one has sufficient time, resources, and control over her/his labor. Jennifer Beech and Julie Lindquist maintain that only literature faculty reap the benefits of this system because they have those resources, that time, and that control. The system, they explain, is circular: “the more resources you have, the more likely you are to produce the kind of work that is taken by the institution as evidence that you deserve the resources you have” (179). They argue that composition faculty and composition work are neglected because they are perceived as something one merely does or teaches “when necessary, not as something that serious scholars study” (172). Therefore, just as literature reaps rewards because it is allocated more time/control, composition suffers because compositionists have less time/control. Beech and Lindquist lump composition studies into one category. However, I would argue that the system creates further divisions. Writing centers are even lower on the rung of academic labor. Compositionists such as Kerri Morris (“The Service Myth: Why Freshman Composition Doesn’t Serve Us or Them”) conclude that writing centers are holding composition studies back from gaining further disciplinary currency. She sees writing center work as non-specialized and therefore of little benefit to composition as a whole. While I
disagree with her assessment, I don’t think her observations are surprising, especially when less than 50% of all writing center director positions are tenure-line. The statistics suggest that members of the field do not believe writing center directors need the kind of specialized training that comes with a doctoral degree.

Implicit in my discussion is the hierarchy of work in the academy: research, teaching, and service. When writing centers emerged, the hierarchy was already in place, leaving centers to somehow fit into the system. The problem though is that writing centers do not fit into this hierarchy. Their scholarship is frequently practitioner-based and therefore not as valued as other kinds of research, or it covers even less prestigious ground because it is institution-specific and therefore not relevant to the field as a whole. And the work that tutors and directors do operates somewhere between teaching and service. Working with students one-on-one is a kind of teaching, but those who are employed at writing centers are not necessarily teachers. They may be peers; they may be graduate students; they may be professional tutors. In the writing center literature, writing centers are often called “support units” (see Jeanne Simpson’s work). This designation suggests that the centers are in service of disciplinary work.

Writing centers are academic misfits and this misfit status is the source of its greatest strength and paralyzing weakness. It is a strength because centers have the ability to serve as new models in higher education, but they are at a disadvantage because they do not conform to prevailing disciplinary expectations and are therefore frequently considered unscholarly sites. Writing centers ultimately create a kind of dissonance in composition and rhetoric and the institution. But Nancy Welch believes that dissonance
is crucial to revision. It is the site of a productive struggle where real change can happen. Throughout this dissertation you will see me use key terms such as “writing center as misfit,” “reflective practice,” “service,” “collaboration,” and “revision.” I use these key terms to frame the historical, current, and future perils and possibilities that writing centers have faced. I want to emphasize that this dissertation is about status, and in each of the chapters that follow, I begin in a place where there is discomfort about status, about the meaning and value of work within the field and the institution, and I draw out the tensions in order to see what’s behind them, what we can learn from them, how writing centers, composition and rhetoric, and the institution can grow, can change, can revise themselves. Ultimately, I want my readers, both those who work within them and who are less with them, to reconsider and reenvision writing centers. I want those within the field to complicate and challenge their assumptions about scholarship, status, and work.

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is largely a textual analysis. Stephen North would classify it under his “Critics” section in The Making of Knowledge in Composition. I interpret and generate theories about composition and writing centers using the texts from within and outside the field. I understand a critical methodology to be dialectical. I have placed specific texts and specific people into a conversation, and I have contributed to the dialogue by responding to those texts/people. I do not propose to be the final authority
on the issues I raise, rather, I see this dissertation as a participant in a larger dialogue about status, institutional hierarchies, and the meaning and value of work, and I imagine that as I disseminate arguments from this text to a wider audience, people will respond to, apply, and challenge it. It will grow, change, and become something different because it is part of the dialectic.

Chapter one, “Composition and Rhetoric Scholarship Re-envisioned: Contributions from the Writing Lab Newsletter and The Writing Center Journal,” primarily examines writing center scholarship: the forms it takes, the criticism it receives, its perceived value within the field and the institution, and its validity. I do offer a little history in chapter one, in order to give my readers a sense of the writing center’s connections to composition and rhetoric. I first explain that writing centers came about as a result of first-year composition. Beth Boquet suggests that they emerged as a method of instruction (“A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions”). In the early 20th century, instructors would work one-on-one with students during class time in order to help them “eliminate errors and other weaknesses” (Horner qtd in Boquet 44). Between 1920 and 1940, centers (then widely referred to as “labs”) became free-standing units that supported the composition classroom. Writing centers and composition and rhetoric were both emerging as disciplinary forces at around the 1970s. In the 1970s and into the 1980s composition made a turn towards the theoretical. It began to define itself using empirical, historical, theoretical, and philosophical methods. This redefinition is key to the arguments about the status of writing center scholarship that I make in this chapter. After I have provided this history of the writing center, I
then move to my focus: writing center scholarship. I describe and categorize the past twenty years of writing center scholarship, focusing specifically on the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (WLN) and *The Writing Center Journal* (WCJ). While there are other, more recent journals or collections of essays this chapter could explore, I focus on WCJ and WLN because they are the writing center community’s first scholarly publications, and therefore they provide the most complete historical sketch of writing center scholarship: its preoccupations and evolution.

I then focus on center scholarship. Currently, there are no publications that examine writing center scholarship as a whole. The nearest example is an annotated bibliography of WCJ scholarship, published in the journal’s twentieth anniversary edition (Spring/Summer 2000). However, others within Composition and Rhetoric have traced scholarship. Kenneth Bruffee, in his article, “The WPA as (Journal) Writer: What the Record Reveals” examines six years worth of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* journal issues (1979-1985) and places the articles in three categories: how-to, contextual how-to, and professional self-critique. Maureen Daly Goggin undertakes a significantly larger task in her book, *Authoring a Discipline: Scholarly Journals and the Post-World War II Emergence of Rhetoric and Composition*. She provides an historical outline of the field’s major journals to flesh-out composition and rhetoric’s professional and disciplinary identity. Her major claim is that as the field matured, so did its scholarship. The argument itself is not profound. One could say the same thing about any field. However, she argues that disciplinary maturity came as a result of the abandonment of practitioner scholarship. I use Goggin’s arguments to frame the first half of the chapter.
I believe that her argument is short-sighted and marginalizing because she disregards journals like WLN and WCJ which still employ practitioner scholarship. I then offer an evolution of writing center scholarship and show how practitioner scholarship is as complex and theoretical as the other, more preferred forms Goggin outlines and therefore is an equally valid form of knowledge making.

In the second half of the chapter, I focus on writing center scholars as knowledge makers. I pay particular attention to their conceptions of “theory.” Disciplines use theory to legitimate and situate themselves within the institution. Scholars resist defining writing centers according to any one theory. I argue that such resistance is one of many things that lead to the writing center’s institutional and disciplinary misfit and therefore perceived low status. However, their resistance is meaningful action that has the power to infuse the institution and the discipline to build themselves anew.

In chapter two, “Narratives of Service: Composition and Rhetoric and the Writing Center,” I closely examine the uses of and conceptions of the term “service.” My intent is to get at how conceptions of the service affect the writing center. I begin by defining service, a term that is difficult to pin down because of its multiple meanings. Service is used to describe many different kinds of work: from sitting on committees or performing outreach to teaching first year composition. The first two manifestations (committee work and outreach) are institutional whereas “teaching as service” is a disciplinary conception. This chapter focuses primarily on disciplinary understandings of service. Before I begin my analysis of service, I provide a brief history of the development of scholarship and teaching. I explain that our current understanding of service is
influenced by the German model of higher education, which situated research above all other activities. I argue that the German model has had lasting effects on the field.

I then make connections between composition’s value and understanding of research, teaching, and service. I argue that current conversations about the field’s status and role within the university invoke the German model. I explain that composition and rhetoric both vilify and glorify service as it relates to teaching composition. On the one hand, many in the field like Sharon Crowley believe that service/teaching first-year composition positions the field as subordinate to other disciplines and the institution. Essentially the argument is that when our identity as a field is based on the teaching of composition, we do not position ourselves as a serious discipline; our service identity keeps us from gaining disciplinary status. On the other hand there is a group of scholars who see service as composition’s civic duty and obligation. They believe that the ethic of service is fundamental to composition’s identity. It has its roots in the classical period, eighteenth century rhetorical education, and progressive education models.

Writing centers are caught in the middle of the service debate because they are a service unit that serves a service course. However, they are never invoked. The rest of the chapter is devoted to where writing centers fit within the debate. I examine writing center scholarship and promotional materials that use the same kind of language (service as subordination and service as civic duty) to position writing center work and the affects of that language. I also argue that collaboration, a major writing center tenet, can help to mitigate the service debate.
Chapter three, “Professional Status and the Writing Center: Center as Site of Intellectual Work?,” builds on the arguments from the previous chapters. It combines discussions of scholarship and service in order to define what counts as intellectual work within the academy. I cite the Boyer report, *Scholarship Reconsidered* and the MLA report on Professional Service, which both suggest that writing center work is valid scholarly work. However, as I show in the two preceding chapters, writing centers have had great difficulty in establishing themselves as sites of legitimate intellectual work because their scholarship is often practitioner-based and because they are service units. Granted, I also argue in those chapters that the field can learn from writing center praxis, and composition and rhetoric could become a more inclusive and cohesive area of study if it expanded its conceptions of publishable scholarship and employed theories and practices of collaboration.

In chapter three, I examine the various ways in which writing centers have attempted to position themselves as sites of intellectual work: constructing a history, designing graduate coursework in writing center administration, and calling for tenure-track writing center administrative positions. While I focus on these three areas, there are others I could include in the debate: accreditation, assessment, departmental affiliation. All, however, lead me to the same conclusion: given the current system of the hierarchy of work, research, teaching, and service, writing centers’ moves to legitimate themselves within the field and the institution will always be unsuccessful. They are, in essence, arguing for their value in a system that is not designed to value them. I characterize
writing centers as academic misfits who, through the above moves, have made unsuccessful attempts to situate themselves as legitimate members of the discipline.

To frame this chapter, I use Richard Ohman’s explanation of the process of professionalization. He outlines the steps disciplines take in order to establish themselves as professional bodies. I discuss the three moves I outline above in light of Ohman’s explanation. Writing centers have constructed a history of their inception and growth as a means to solidify the center community, carve out a professional space, and define themselves for those outside of the writing center community. This construction of a history corresponds to the first steps in the process of professionalization: grounding practice in a cohesive body of knowledge. But I argue that the writing center’s efforts are stymied by the persistent effects of the stories that have been written upon writing centers, stories that have positioned them as supplemental, subordinate, and remedial. I then examine graduate training and the community’s push for tenure-track directorships. I describe the ways in which graduate students are trained for future careers in writing centers, namely through coursework and internships, and the larger implications of that training. Lastly, I turn to tenure line administrative positions and why the writing center community has made a strong case for them. I suggest that the arguments in favor of tenure-line directors are an indication of the center community trying to align its behaviors with members of the institution who have power and authority. Faculty have power and authority in academia because they are its knowledge makers. However, allegiances to academic systems like tenure or the process of professionalization have not changed the material circumstances of writing center workers.
Chapter three’s conclusion lays the groundwork for this project’s ultimate conclusion, “Fitting In and Cutting Out.” In the final chapter, I return to Nancy Welch, whom I cite earlier in this introduction. I use her understanding of the revision process to structure my discussion of the revisions that need to happen so that the field and institution finally acknowledge writing centers as viable members of the academic community. Welch believes that we should teach revision differently. We normally suggest to our students that they reign in the excessive texts, and cut out what doesn’t fit. Welch wants all writing teachers to instead teach students to begin with dissonance in the pieces of the text that can’t or won’t adapt. When students begin here, they are enabled to really consider their texts anew and explore issues that they might otherwise have ignored or discarded.

Welch’s ideas are relevant to my discussions of the writing center, the field and the institution because both the discipline and the academy require that its members conform to ways of knowing and doing. Writing centers don’t fit or conform in many ways and have tried to change their practices in order to fit, but they have either been unsuccessful in changing their practices or ignored. However if we operate by Welch’s redefinition of revision, then we should begin at the site of dissonance in order to initiate a productive struggle that will lead to a real reenvisioning. Writing centers are marginal spaces. They are on the fringes of the university (sometimes they are located on the boundaries both literally and metaphorically). They are the dissonant spaces that don’t fit, that would otherwise be cut out. This is precisely why we must begin with them, but a reenvisioning of writing centers will not happen unless the system changes.
I go on to argue that the system is changing, though many believe it is not changing for the better. The university is becoming ever more connected to corporations, and these corporations are dictating what kind of knowledge is produced and disseminated. I believe that writing centers are in a prime position to shape the future university because they are dissonant spaces. Unlike traditional departments, they have permeable borders. They connect departments. They develop partnerships with spaces like the library. They move outside the walls of the university and work with schools and organizations. The university and English studies can look to the writing center for models as they search for better ways to serve the community and as they work towards making their own work viable in the changing system. Finally,

Throughout this dissertation, I assert that writing centers are important spaces that the discipline and the institution can draw from. They can help broaden our understanding of scholarship, teaching, and service. They are significant spaces because so many of the tensions about the meaning and value of work manifest in the writing center: from the characterizations of publishable scholarship and service to the process of professionalization. In this dissertation, I try to show that centers are parts of a larger whole. As I indicated at the start of this overview section, my hope is that my readers reconsider the writing center, that they engage with and challenge the ideas that I forward. I would like to see more writing center scholarship that steps outside itself, that draws connections to the field and the academy. We have much to say, and there are many who need to hear.
Writing center history is in many ways bound to the history of composition and rhetoric. Scholars like Carino, Boquet, and Harris trace the evolution of writing centers, and Connors, Berlin, and Crowley examine composition and rhetoric’s growth and change. But few have drawn any explicit connections between these histories. Terrance Riley looks to the histories of American literature, literary theory, and composition and makes uneasy predictions for the future of writing centers. He argues that the disciplines created institutional niches for themselves and in the process excluded ideas, practices, and populations to their detriment. In her unpublished dissertation, *The Professionalization of Writing Centers: Visions and Versions of Legitimacy*, Chere Peguesse devotes a chapter to the establishment of literature, composition, and writing centers in order to highlight their similarities and describe the ways “in which professionalization within these histories is largely an alienating process” (46). In the following chapter, I also compare histories and forward arguments about professionalization and the future of writing centers. But my discussion focuses on the field’s professional publications, namely its journals. This kind of discussion is necessary because disciplines largely establish themselves and exist through their journals. They serve as illustrations and archives of a field’s scholarly preoccupations, of their preferred modes of discourse, and their favored research methodologies. According
to Connors, they offer the newest ideas and create “implicit criteria” for future work (351). They distinguish the insiders from the outsider. Ultimately, our professional journals have come “to be the most powerful institutions in our field” (353).

Maureen Goggin has already produced a comprehensive history of Composition and Rhetoric’s major journals. Her study, *Authoring a Discipline: Scholarly Journals and the Post World War II Emergence of Rhetoric and Composition*, traces the genealogy of the field and publications such as CCC, *College English* (CE), *Research in the Teaching of English* (RTE), *Freshman English News* (FEN), *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (RSQ), *Rhetoric Review* (RR), and *The Journal of Advanced Communications* (JAC). The scope of her work does not include subdisciplinary or niche journals like *The Journal of Basic Writing*, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *Computers and Composition*, *The Writing Center Journal*, or *The Writing Lab News Letter*. I do some of that investigation in this chapter because I focus on *The Writing Center Journal* (WCJ), and *The Writing Lab Newsletter* (WLN). There are several reasons she may have only focused on the main journals, one of the most obvious being she had to limit her investigations to make her project manageable. The smaller journals, however, are often the practitioner journals. Goggin suggests that when composition and rhetoric scholars abandoned their practitioner- oriented scholarship, the field gained disciplinary and institutional footing. Practitioner journals seem less important because they do not contribute to composition and rhetoric’s *emergence*. But she also implies that an examination of the subdisciplinary journals is unnecessary. Goggin contends that as the major journals evolve, they begin to resemble one another “in size, shape, and aim”
(139), and the smaller journals—she makes specific reference to WCJ—mirror the major journals in the same ways. In suggesting that *all* journals in composition and rhetoric are alike, and that they all acquiesce to the discipline’s “formal trappings,” she ultimately eliminates the need for further inquiry (140).

I find Goggin’s work dissatisfying for two reasons. Firstly, in dismissing practical scholarship, she dismisses teaching. This is especially ironic given our subject as compositionists is the teaching of college English. As Charles Schuster argues, “composition studies is grounded in practice, in the ways that oral and written language are produced, reproduced, learned, taught, shaped, modified—that is, in the variety of practices that anchor rhetoric and composition within our classrooms and our cultures” (33). Secondly, Goggin does not acknowledge the power struggles in composition and rhetoric, particularly struggles that occur between theory and practice. She suggests that the field speaks in a unified *theoretical* voice. But, like Thomas Philion, I believe “English Studies is itself a contact zone” (79). It is a space in which “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power” (Pratt 34). The niche journals are crucial members of this space because they illustrate that grappling and clashing of teaching and scholarship.

Much of this chapter turns a critical eye to Goggin’s assumptions as it examines niche journals, namely WCJ and WLN. WCJ and WLN do offer scholarship that is in keeping with current disciplinary conventions; scholarship that mentions “theory, history and empirical research as appropriate topics and lines of inquiry” (140). To an extent, then, Goggin offers an accurate argument about journals mirroring research methods.
But, I argue that WCJ and WLN also resist such disciplinary trappings. As the field has moved away from pragmatic and testimonial scholarship, WCJ and WLN still employ it. As the major journals have embraced theory of all kinds, WCJ and WLN often resist it. Their resistance is based on the nature of writing center work, which is largely experience-based.

In this chapter, I also argue that the journals (specifically WCJ) also reveal the community’s conflicted desires to remain insular and isolated from the institution but at the same time a professional body within English studies. Some writing center scholars propose that centers should adopt a particular brand of theory like collaborative learning and forward it as their guiding principle. Scholars advocate for this model because historically, theory lends institutional and disciplinary legitimacy. Still other scholars argue that writing centers cannot align with one theory or another because centers are not pindownable in that way. They are constantly adjusting and adapting to their unique situations. This last area of tension is the most salient to disciplinarity and professionalization adopted by those who work in writing centers. In the final section of this chapter, I explain that in resisting hierarchies of scholarship and in resisting definition, writing centers do not fit-in to the prevailing institutional structures, and yet center workers overwhelmingly desire academic legitimacy. I suggest that centers reexamine their values of resistance, and use that resistance as a basis for large-scale change.
A major claim in this dissertation is that writing centers are a part of the discipline, composition and rhetoric. To many this may seem an obvious assertion, but still to others writing centers are non-disciplinary because they support disciplines across campus. I state at the beginning of this chapter that the history of writing centers is bound to the history of composition and rhetoric. This section elucidates that point, and I build on it to make other claims about writing centers and their disciplinary status throughout this dissertation.

While work in writing centers has been shaped by the recent professionalization of composition and rhetoric, writing centers have a broad history that we can trace back to early conference or tutorial methods of instruction within high school and college composition courses. The tutorial or laboratory method promoted an interpersonal relationship between the instructor and the student (Carino 451). Typically, within this system, students were divided into small groups and worked under the direction and supervision of the writing teacher. Group activities might have included writing, revising, rewriting, or editing course themes. In his 1917 *English Journal* article, “The Laboratory System in English” Francis Walker explains why many writing teachers preferred this method over others. He says, it “affords the teacher of regarding his [or her] pupils as distinct individuals rather than as a homogenous mass of prototypes” (447). And it “relieves the teacher of a large part of the burden of red ink” (451). Walker gives
us an early vision of an alternative, student-centered pedagogy, the same kind of pedagogy writing center scholars have promoted since their inception: it begins “where the student is and move[s] “where the student moves” (North “Idea of a Writing Center” 70).

The student-centered pedagogy on which writing centers are based did not lead to their immediate establishment. Their development on college and university campuses corresponds to the mass education initiative of the 1930s. During this period, “children of immigrants and first-generation students began attending state institutions in large numbers. As a result, public institutions in 1933-34 equaled private school enrollment for the first time and surpassed them by the end of the decade” (Carino 13). This new population of students, who were considered underprepared for college-level reading and writing, created the perceived need for spaces of remediation. Carino also credits Deweyan pragmatism for the growth of the center. The early writing lab’s student-centered approach resonated with the pragmatic goal of tailoring education to the individual student.

Writing center scholars have the habit of dismissing this early period as the time of skills and drills, though recently Peter Carino and Beth Boquet have both made efforts to correct this common misconception. Their archival research indicates that tutorial pedagogy varied from center to center. If we examine the records, we will find skills and drills writing centers. Robert H. Moore’s 1950 College English article, “The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory,” describes a writing lab where lab instructors first “diagnose” a student’s needs and then prescribe “remedial measures” (8). Then she or he
reviews and practices exercises in workbooks and handbooks(8). But records also reveal other methods of tutorial instruction. The University of Denver’s writing clinic favored methods of “Rogerian non-directive counseling,” in order to ask questions and “draw students out” (Boquet Noise 10). And, the University of Iowa’s writing lab promoted interpersonal instruction wherein each student’s need was addressed and strengths, frustrations, opinions, accomplishments, and fears were acknowledged (Kelly 11).

Writing centers experienced a sizable boom in the late sixties and early seventies. As in the thirties, centers came about largely as instruments of remediation. According to Boquet, during this period of open admissions, centers were created to “fix problems that university officials had difficulty even naming, things like increasing enrollment, larger minority populations, and declining (according to the public) literacy skills” (“A History” 50). Goggin states that composition instructors were “scrambling for practical methods of teaching a wider range of new nontraditional students” (76). Evidence indicates that the writing center became a site where instructors turned in order to meet student need and public demand. Muriel Harris confirms this assumption when she describes how and why the Purdue Writing Lab came into being. She began teaching composition classes in the mid-seventies and:

quickly experienced the frustration of being unable to accomplish much of anything within a large [classroom] groups. There were murmurings of starting up a writing lab at Purdue which, like other post-secondary institutions around the country, was beginning to find that the literacy crisis was not a media invention of a fiction Newsweek made up for a juicy
Something was needed to cure the problem, and a ‘lab’ sounded like a distinct possibility.

(“Growing Pains” 1)

The crisis of which Harris speaks was in part announced by the 1974 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report on secondary student literacy skills. This document brought increased public attention to writing. It suggested that “secondary student literacy skills, especially in writing, had supposedly declined since the last national assessment test administered five years earlier” (Goggin 75). These two factors--open admissions and the NAEP report—helped to make the composition classroom a more visible space and the writing center a growing entity on college and university campuses.

The 1970s mark both composition and rhetoric’s rise to disciplinary status and the beginnings of a writing center professional community. For decades composition and rhetoric had been attempting to establish its disciplinary status, but the seventies proved most fruitful because the conditions were ripe for the establishment of the first doctoral programs and what Connors calls “a great burgeoning of journals and books” (“Composition History” 8). Goggin argues that the publications between the 1960s and early 1980s employed a scholarly sophistication not seen before. Scholars became “more self conscious” toward establishing research agendas and methods (76). Prior to this period the bulk of publications focused their attentions on classroom teaching as they addressed the practical: “here’s what I did” and “here’s how it worked.” But during the
seventies and into the eighties, composition and rhetoric “began to define itself through a search for explanations including empirical, historical, theoretical, and philosophical” (79). The shift from practical to theoretical created tension between the classroom instructors who were looking for concrete materials they could apply in their classrooms (especially given the writing classroom’s new public visibility) and “those who were turning to more speculative projects to create, preserve, and use knowledge about writing, reading, and teaching” (76). Goggin indicates a rift between theory and practice which resulted in practical publications going out of favor.

The turn towards the theoretical has had important implications for the writing center community that was also forming at this time. Before I discuss those implications, I first offer a brief sketch of the community’s inception. In 1971, NCTE and CCCC began holding special sessions for academic skills centers (Kinkead 30). These special sessions serve as a benchmark for the professionalization of writing centers because they represent a coming together of disparate and disconnected units on individual campuses. Writing centers began to collectively define their own praxis. Harris tells us that writing center practitioners combed the programs of the early conferences and found only a handful of sessions that addressed their concerns. There were no presentations addressing how to establish a writing center, what to teach there, where to find materials, how to recruit tutors, how big a center’s budget should be (2).

In order to further combat that sense of isolation and to develop a collaborative network of writing center professionals, Harris began The Writing Lab Newsletter in 1977. She took down sixty names at a 4Cs conference of those who wanted to stay in
touch. In the span of four years, the newsletter’s mailing list grew to over 1000. By 1978, a College English Association survey indicated that several hundred colleges and universities had writing centers (Kinkead 30). Harris spearheaded a special interest group for writing center directors at the 1979 and 1980 CCCC, and it became a lasting feature at the conference (31). Also in 1979, “a group of directors in what is now called the East Central region decided to organize a spring meeting. The Writing Centers Association met for the first time that May. From this group the” National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), now the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), was born (31). And, in 1980, Stephen North and Lil Brannon began The Writing Center Journal.

Prior to NWCA, WCJ, and WLN foundings, there were some outlets for writing center practitioners. CCCC offered its special sessions, but the organization was not at all represented by writing center staff (35). The Association of Writing Program Administrators also tried to include writing center administrators, but their focus was (and is) on composition programs. In the late seventies and early eighties, writing centers were rapidly carving out their niche within the discipline, and they used their journals to announce their identities.

*The Kaffeklacht or The Writing Lab Newsletter*

Journals provide glimpses of a discipline’s dreams, its future plans. They offer new directions, shape trends, and motivate others to contribute to emerging conversations
in a field. *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal*, played pivotal roles in shaping an enduring writing center community. The two publications present compatible, but very different portraits of the community. WLN is informal and practical and does not move beyond general theory. WCJ is its “scholarly” sibling, designed for extended theoretical inquiry. In this section of the chapter, I examine the two publications and argue that they present scholarship in ways different from the rest of the field. Instead of dividing theory and practice, writing center scholars have found ways to combine the two, and that combination challenges conceptions of scholarship in the field.

I begin this section with a discussion of the WLN. It is less in depth than my examination of WCJ for two reasons 1) I believe that the newsletter has evolved less in terms of scope than WCJ and 2) as I was writing this chapter, Michael Pemberton’s article “The Writing Lab Newsletter as History: Tracing the Growth of a Scholarly Community” was published in *The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship* He provides a thorough discussion of the newsletter’s history and evolution. There is some overlap between the Pemberton piece and this section of my dissertation. However, he offers a different perspective on the nature of writing center scholarship. Namely, he does not examine it in light of composition and rhetoric as a whole, nor does he in the context of other writing center publications. Therefore, I see his article as a useful supplement to this chapter.

WLN has always been the writing center community’s forum for discussion on writing center practice. WLN is the place for practical information: book reviews on writing pedagogy and tutor training, calls for manuscripts, calls for conference proposals,
meeting announcements, job announcements, and a long list of how-to articles: how to establish and run a center, how to publicize a center, how to hire tutors, how to train tutors, how to incorporate technology in a writing center, etc. Pemberton rightly refers to the publication as a “news service” (25). Earlier, I mention that as the writing center community began to shape itself, composition and rhetoric was shifting from the practical to the theoretical. But the emerging writing center community was seeking practical information about how to design and run a center. The WLN became the space where they could share this information. It is significant that the first major publication for writing centers came in the form of a newsletter. Newsletters are generally brief, informal resources directed at a fairly limited audience. They usually do little more than provide information.

In 1977, the year WCJ launched its first issue, writing centers were not yet looking to professionalize or establish disciplinarity. Centers workers were seeking each other out, trying to learn from each other’s best practices. WLN looked only to publish news or resource-worthy material. In her editor’s statement, Harris attempts to acquire such material for future issues. She asks for queries, news, general announcements, reviews of materials used at centers, “suggestions for the format, content, and title of the newsletter, offers to take on projects, requests for some particular bit of information” (1). In its five pages, the issue has few if any of the resources Harris hopes to include. There is one conference announcement, a list of newsletter subscribers, and a series of requests: “At the Saturday morning 4Cs session there was some discussion of the Auto-Tutor branching system of self instruction. Can someone who is familiar with it send in a brief
description and address?” or “Has anyone used the Westinghouse self-instruction materials with speakers of non-standard English, and if so, with what results? Please send comments and other information to . . . (2). These requests, which fill pages of the newsletter for several years, give it the quality of a bulletin-board or listserv: informative and also highly informal. Queries like the above are, today, fairly typical on WCENTER, the writing center listserv established in 1992. The writing center community at that time, had no other venue to post requests, so the newsletter was the logical place for them.

Like the first issue, many of the earlier issues of WLN are quite rudimentary in form and content. Armed with scotch tape and a mimeograph, Harris stitched together the first few issues of the newsletter and mailed them off to its monthly subscribers (“From the Editor 1999”). Robert Connor’s remarked that they resembled department handouts because they were stapled in the corner and printed on colorful 8½ x 11 paper (359). But in providing resource material, the newsletter performed an important function. It gave writing center workers a concrete voice. The newsletter regularly featured individual descriptions of centers. This gave others in the community a general sense of how their centers operated and how their tutoring practices and policies worked.

Goggin critiques the same kinds of descriptive articles that appeared in CCC before 1965. She argues that the practice of describing a writing program or providing testimony of teaching rather than critically examining “these practices points to an underlying assumption that writing and pedagogy are natural, commonplace activities that do not need investigation but merely explication” (47-8). I believe however, that her
assessment cannot be applied wholesale to the center portraits in the newsletter. The portraits served to shape the writing center community. So much of the information about centers prior to the newsletter was sketchy at best. Even the newsletter’s founder is incorrect in some of her writing center history. In her 1982 WCJ article, “Growing Pains: The Coming of Age of Writing Centers” Harris cites information that indicates less than a dozen writing centers existed before the 1970s (1). But current historical surveys of writing centers reveal that the number is grossly understated. Because centers were just beginning to develop senses of one another, this kind of misreporting did occur. The descriptions that center workers provided to the newsletter were the start of a more accurate reporting of center history for two reasons: 1) descriptions included when the centers opened and 2) they prompted center workers to conduct histories of their writing centers. I also believe that the descriptions served as a foundation for future critique. Centers were pooling together writing pedagogy so that practitioners did not have to reinvent the wheel when they were asked to develop a writing center, design its curriculum, assess its success, etc. Readers of the newsletter indicated that descriptions led the way for careful inquiry. These portraits allowed readers to reflect on their own centers (Harris From the Editor June 1987).

Over the years, the newsletter has been characterized as “folksy and newsy” (Connors 360), a kaffeklatsch (Kinkead), the epitome of phronesis, because its contributors offer “practical wisdom rather than airy speculation” (Stull 1), and “the only writing journal that makes its readers feel like friends” (Connors 359). These descriptions, while positive and even affectionate, suggest that the newsletter is a simple
and even unscholarly publication. While the WLN has never included extended theoretical articles, it is short sighted to say that it lacks theory. As Pemberton notes, the 1980s “were a transformative period for the Newsletter” (32). Articles were becoming much more theoretical in scope. One such theoretical example is Jeanne Simpson’s February 1985 article titled, “Defining the Status of Writing Center Tutors.” Simpson contends that the writing center is an ideal space to professionalize graduate students. Through the experience of working at a center, graduate student tutors develop sound pedagogy for the classroom. They are also introduced to composition scholarship and therefore develop a theoretical base for their work. Simpson’s argument was the precursor for contemporary scholarship that makes the same point (as in more current work by Harris). In another article by Simpson, this one from 1982, she provides a brief summary of her dissertation, which argues that directors of writing centers should develop a working knowledge of rhetoric because such knowledge will help directors “defend” their centers (6). Simpson’s research is also an example of the increasing number of center scholars who actively drew upon rhetoric and composition research in order to explain writing center work.

Later articles become more theory oriented. They move further beyond the how-to’s and expand upon the implications of practice. In the 1990s, Michael Pemberton regularly contributed a column titled, “Writing Center Ethics.” The column covered issues like the effects of an open writing center (one without walls between conference areas) and closed centers (one enclosed with cubicles or carrels) (December 1995), or the writing center’s connection to “kiping,” a 1960s slang term that referred to act of lifting
items from a business, shop, or vendor’s stand (June 1996). In a more current issue (Jan/Feb 2004), WLN contains an article that discusses Mikhail Baktin’s dialogism and Anne Berthoff’s interpretive paraphrase in order to make sense of sessions with non-native English speaking tutees. All of these articles, early and later, indicate that WLN always grounds the theoretical in the practical. The articles mirror the writing center practitioner’s daily work. WLN is also one of the only publications in composition and rhetoric that gives serious scholarly consideration to all of its practitioners, including peer tutors--usually undergraduates--who work at centers across the country. The newsletter has included a tutor’s column since June 1984. Pemberton makes the same observation in “The Writing Lab Newsletter as History.” He says that the tutor’s contributions “allow them to become active members of the writing center community” (34). However, the tutor’s inclusion yields much more than just active membership. Generally speaking, major journals in composition and rhetoric do not publish many submissions from rank and file practitioners who rely on their experience as evidence (as discussed in Richard McNabb’s recent Composition Studies Article). The tutor’s column is largely anecdotal. Tutors create or understand theory through experience; therefore, the column is largely one of praxis. The implications of tutors included in this way, suggests that unlike in composition and rhetoric scholarship as a whole, experience does lend someone expertise.

Also unlike other journals in the field, WLN presents itself as the people’s journal. Harris has consistently asked for reader feedback about the newsletter’s content and form and has changed the newsletter according to reader preferences. Readers have
asked for mundane revisions such as enlarging the type size and have made more significant suggestions such as publishing more articles that address ESL and LD issues. In many ways the WLN has been the voice of the writing center community, but at the same time it represents a single vision. Also unlike other journals in the field, it has had only one editor in its twenty-three years of existence, Muriel Harris. Pemberton praises Harris for her “voice” and “leadership” in the writing center profession and for her scholarly contributions and her editorship of the WLN (35). Certainly Harris is deserved of such praise, and we do indeed “owe her a tremendous debt.” However, in the case of WLN, journal editorships are usually short-term positions for a number of reasons, some of them being to offer fresh perspectives on scholarship and to take the publication in new directions. Regardless of the degree to which Harris solicits feedback from readers, the single editorship of the WLN serves as a detriment. As editor, Harris has ultimate control and power over the text and therefore the newsletter represents her vision of the field. Connors said it best when he remarked, WLN is “strongly imbued with the character of its editor, Muriel Harris” (359). When the WLN readership looks at the text, do they see their reflection, or do they see Harris’ strong personality? In many ways Harris’ name is synonymous with writing centers, and so I suspect that it is a combination of the two, though I wonder what will happen to WLN once Muriel Harris retires. The newsletter will no doubt continue, but it will be an altogether different kind of text.

 Might the Writing Lab Newsletter become the Writing Lab Journal? Publications like the WPA and Freshman English News “traded up” from their newsletter status and became “legitimate,” refereed journals. When FEN was first established, its “guidelines
favored descriptive and practical over analytical and scholarly accounts” (Goggin 93). But founding editor Gary Tate claims that “people insisted on sending in essays that contained more theory than news” (94). FEN was compelled to accommodate its submissions and became a more theoretical publication. Maureen Goggin believes that Tate’s experience serves as evidence that composition and rhetoric “was in the process of turning away from its localized, service-oriented focus towards a more sophisticated disciplinary-oriented one” (94). Goggin assumes that descriptive and practical texts were no longer necessary. However, this does not explain why a publication like WLN proliferated.

If articles published in WLN count towards promotion and tenure, they are weighted less heavily than more research-based publications. While it is an official journal of the International Writing Center’s Association, it does not hold much academic currency in the grand scheme of the field and the institution. It would be fairly easy to bind the text and pull together an editorial review board, making it a refereed journal. I believe that if WLN made these changes, it would lose much of its current integrity. After twenty-three years of existence, articles “continue to exhibit the same value of networking, sharing, and helping” (Harris 434). As Joyce Kinkead has noted, “the newsletter is like a kaffeklatsch and you cannot have a refereed kaffeslatsch” (34). Equally important is the idea that WLN is a place to explore, experiment, try on new ideas, and encourage conversation much in the same way writing centers themselves are spaces of exploration, experimentation, and conversation.
In this section of the chapter, I discuss *The Writing Center Journal*, paying specific attention to its first four years of publication (1980-1984). Narrowing my discussion thusly, I focus on the scholarly legacy of the first editors, Stephen North and Lil Brannon. Whereas I argue that through the newsletter Harris created a kind of meeting space for writing center practitioners, here I argue that in order to legitimate writing centers as scholarly spaces, North and Brannon attempted to constrain writing center scholarship in ways that are compatible with composition/rhetoric. However, the writing center community resisted their constraints, and as I state at the beginning of this chapter, their resistance is based on the nature of writing center work which is experience-based. Once I establish this argument, I then generally examine the journal’s later issues and discuss the lasting effects of North’s and Brannon’s scholarly vision.

Like the WLN, WCJ was also the result of a CCC convention. In an interview conducted by Jeanette Harris and Joyce Kinkead (the second editors of WCJ), North and Brannon explain how they began the publication. North approached Brannon at the conference and asked her if she would like to collaborate on the journal. The two saw the need to begin it because there was little scholarship devoted to writing centers in the major journals (they reference CCC and CE), and the only other writing center publication, WLN, did not allow the space for “extended pieces on the writing center” (3). They set out to create that space through WCJ.

In the editor’s statement of the journal’s 1980 inaugural edition, North and Brannon provide a rational for its inception. They argue that they began WCJ for
scholarly and political reasons. They call the writing center “the absolute frontier” of composition and rhetoric because it embodies two central disciplinary concerns, a “student-centered curriculum, and a central concern for composing as a process” (1). Writing centers, they claim, are important and unique sites for research and teaching. Their political motives stem from their experiences as center directors. Others perceive centers as “correction places, fix-it shops for the chronic who/whom confusers, the last bastions of bonehead English” (1). In North’s “Idea,” he elaborates on the misperceptions of writing center work that led him and Brannon to start the journal. He establishes writing centers’ autonomy as he declares, centers are not “here to serve, supplement, back-up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum. We are here to talk to writers” (71). In keeping with this move towards independence, North and Brannon hope the WCJ will become a site of disciplinary legitimacy that will establish center workers as professionals by giving them a forum to recreate their identities within the academy.

In his 1984 article, “Journals in Composition Studies,” Robert Connors calls WCJ a *manifesto founding* because it comes into being in order to “proclaim” and “formalize” a part of the discipline (350). Manifestofoundings are journals that say “Look at us. See this ritual presentation of our worth; understand that we share our truths thus, and that this artifact is testament to our collective endeavor” (350). We can clearly see these attention-getting declaratives above when North and Brannon justify WCJ’s existence. And in order to appear relevant to the composition and rhetoric, they explicitly connect writing centers to composition scholarship—namely the process movement. They also
suggest that writing centers are untapped, potential research sites in composition studies that will yield “great new discoveries” (1). When they identify their connections to composition studies in this way, they attempt to expand the journal’s relevancy and readership beyond writing centers and writing center practitioners. The move for wide appeal and applicability is especially important at this time because other composition and rhetoric journals simultaneously emerged. The JAC, RR, *The Journal of Teaching Writing*, *The Writing Instructor* all began between 1979 and 1980.

Despite WCJ’s attempts to appear widely applicable to the field, Connors believes that the WCJ has limited appeal; its only audience was writing center workers. He also calls it “redundant” because writing center practitioners already had the WLN (360). WCJ wanted to be distinct from WLN and position itself as a scholarly publication, but most of its articles did little to advance the editors’ vision. I believe that Connors’ critique is overly harsh given WCJ age at the time: four years old. Earlier in his article, he argues that journals come into being in order to “encourage already extant scholarship” (350). This is not true of the WCJ. Neal Lerner explains that from roughly 1939 to 1970, writing centers’ intellectual work was constrained “by a reliance on graduate students and part-time staff” (54). Writing center workers did not have the time or opportunity to publish. WCJ gave the writing center community a venue to develop scholarship that had not previously existed.

As editors, North and Brannon played an explicit role in projecting the future of writing centers. In the editor’s statement, they say, that centers are “bright with promise” but “full of deadly threats as well [. . .] If writing centers do not mature, do not establish
themselves as part of the academic establishment, (even as, perhaps, they maintain their anti-establishment posture), they will surely, deservedly wither away” (2). These words carry an interesting ambivalence. Only a few paragraphs earlier, North and Brannon declared writing center independence, and here they suggest their subordination to the academic establishment. The contradiction points to writing centers’ continuous struggle to fit and their apparent misfit within the larger institution.

North and Brannon shaped the direction of writing center scholarship because as editors, they were both gatekeepers and powerbrokers; they shaped and encourage certain kinds of intellectual conversation while discouraging others in order to carve out a space in academia for writing centers. We see them do this molding in their editorial policy when they define the boundaries of publishable scholarship. They call for three kinds of articles: Theoretical essays, Theory/Practice essays, and Practical Application essays. Theoretical essays “explore or explain the why of writing center instruction: Exactly what is the nature of the tutorial relationship? Out of what traditions—pedagogical, psychological—does it arise? What sorts of research do we need to examine our teaching practices?” (2). North and Brannon encourage these submissions first because they are the “rarest” (2). They also look for articles that connect theory and practice, research that applies composition or composition related research to writing centers. Finally they seek articles that“draw upon experience in writing center teaching and administration to offer insights and advice that” writing centers can use (3). The third kind of article represents the majority of the submissions they have been unable to use because they are too specific and therefore inapplicable to writing centers in general.
North and Brannon offer models of these three kinds of articles in the journal itself. Lou Kelly’s “One-on-One, Iowa City Style: Fifty Years of Individualized Instruction” serves as an example of a theoretical article. William M. Stull’s The Heartford Sentence Combining Laboratory: From Theory to Program” is an example of a theory into practice text, and Muriel Harris’ and Kathleen Blake Yancy’s, “Beyond Freshman Composition: Expanded Uses of the Writing Lab” is a practical piece. Stull’s article is easily identified as theory into practice because he directly applies sentence-combining techniques to writing center work – making reference to notables such as Noam Chomsky and Charles Cooper. The Harris/Yancy article is also a concrete example of practical applications because it offers a rationale and strategies for centers to serve students outside of first-year composition. The Kelly article, however, is the most problematic. *Theory* articles, according to North and Brannon, examine the whys of writing center work. Kelly’s article offers a narrative history of the Iowa City writing lab. He gives us an early portrait of the lab and suggests that as its director, he maintains its early goals of “helping each uneasy writer become a more confident and competent writer” (4). He offers us a rationale for his current practice; he reflects on why he chooses certain practices over others in order to meet his goals. In this sense, he meets the “why” criteria, but at the same time, one could simply dismiss his article as a practical text because the majority of it stems from his experience. He shows us what works successfully in his center and thereby provides a model for other centers to follow.

If Maureen Goggin were offered the Kelly model for analysis, she’d likely argue that the article represents the writing center community’s early attempt to establish its
disciplinary authority. A piece like Kelly’s that describes a writing center and the ways it works out stakes the community’s domain and explains that domain to both insiders and outsiders. Articles that map out disciplinary territory precede articles which, critique, interpret, evaluate, etc (47).

However, I believe Kelly’s article offers an alternate vision of scholarship, one that blurs the line between critique and description or theory and practice. When North and Brannon characterize “One-On-One, Iowa City Style” as a theoretical article, they suggest that theoretical articles turn a critical eye to what writing centers do. They do not necessarily need to employ critical theory in order to explain a specific practice or phenomenon. As in the WLN articles, theory here is grounded in practice. It is reflection on practice. This conception of theory is quite different from the rest of the field where it manifests as a critical lens: e.g. How can feminism, Marxism, dialogism, psychometrics, anthropology, etc. help me understand x. I do not mean to suggest that writing center scholarship did not and currently does not employ critical theory in order to understand writing center work. There are several examples of such texts, which I will discuss in depth later on in this chapter. However, I do argue that “One-on-One” challenges our conceptions of theory through its reflective focus on practice.

At first, the editors see reflective articles as useful and meaningful until they comprise the bulk of the journal’s submissions. Norh and Brannon struggle to negotiate and reconstruct the borders between the increasingly research-oriented field and writing center concerns. The struggle continues for most of North and Brannon’s tenure as editors. In the journal’s next issue, they include a long forward, which further defines the
kind of scholarship they would like to publish. They expand the three essay
categories—theory, theory into practice, and practice—into “five key subject areas: Our
Writers and Their Composing Process; Tutoring and Tutor Training; Materials;
Administration; and Evaluation” (1). In the first issue, they tell their readership that they
are “testing the waters to see the sorts of things that writing center people are publishing”
(1); the forward in the second issue clearly indicates their dissatisfaction with
submissions. As in the previous issue, they expand on the categories and offer examples,
but their tone here is a bit severe, especially when they discuss Our Writers and Their
Composition Process:

The interest in all of teaching writing, of course, is on the composing
process. Incredibly, though, among all the manuscripts received, not a
single one has focused on a student writer, except for anecdotal support.
No one has offered a case study, no one has described the kinds of
strategies—successful or unsuccessful—the writers they work with use.
No one has offered a portrait of a student writer in a larger context—
noting, for example, how a student’s reading strategies are connected to
her writing strategies. In short the writing center people spend nearly all
their time working with individual students, but they apparently spend
very little time studying them and their and their needs. We would like to
see first, articles suggesting methods for writing center case studies, based
on both experience and the case study literature of our own and other
disciplines. Second, we would like the case studies themselves, the basis
for accumulating knowledge for what people do, successfully and
unsuccessfully when they write. We need analysis of written work,
alyses of anything relevant to writing. Such studies could include or
emphasize any number of variables; early efforts may be full of flaws.

But it is a collection of information that must begin. (1)

Their words here are reminiscent of Nancy Sommer’s ideal text—a term used to describe
a phenomenon in classroom assessment. A composition instructor, displeased with her
students’ writing, gives them feedback based on her vision of the writing assignment.
Her comments shape the students’ text without considering their purpose or goals in
producing the text. North and Brannon tell their readers that the majority of the articles
they have received are “superficial and anecdotal” and “not what our audience needs” (2).
Their encouragement of empirical studies suggests that the journal’s audience needs the
kind of research that resembles scholarship in major journals like CCC. A quick scan of
CCC table of contents in February, May, October, and December 1980 issues reveals
case study research that focus on the composing process: C.H. Knoblauch’s,
“Intentionality in the Writing Process: A Case Study,” Sondra Perl’s “Understanding
Composing,” and Nancy Sommers “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and
Experienced Adult Writers.”

But, what WCJ readership needed and what they submitted were at odds. In the
four years that North and Brannon edited WCJ, they published only five case studies.
CCC had five in 1980 alone. Scientific models like case study research were important
to the field at this time. Scientific models lent the field credibility and authority in part
because writing became a generalizable activity, one that could be patterned and explained. But we see very few of these publications in writing center research.

North saw an added pressure for the writing center community to include scientific research because there were some fairly vocal individuals in composition and rhetoric such as Maxine Hariston who believed writing centers did not work (North “Writing Center Research 33). Scientific research had an advantage over other kinds of research because it offered a positivist view of the world: everything operates “according to determinable or ‘lawful’ patterns, general tendencies” (North The Making of Knowledge 137). Case study research in particular examined specific instances of general tendencies: a student, teacher, or tutor, for example, performing particular acts. It would have been easy enough for writing center scholars to produce this kind of research, because as Brannon and North say, writing center people spend nearly all of their time working with individual students. Instead we the journal contains stories – narratives – portraits of students, tutors, directors, and centers. Take for example Judith Fishman’s 1981 essay “The Tutor as Messenger.” Fishman describes a two-year long, high school/college writing center collaboration, and gives her reader a portrait of a particular tutor, Beverly. She uses her experiences and observations to illustrate the idea that “Tutors are carriers of messages, embodiers of methods of teaching reading and writing” (11). Another example is Lee Ann Leeson’s 1982 article “All of the Answers or Some of the Questions? Teacher as Learner in the Writing Center.” Leeson reflects on some of her tutoring relationships/experiences with students. In both of these articles, the authors
use narrative to illustrate concepts as opposed to more clinical methods that depersonalize experience.

In the introduction to *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*, Alice Gillam provides a rationale for writing center scholars’ resistance to more traditional forms of research. She argues that writing center research remained (and arguably, much of it still remains) “descriptive and practice-based” because such research was “more familiar to most humanities-trained writing center administrators” and “more congruent with their everyday work” (xvii). Writing center workers support her assertions. According to Richard Leahy, a writing center director must always be “immersed in the writing center’s daily work” (47). And elsewhere, Harvey Kail says, “it is late in my day when I get around to thinking of the writing center director as writing center researcher—very late in the day” (27). Kail’s words are consistent with Leahy and Gillam’s claimed because so much of his time is devoted to teaching and otherwise working in the writing center. The writing center worker—be she or he the director and or the tutor—is “entrenched in the practical” (Lerner “Confessions” 43).

Unfortunately, the field and the institution at large still assume that practitioner texts are unscholarly or devoid of critique. Stephen North helped to solidify this assumption when in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* he claims that practice is only inquiry:

(a) when the situation cannot be framed in familiar terms, so that any familiar strategies will have to be adapted for use;
(b) when, although the situation is perceived as familiar, standard approaches are no longer satisfactory, and so new approaches are created for it; or

(c) when both situation and approach are non-standard.

Based on these criteria, North says, practice is seldom inquiry because practitioners are least equipped to perform such inquiry. Practitioners are often overburdened with their course load, so instead of experimenting with or critically examining pedagogy, they look to quick formulas in order to resolve emerging issues or situations in the writing classroom (35). However, others (Carino, Phelps) have convincingly argued that any scholarship based on pedagogical practice requires some theorizing or inquiry, whether that theorizing comes through complex analyses or basic trial and error. Gillam even suggests that practice-based scholarship is a form of empirical research because its aim is “to understand, improve, and/or change practice” (xvi). Research categories, then, are not nearly as fixed as some like North have positioned them. Even North and Brannon implicitly acknowledge this in WCJ; as evident in how Lou Kelly’s “One-on-One” blurs the distinctions between theory and practice.

At times North and Brannon struggled to produce WCJ. In the third issue of volume 1, they placed an eager call for manuscripts because they simply weren’t getting enough, though it is difficult to speculate whether they had not received enough submissions or enough of the right kind. Nonetheless the journal survived and continued to flourish under new editors: Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris (Spring 1985 - Spring 1991), Diana George, Nancy Grimm, and Edward Lotto (Fall1991 - Spring1994), Dave
Healy (Fall 1994 - Spring 1997), Joan Mullin and Albert DeCiccio (Fall 1997 – Spring 2002), and Neal Lerner and Elizabeth Boquet (Spring 2002 – Present). In 1985 it began its affiliation with the National Writing Center’s Association, became a refereed publication, began publishing book reviews and an annual bibliography on writing center scholarship. It has updated its cover four times to enhance its professional and aesthetic appearance. In its twenty-plus years, WCJ has produced diverse scholarship: countless tutor training articles, articles addressing writing center status and identity within the institution, writing center performance evaluation, center administration, writing program assessment, collaborative learning, the writing classroom/writing center connection (and disconnection), international students, technology, race, class, and gender. The list goes on.

It would be interesting to examine each editor’s contribution to the journal in the same way that I have examined North’s and Brannon’s. It would be equally intriguing to trace all of the above writing center scholarship to assess how conversations have changed over the years. However, for the scope of this chapter and the focus of this dissertation, such examinations are too broad. I make some references to specific editors and I focus on limited recurring issues in keeping with the central issues I outlined at the beginning of this chapter: the composition/rhetoric and writing center relationship, theoretical and practical scholarship, and writing centers as marginal or borderland spaces.
At the Frontier Between Theory and Practice

How has center scholarship evolved since the first issue of the *Writing Center Journal*? Just as in composition and rhetoric there is little emphasis on the process movement, so there is less of a process focus in WCJ. But still, much of the journal scholarship has been in keeping with “One-on-One”: reflective practice. Earlier I quoted Lerner, who states writing center workers are *entrenched in the practical*. Because so much writing-center work is hands-on, its scholarship often addresses the immediate, everyday, and practical concerns. Harris also argues that WPAs (this designation includes writing center directors) begin their inquiry “with questions that arise from local practice and local conditions,” and such “practical inquiry leads to disciplinary knowledge” (2). It makes sense then that in nearly every journal issue there is at least one article that describes what something looks like or how to do something in writing center tutoring or administration. The later articles, however, are more sophisticated in their subject matter and critique. Instead of simply providing individual portraits of tutors, tutees, centers and center practices, writing center scholars address issues through a combination of local, institutional and broader disciplinary and theoretical lenses.

Beatrice Mendez Newman’s, “Centering the Borderlands: The Writing Center at Hispanic Serving Institutions,” in WCJ’s Summer/Spring 2003 edition offers portraits of individual students at her institution, not unlike the articles from the first few issues that I cite above. But the early issues served to generate what Kenneth Bruffee calls a “core of knowledge” (6). Bruffee makes this statement in reference to the early issues of the
WPA, but says that developing this core is “basic to any professional practice” (6).
Mendez Newman’s piece is more complex because it moves beyond and complicates the
generalized knowledge of writing centers. She uses the basic tenet that writing centers
are a challenge to more traditional modes of instruction as a jumping off point and she
then discusses it in relation to how Hispanic students are served and how we can better
serve them at writing centers in borderland institutions.
Irene Clark’s 1988 article, “Collaboration and Ethics in Writing Center Pedagogy” is
another example of a more nuanced discussion of basic writing center tenets. She
investigates writing center collaborative learning practices and institutional conceptions
of plagiarism. She combines personal experience with the writings of other writing
center and composition scholars like John Trimbur and Lisa Ede, and learning theorists
such as Vygotsky and Bruner. Both articles, and there are many others, indicate
disciplinary maturation. As more writing center people write and publish, more scholars
are motivated to contribute and enter into the dialectical arena.

If journals shape and define disciplines, then the pages of WCJ reveal a
community in flux. It is both anxious and hesitant to be welcomed into the disciplinary
fold. That eagerness and hesitance plays itself out in the “theory” debate. Reflective-
practice-as-theory is not enough for many in the writing center community. When
Edward Lotto, Diana George, and Nancy Grimm became editors of the WCJ in 1991,
they called for submissions that “view everyday practice through the lens of
contemporary theory” (1). The desire to theorize in this way—connecting practice to
some form of critical theory—stems from writing centers’ continued disciplinary
insecurity and the general academic context. Theory lends disciplinary and institutional legitimacy. Peter Carino states it thusly, “a body of theory, a reasonably stable paradigm, would not only enable writing centers to explain themselves to themselves but to other entities” such as the university which funds the center and the parent discipline, composition and rhetoric (125). Theory, then, offers stability because it helps establish the standing of the center. North’s “Writing Center Research: Testing Our Assumptions” is arguably the first to define a coherent theoretical justification for writing centers: “the ideal situation for teaching and writing is the tutorial, the one-on-one, face-to-face interaction between a writer and a trained, experienced tutor; and the object of this interaction is to intervene in and ultimately alter the composing process of the writer” (28). He of course echoes these words in the oft’ quoted “our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (Idea 69). These words were largely embraced by the early writing center community.

There seemed to be little dispute over theory itself—its form and function—until Lotto, George, and Grimm called for more of it in 1991. They wanted scholars to establish or illustrate the writing centers’ general principles or laws. An example of such a principle is collaborative learning. But shortly before the three took over the journal, Irene Clark argued that the writing center needed to maintain its chaos, that it resist a common form and acknowledge that they “have not as yet discovered any magic formula about how it is best to work with student writers” and “that the diversity of humanity makes it unlikely that such a formula even exists” (83). The article also argues that that we must “examine with a critical perspective the established practices which ring through
our discipline like cereal commercials, phrases such as ‘collaborative learning’” because through overuse, they become meaningless (84).

It is possible that Lotto’s, George’s, and Grimm’s encouragement of theory stems from yet another influential article in the writing center canon: Andrea Lunsford’s “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,” published in the same issue as their editorial request. In this article, Lunsford suggests that there have been three iterations of theory within the writing center. She categorizes centers based on the theories that informed them: the current traditional center is “the Center as Storehouse” (93), the process/expressivist center is the “Gattent Center” and the post structural/social constructivist center is “The Burkean Parlor” which she holds as the ideal. These centers construct knowledge as negotiation (96). They engage students not only in solving problems set by teachers but in identifying problems for themselves; not only in working as a group—but in monitoring, evaluating, and building a theory of how groups work; not only in understanding and valuing collaboration but in confronting issues of control that successful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus, but in valuing dissensus and diversity. (97)

Eric Hobson in 1992 and Angela Petit 1997 repeat Clark’s sentiment in their respective WCJ articles: “Maintaining Our Balance: Walking the Tightrope of Competing Epistemologies” and “The Writing Center as ‘Purified Space’: Competing Discourses and the Dangers of Definition.” They are reluctant to categorize writing centers according to one epistemology or another because theorizing a writing center does not just ground it, it
affixes it. Throughout the literature in WCJ, WLN and other writing center scholarly texts, centers tout themselves as dialogic spaces, where multiple discourses, practices, and conceptions of writing center work can be heard. To many in the writing center community, using theory to generalize writing center praxis means turning the center into a monologic space where one dominant idea or practice rules. Such monologism undermines the writing center because it ceases to be a space where individualized instruction can happen. Instead the center operates by a one-size-fits all pedagogy.

*Marginalization, the Institution, and Composition and Rhetoric*

Because writing centers choose not to be defined according to one theory or another, the space they occupy within academia is also ill defined. Arguably, some of the most interesting WCJ scholarship discusses the writing center’s position both within the institution and within composition and rhetoric. Writing center scholars have asked and continue to ask, “Who are we as a community?” and “Where is our territory?” The first question is more difficult to answer because writing centers across the country serve different kinds of students, use varied methods for working with those students. They employ a variety of tutors (some centers are peer-tutor only, graduate student-tutor only, faculty-tutor-only, or some combination of the three); centers answer to different academic departments or units. They have full-time faculty directors, academic professional directors, part-time adjunct directors, graduate student directors, undergraduate directors, and sometimes no director.
Given the above differences, it’s difficult to define the writing center community as cohesive, but centers do seem to agree on the following, according to Muriel Harris’ SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) Statement on “The Concept of a Writing Center”:

- Tutorials are offered in a one-on-one setting.
- Tutors are coaches and collaborators, not teachers.
- Each student’s individual needs are the focus of the tutorial.
- Experimentation and practice are encouraged.
- Writers work on writing from a variety of courses.
- Writing centers are available for students at all levels of writing proficiency.

The statement was published in 1988, and has not yet been revised. Some of the language and concepts seem out-dated and certainly disputable, but they do provide a general sense of a writing center’s form and function. And based on these concepts, writing center workers have been able to develop a professional community partially through its journals.

With the first question somewhat answered, the second question: “Where is our territory?” has provoked much discussion on the pages of the WCJ. All scholarship on this subject points to the margins or frontier of the university, where writing center theorists either embrace or refute the space. In the journal, North and Brannon were the first to call writing centers the “frontier” of the field in order to invoke possibility and exploration and intimate that centers were untapped scholarly resources. At the same time, however, the frontier suggests the fringes or outskirts of civilization – its limits, and
it also implies a space that must be fortified against attack. The writing center community has suggested each of these iterations of the frontier when they discuss writing center territory.

By far, the most controversial discussion on the pages of the WCJ about writing centers as the frontier is Terrance Riley’s 1994 article “The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers.” At the beginning of this chapter, I briefly mention that Riley’s piece addresses writing center professionalization. His argument is that “our pursuit of success and stability, as conventionally measured, may be our undoing” (139). Riley wants writing centers to remain on the margins of the university because in this space, centers are able to provide “an alternative to mass education: to epistemological conformism within the disciplines, and courses, to teacher (expert) centrality, to assessment by measurable outcomes, to replicate pedagogies, to the thorough fixation on the isolated mind that above all characterizes the modern philosophy of education” (139). He says that writing centers should resist professionalizing because if they do not, they will not retain their “liberatory” and “contrarian” philosophies (148).

Here he invokes another canonized writing center article (which does not appear in the WCJ), Tilly and John Warnock’s “Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers.” Warnock and Warnock argue that writing centers exist “on the fringes of the academic community” and must exist there in order to “maintain critical consciousness” (60). Riley believes that professionalization leads to conformism much in the same way that the anti-absolute-theory, writing center scholars believe theory will homogenize the writing center community. He claims that professionalization forces “us to act as if our
subject matter’ had natural, discernable borders, specific research goals and methodologies, and a replicable pedagogy—and where these do not come easily to hand, we have to create them” (148). Academic conformism “reduces our variety” and limits “our breadth of vision” (149). Like North and Brannon, Riley sees the marginal or the frontier space that writing centers occupy as full of possibility: writing centers can change the institutional experience if they remain on its outskirts. His article serves as a line of defense as field-wide professionalization attacks the border.

Riley’s article provoked and still provokes considerable response on the pages of WCJ. In a letter responding to the article, Byron Stay replied “Professor Riley’s contention that writing centers need fear success because they risk being co-opted by the educational establishment oversimplifies the place of writing centers in their institutions, underestimates the importance of scholarship, and ignores the political liabilities of self-marginalization” (187). Lisa Ede responded similarly in her article, “Writing Centers and the Politics of Location: A Response to Teerance Riley and Stephen North.” She argued that while she agreed that writing centers should heed Riley’s warnings, they must also acknowledge that writing centers do not operate completely on the borders because centers operate within institutions and are inevitably “part of the complex and paradoxical story that they narrate” (119).

Stay and Ede suggest that marginality is a construct and that it has its liabilities. Others concur. Joyce Kinkead argues that writing center workers focus too much on “what’s being done to us (e.g. limited spaces and funding), rather than what we do well” (37). She declares, “Our image is determined by us, and if the image we project is of
strong, capable, wise, and caring teachers, then that is how we will be perceived” (37).
Kinkead wrote these words in 1996. She was trying to empower the group and bolster spirits, but her statement is not entirely true—we do not determine our own image, regardless of external circumstances or pressures. If we did then writing center workers would not still be defending their institutional and academic viability. Recently on WCENTER, a director asked for help from list members. Her department was considering eliminating the writing center. She asked for advice on how to construct an argument to save her center. The center, staffed by the same kind of strong, capable, and wise teachers Kinkead describes, serves 500 students at a European, English speaking university. This situation happens regularly, abroad and here in the US.

It seems more likely, then, that writing centers are indeed marginal, that they exist on the frontiers of the academic community where there is both possibility and peril. Scholarship that acknowledges this reality is more and more apparent. Such work suggests that writing centers indeed celebrate their marginality, but in ways quite different from the complaining Kinkead detests. Bonnie Sunstein acknowledges that “writing centers lurk in a state of inbetweeness” (7):

a writing center cannot define itself as a space—we’re often kicked out of our spaces. It’s not a pedagogy. We’re always re-articulating our pedagogy. It’s certainly not an academic department. It crosses all disciplines. A writing center does not produce a text—the texts in writing centers are unfinished. And we don’t own the texts the students create; those texts are cross-curricular, cross-linguistic, cross-discursive. And we
can’t really call a writing center a culture; it exists where differing cultures meet. Non traditional students, failed students, needy faculty, lost students, LD and ESL students, gifted and average students, blocked and oppressed students—and we hope other “kinds” of students and faculty—pour in our doors daily. We allow our centers to mold themselves to our institutions’ needs. And that too presents a problem because when we must define ourselves to our colleagues in more academic, “fixed” places of our institution, we know we’re not telling the whole story—and they’re not hearing it. (8-9)

She believes that centers should embrace and not lament their liminal space. Writing centers can do the kind of work that they do because they exist and practice in between concrete institutional structures like classrooms and departments. At the same time, she acknowledges that centers must often adapt to institutional structures they would prefer to resist. Centers either submit to institutional definitions, define themselves “and risk extinction,” redefine themselves in order to maintain existence (22). Even though centers elude concrete definition, they are nonetheless “in the presence of one” (22).

Stephen North and Lil Brannon offer a similar argument in the 2000 anniversary edition of the WCJ. They suggest that writing centers cultivate a “rhetoric of marginality that will use their status for institutional advantage” (10). This rhetoric of marginality allows writing centers to understand how their work enriches colleges and universities, create and sustain institutional memory or history, and embrace and explore its ambivalence. North and Brannon also suggest that a rhetoric of marginality claim “as
its knowledge the knowledge of practice rather than the institutionally viable knowledge making practices of the educational research establishment” (11). This statement contradicts their push for standard research 20 years earlier. I believe that their acknowledgement shows that their understanding of writing center scholarship and scholars has evolved.

Conclusion

The portrait of writing center scholarship and the writing center community captured by the two publications *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journals* suggests that the community attempts to maintain a degree of autonomy through its scholarly focus on practice and its critiques of theory. Writing center scholarship crosses the boundaries between theory and practice, and the journals show the field that valuable scholarship exists in many forms. Goggin can argue that composition and rhetoric achieved disciplinary status when it abandoned practitioner scholarship because she does not examine the many voices that comprise the field. She does not explore the spaces that contradict her assumptions, spaces like the journals where there are no distinct lines between teaching and research.

It is difficult to examine and determine an exact fit for writing centers within composition and rhetoric and academia because they are rough and imprecise spaces that resist definition. This imprecision is precisely what the writing center community values. However, at the same time, writing centers are not independent of larger forces, forces that dictate the value of work in the academy. It has been fairly common over the years to
hear an occasional lament or complaint in writing center publications: major publications—journals and collections of essays--rarely include writing center scholarship. This complaint is a reality. But writing center scholars seldom ask why. Instead they point to the ways in which writing center have and could contribute to the field’s body of research: in methods of collaborative learning, in student-centered pedagogy, in technology, in WAC, in ESL and LD pedagogies, etc. We seldom see discussions about why writing center scholarship looks different than other kinds of scholarship in the field and why there is value in that difference. I believe that it is as important to vocalize the writing center community’s misfit within the field as it is their fit because as I have argued throughout this text, there is great value in resistance. Resistance has led to a continual revision and transformation of the writing center community and can lead to revision in the field and the institution.

I believe that writing centers create a kind of uneasiness because they challenge many in composition and rhetoric to reassess their assumptions about theory and publishable scholarship. Earlier, I quote Charles Schuster who claims that “composition studies is grounded in practice” (33), and yet there are many like Maureen Goggin who believe that composition and rhetoric only gained academic currency once its scholarship moved away from practice. And there are many still who believe that the act of practice, more specifically the teaching of composition, further hinders composition and rhetoric’s attainment of disciplinary legitimacy. In the next chapter, I explore the above issue—teaching as an impediment to legitimacy—at length. The chapter builds on arguments that I have developed in this chapter, namely the writing center’s misfit within the
discipline and institution and their emphasis on practice. Instead of focusing specifically on composition and writing center scholarship, as I have in this chapter, I focus on the center’s service function.
CHAPTER TWO: NARRATIVES OF SERVICE: COMPOSITION/RHETORIC AND THE WRITING CENTER

*We cannot gain important insight into a single metaphor without also considering the metaphors that support it and to which it responds.*

Philip Eubanks, “Understanding Metaphors for Writing.”

As I assert in the introduction to this project, this dissertation attends to the value of work in English studies and the institution. It examines the hierarchy of work—research, teaching, and service—and where centers fit or do not fit within that hierarchy. The previous chapter focuses on the first part of the triad: research. I examine the scope, shape, and trajectory of writing center scholarship in its two major journals *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal*. I make three major arguments: 1) The writing center community emphasizes reflective practice as a valid research method in composition and rhetoric. Reflective practice bridges the field’s theory/practice binary. 2) Writing centers want to be embraced by the discipline and also want to be autonomous from composition and rhetoric. Their opposing desires play themselves out in a “theory” debate. 3) Because centers choose not to be defined according to one theory or another, they situate themselves on the margins of the discipline and institution.

In this chapter, I build on my assumptions about the academic currency of writing center work and examine “service,” a term which often includes “teaching” within its definition. The Eubanks quote that I begin this chapter with speaks to the fluidity of language, the multiplicity of meaning—things that those of us in composition and rhetoric are very conscious of. However, when we talk about something like “service” in composition, many of us refer to it as though it were a fixed concept. But what do we
mean when we call something a service course, a service activity, or a service resource? In both the institution at large and in composition and rhetoric, “service” is used to describe and situate different kinds of work. Colleges and universities define service as the work performed by faculty and academic professionals that benefits the institution, the department, other professional organizations, or the community at large. It is the last of the three categories--research, teaching, and service--we use to evaluate academic work. At leading universities, work time is divided accordingly: 40% research, 40% teaching, and 20% service.

In composition and rhetoric, we often conflate the term with teaching. As such it embodies an identity composition and rhetoric has often tried to escape—service as servitude or subordination—and also at times to embrace—service as benefit to others, assistance to the public, or civic engagement. A benchmark article for considering service is Sharon Crowley’s “Composition’s Ethic of Service, the Universal Requirement, and the Discourse of Student Need.” Crowley examines service’s twofold identity. She argues that composition has been positioned as a service to both students and the community at large because it teaches students to become effective, or at least error-free communicators (1). At the same time, this “service ethic” defeats composition’s attempts to gain disciplinary status because the kind of work that we do—teaching expository prose—is “low work” in the academy.

Service discussions in the field often focus on the first-year composition classroom, probably because composition is a general education course that serves to introduce students to the writing done in college. It is also composition and rhetoric’s
largest and most visible work-site. It is what most people, particularly those outside of English studies, associate with the field. The first-year composition classroom is also a historical site of the field’s emergence. Contemporary composition and rhetoric studies came into being, in large part, from late nineteenth century, required English courses. But, the one focus on the composition classroom leaves other sites like the writing center out of the service discussion. There are many possible reasons for this neglect: writing centers are relatively new on college and university campuses and therefore lack visibility, and centers are not always connected to the composition classroom. In any case, composition and rhetoric has a history of excluding writing centers from larger disciplinary discussions, and for those within the discipline trying to escape its service identity, writing centers call attention to composition and rhetoric’s less prestigious service function.

Disciplinary and institutional conceptions of service have profound implications for both those who use writing centers and those who work in them. Centers have a broader service mission than the composition classroom insofar as many support and sustain WAC and meet the needs of students at all levels (including graduate students). Nonetheless, writing centers are part of, not apart from, composition and rhetoric studies. Therefore, fieldwide discussions invariably affect the beliefs and practices in discrete sites like the writing center. I have already established this line of argument in the previous chapter, and my purpose is not to belabor the point. However, my concern is with the general absence of conversations regarding how areas like the writing center and concepts like service influence our work and our conceptions of work within the field.
In the following chapter, I explore service within the field and at the institutional level and elaborate on the following argument: whenever we talk about service or refer to something as service, we call upon multiple and competing conceptions of how our work relates to others and the world. These multiple associations create divisions in the discipline and the academy. This chapter will develop this line of argument: first, perceptions of service in composition and rhetoric can help us understand conceptions and manifestations of service in writing centers; second, while many in the field resist the service classification, composition and writing centers have undeniable service functions; and third, a major writing center tenet—collaboration—can help us understand and reframe competing definitions of service to advance purposes through strategic coalitions with others.

*The German Model*

We cannot talk about service unless we also talk about the historical development of scholarship and teaching. The desire and perceived need to escape practitioner and service identities stem from reified systems that have long been in place in American higher education. We have inherited them from what Margaret Marshall calls, “a time now dead” (2). She contends that unless we become conscious of our inheritance, we will “continue to repeat, unwittingly the patterns of discourse we wish to alter or refute” (2). Heeding her call, we must look to the past in order to understand how it influences our current conceptions of teaching and service. Many (for example, Robert Connors,
David Russell, and Steven North) have already devoted time to critiquing early models of higher education and its effects on the current institutional climate. Because much has been done in this area, I offer a tightly focused history, focusing specifically on the German model’s influence because it is the most relevant to conceptions of teaching and service.

Our modern conceptions of “the scholar”—the disciplined researcher—stem from the German model, a system of higher education exported during the last half of the nineteenth century. Traveling American students, motivated by their experiences from universities in places like Dresden, Berlin, and Heidelberg, brought home the ideal of pure scholarly research (Connors 176). The German model shaped a system in which scholars often practiced non-utilitarian learning, and their research was an “abstract, intensely self-involved” and “rarely social” activity (Veysey 122-23). Thorsten Veblen remarked “A university is a body of mature scholars and scientists, the ‘faculty’—with whatever plant and other equipment may incidentally serve as appliances for their work” (qtd. in Veysey 121). Students and teachers were largely ignored in the definition, an indication that the German model did not place a high value on teaching. Within this system, professors disseminated their research to their students, but they were not teachers. They were specialists. There was often little mention of teaching except to indicate its low value. Teaching was perceived as a distraction from the faculty’s real work as autonomous specialists concerned with advancing knowledge.

In the late nineteenth century Harvard adapted the German model and became one of the first American research institutions. During this period, it also adopted a required
freshman English course. Many other American institutions followed in Harvard’s footsteps, both in adapting a research paradigm and in creating a mandatory writing class, according to Connors and other historians of composition. When American colleges and universities began to privilege the German model, teaching became low status work, especially teaching that was not attached to a specialized discipline. Required writing courses designed to remedy the incoming students’ shortcomings, primarily focused on issues such as spelling, pronunciation, grammar, sentence construction, and paragraphing (185). Those who taught the course came to despise it for two primary reasons, most obviously the workload turned teachers into the “academic proletariat” (208). While teachers in other fields “were dealing successfully with large numbers in their classes by evolving techniques of discussion and lecture, composition teachers were tied to reading thousands of themes” (Connors 193). Secondly, composition courses removed faculty, and eventually graduate students, from the ideal of research and scholarly inquiry. As a result, positions in composition teaching were not filled by “upwardly mobile scholars” (172). Those who had been trained to conduct research were left to classroom drudgery.

The German model of higher education and its American incarnations fostered an environment within composition/rhetoric history that denigrated teaching. Because of its influence, it produced (and continues to produce) lasting effects on the field, including the research, teaching, and service hierarchy that we see in current conversations. Within the German model, the scholar was his own master whose principal aim was investigation. With the proliferation of freshman English courses, those who taught the course seen as serving only the institution, although, those who produced scholarship
served an institutional agenda because they advanced their disciplines and institutions. They venerated professional autonomy, even if it was illusory. Even when scholars were required to teach undergraduates, their courses were based on their areas of expertise. When one was assigned freshman English courses, there were no illusions. Instructors were required to remediate students. Little else was expected.

Less than a hundred years after the birth of the first-year writing course, composition and rhetoric began to assert itself as a discipline. Those who had committed their professional lives to the teaching of college English were driven to change its face, making composition a viable discipline. Composition teachers/scholars made connections among the first-year writing course and fields like linguistics and cognitive psychology, and forwarded powerful tenets that remain with us today. Janet Emig’s declaration—writing is a unique mode of learning—is a classic example. However the “new” composition had nonetheless inherited hierarchies from the German model, namely that teaching was inferior to research and first-year composition was a remedial course that served an institutional agenda: to succeed in writing instruction where earlier schooling had failed.

The Legacy

Recent conversations about composition’s status and role within the university often tacitly invoke the German model’s legacy, especially those discussions that use the term “service” to define composition’s identity. Ironically, those who oppose defining
composition as a service tend to draw on the basic assumptions of the German model and its promise of research. These scholars often propose abolishing composition’s first-year requirement because of its service functions. The abolitionist’s most often cited proponent is Sharon Crowley. As I mentioned earlier, she argues that the course has been positioned as one in which the needs of the academic community, the needs of the students, and the needs of the community at large are met because it is designed to teach students “to write error free-expository prose” (“Ethic of Service” 1). Such analyses accept that first-year composition performs a service, but that service does not hold much institutional or cultural capital. The “required first-year composition uses enormous resources and takes up large chunks of student and teacher time,” but few within the institution bother to “talk or write about composition, unless it is to complain about the lack of student literacy” (Composition 1). The lack of respect for the service mission of the course is a major cause of its lowly standing.

Crowley explains that in order to advance composition’s standing, many have expanded its identity to include “loftier goals like liberal culture or democratic values” (“Ethic of Service” 3). In the twenties and thirties, Crowley explains:

the introductory writing course was conceived as a site wherein students could be exposed to liberal culture (Berlin, Rhetoric). During the 1940’s, in the aftermath of World War in the required course was reconceived as a venue for the inculcation of citizenship and the distillation of democratic values. [And] Recently, radical composition theorists have urged that
college teachers of writing use their classrooms to make its students aware of social inequities. (1)

According to Crowley, all of these linkages to a service ethic have been largely unsuccessful in reshaping composition and rhetoric’s institutional and public image. She additionally argues that in the discipline’s disfavor, the required course positions students as passive recipients of a predefined pedagogy. She sees the subject position as a direct outgrowth of its being defined by a service mission.

The heart of Crowley’s argument lies within composition’s disciplinary status (or lack thereof) and how to bolster it, and her ultimate solution is to abolish the first-year composition requirement and put in its place an elective curriculum “that examines composing in general and as it takes place in specific rhetorical situations such as workplaces and community decision making” (Composition 263). She believes that this new focus will inevitably prevent compositionists from “perpetuating the discourses of hierarchy and exclusion” and allow us to speak a more disciplined language because we would be dropping service, or “the discourse of student need as our legitimating claim” (“Ethic of Service” 15). In other words, we would no longer be arguing that students need the first year writing course “in order to write better, to write error free prose, to survive in the academy, to prosper in a job or profession, to be come acquainted with the best that has been thought and said, [or] to become critics of the society in which they live” (9). Instead composition and rhetoric would be free to rebuild and sustain an identity beyond the first-year requirement, one that would move us away from the
definitions that have been imposed upon us. We would thereby be empowered to speak a more disciplined language.

Others come to similar conclusions with regards to composition’s service identity and disciplinary status. Kerri Morris in “The Service Myth: Why Freshman Composition Doesn’t Serve Us or Them” believes that composition as a discipline lacks focus. She says “The sheer variety of uses of the term ‘composition,’ our tacit agreement to avoid defining it, and the lack of common themes suggests an undisciplined discipline” (114).

At the center of such positions is a clearly defined sense of a discipline as an academic enterprise. When we consider the term “discipline,” we often think of a body of knowledge that stands by and for itself, like mathematics. While this conception is reductive, its boundaries are clearer in the eyes of most than the boundaries of composition and rhetoric. Because of composition’s “variegated countenance,” others have defined the field for us:

the story most frequently told to and by our students, that their parents, or families, legislators, trustees, and teachers seems to be that first-year composition serves as a foundation upon which our field is built, that it serves students, the society in which we live, and the curriculum as a whole. (Morris 114)

According to Morris, our lack of a clear definition as a discipline has led others to characterize the work that we do, and those definitions have reduced composition to a service discipline. Those of us who work within composition and rhetoric are then positioned as waiters and waitresses who serve “our customers/students a casserole of
expectations from the masters we also serve—our own departments, myriad other
departments on campus, curricular goals, and the communities in which these students
will eventually work” (115). Compositionists are expected to produce measurable results
in terms of English proficiency and leave all customers satisfied. She too recommends
that composition abandon its first-year requirement and additionally raise itself to gain a
concrete disciplinary identity. The redefinition requires that the field focus its energies
on language and culture and discourse production and reception. It should be
“interdisciplinary by nature, inquiry driven like philosophy, and text-focused like
literature” (121). According to Morris, anything that does not fall within these categories
should not be a part of composition and rhetoric studies.

In his Constructing Knowledges: The Politics of Theory Building and Pedagogy
in Composition, Sidney Dobrin sees composition’s identity problem in relation to its
resistance to theory. He argues that composition leans too heavily on pedagogy and only
sees the value of theory when it has direct classroom applicability. He claims not to
privilege theory over pedagogy, but he does say that without theory, composition will
“stagnate” and be “defined within the narrow confines of a service orientation” (23). He
does not suggest abandoning the first-year requirement, but he believes that composition
must theorize in order to create “its own body of knowledge” if it is to escape its
subservient role within the university (32). He reinforces a theory/practice binary that
much scholarship—including my previous chapter—has worked to subvert. For Dobrin,
 scholarlly pursuits are imperative within the system if a discipline is to succeed in gaining
recognition and respect.
Crowley’s, Morris’, and Dobrin’s suggestions—abolish the first-year requirement, sharpen composition’s identity, and devote more serious attention to theory—all share in the idea that composition’s service identity prevents it from gaining status within the institution. A service identity leads compositionists away from disciplinary pursuits; it keeps its practitioners from becoming scholars who are free to research, who are free from institutional and public demands, who are ultimately free from servitude and subordination. Crowley, Morris, and Dobrin seem to give favor to a system already in place, one that privileges scholarship over teaching, and recommend that we comply with and adapt to institutional notions of disciplinarity and scholarship. Crowley is a Marxist and explicitly opposes institutional hierarchies, and therefore her tacit support of the research model is ironic because it upholds hegemonic structures within the university. It does not occur to her or the other scholars to critique the system itself and so their solutions, though compelling because they appear to bolster composition, ignore critical circumstances and realities that composition cannot escape.

Audre Lorde once cautioned, “If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment” (45). Those who oppose composition’s service identity implicitly act upon Lorde’s words. Morris’ above most clearly demonstrates Lorde’s sentiment: because composition has multiple identities and is therefore not as concrete as other disciplines, others have defined it. However even though Morris and others want the relative freedom of self-definition, composition and rhetoric is not an autonomous entity; no discipline is. Perhaps composition, more so than any other discipline, has multiple audiences, multiple other constituents beyond the
departments that house it, its faculty, academic professionals, adjuncts, and graduate
students. The discipline is also accountable to undergraduates, departments across
campus, central administration, local, state, and national government, and the public at
large. These various stakeholders invariably influence the field, but we can help define
our relations to them by reconfiguring service. Before I expand on this idea, I must first
discuss service’s civic identity.

Those who counter the above scholars and others who share their ideas, appear to
take into account composition’s public image. They also use the language of service to
describe and define the discipline, though they cautiously embrace the concept rather
than reject it. Their perceptions of service take an altogether different form: service as
composition’s civic duty and obligation. Crowley already cautions us against attaching
composition to this kind of service by asserting that many in the field have tried
unsuccessfully to associate composition with civic duty. But she fails to acknowledge
that this manifestation of service has deep historical roots. It is not something that
compositionists have tacked-on to the discipline in order to boost its status. We can trace
the idea to classical Greece and Rome and the rhetorical tradition, which portrayed the
orator as a “civic leader who understood all the value of his culture and used artful speech
to make those values effective in the arena of public affairs” (Halloran 185). While we
need to be critical to those who had access to such positions, we can look to eighteenth-
century rhetorical education in the United States. During this period, higher education
was designed to prepare its students for their future public roles, as it focused on
community rather than individual needs (Halloran 193). We also hear its echoes in progressive education models which emphasized civic education and engagement.

While I have simplified the above examples, it is fair to argue that composition and rhetoric’s turmoil over its service identity stems in part from its history to serve the public and the conception of service as servitude brought on, in part, by the German model of higher education. John Warnock illustrates composition’s in between state in “The Discipline and the Profession: It’s a Doggy Dog World.” He says we use the terms “discipline” and “profession” interchangeably, but the connotations of the terms position composition and rhetoric differently: “To the extent that we are claiming to be a discipline, we are locating ourselves within the academy. To the extent that we are claiming to be a profession, we might be locating our primary consistency outside of the academy, in what some are content to call the ‘real’ world” (77). Members of a discipline do not perform service as part of their function; they are researchers and scholars. However, Warnock argues, members of a profession perform service as “part of the program” (78). Members of the two best known professions—law and medicine—“both officially embrace an obligation to do service—lawyers are supposed to do pro-bono work for poor people, and doctors are supposed to treat people regardless of their ability to pay” (78). The service missions of these professions do not weaken them, but instead provide legitimacy to their high standing. If composition and rhetoric is at once a discipline and a profession, this places the field in an interesting position because the conceptions—discipline and profession—are incompatible in the sense that they characterize service in the field as including both scholarship and teaching. As I have
already elucidated in the previous chapter, the binary of scholarship and practice is false, especially as it is applied to composition and rhetoric.

When we foreground composition’s service function, we also call attention to its materiality. Many in the field do not consider service to be specialized work. It is labor—work that is oftentimes physically taxing and requires little skill. Laborers toil. Laborers serve. Scholars do not. James Sledd, in his article “Return to Service” argues that the byproduct of composition’s search for disciplinary status is the “boss compositionist”; the scholar for whom “service is an abomination” (18). He readily places the likes of Crowley and Dobrin in this category because he believes they are more concerned with developing and forwarding theory than they are with “careful” teaching (11). When we accept the prevailing hierarchy, teaching becomes “low-mechanical work” (Horner 376). One’s class is determined by her or his proximity to mechanistic labor. If we abolish or significantly alter our sites of teaching and instead focus on knowledge production, we are separating knowing from doing, in essence elevating composition by denying its material reality. The implication is that teaching as service has little value, and yet composition is a discipline built on teaching. Most scholars entered the field because they value the teaching of writing. The problem then is that there is a disjunction between how we as teachers see the value of our work vs. how others (the institution, others in English studies, other departments) perceive us.
Within the field, service discussions fall under two major categories: those which characterize service as subordination—a lesser duty to advancing knowledge, an activity that forwards the agenda of others as opposed to a disciplined, autonomous agenda, and those who characterize service as civic duty and obligation with a potentially higher standing. The arguments that liken service to servitude forward that teaching, particularly the teaching of first-year composition, keeps the field on the margins of the institution. Those who see service as composition and rhetoric’s function and duty believe that if we ignore or alter the field’s service ethic, we unduly support the idea that the teaching of composition is less important and less meaningful than scholarly work, and we deny the power of the material work we do.

Though none of these service discussions specifically reference writing centers, they nonetheless influence the writing center’s identity, especially considering how writing centers support and enhance college writing instruction. Additionally, if first-year composition came about to remedy the writing problems of college students, then the writing center evolved as a means to supplement that remediation. To put it plainly, they are a unit that serves a service course. Granted, writing centers do more for a college or university than serve as adjuncts to first-year composition. But I am necessarily blunt to illustrate a writing center’s uneasy disciplinary footing. I already touch on this issue in the previous chapter with regards to scholarship, and I think that it is equally important to explore it in light of the writing center’s service identity.

Service and the Writing Center
Concepts of service have caused considerable unease for writing centers. Some composition scholars go so far as to accuse spaces like the writing center of hindering the field’s disciplinary status. Morris asserts that because of composition’s service connotation, it must constantly justify itself and prove the work that it does. Writing centers are, according to Morris, a byproduct of the discipline’s “ends-oriented” preoccupation. They are places “where presumably students can ‘gas up’ with some extra help from the staff” (116). As Morris sees it, the writing center is an extension of the composition classroom that serves the immediate and rudimentary needs of the students.

Stephen North declared twenty years ago that centers “are not here to serve, supplement, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum. We are here to talk to writers,” but centers are still characterized as support units that offer discrete writing assistance (72). Even writing center workers are unsure of their disciplinary positions. David Healy asks whether centers are indeed an alternative to classroom instruction or whether they are an extension of it (“Managing the Writing Center/Classroom”). We see a similar confusion in the ways people have described writing centers:

- as a pedagogical movement -- Steven North and Lil Brannon in Kinkead’s “The National Writing Center’s Association as Mooring.” North and Brannon identify the writing center as a unique learning environment that has the potential to revolutionize writing instruction because of its focus on collaborative learning and individualized instruction.
as spaces for play – Nancy Welch. Welch envisions a writing center that allows students to explore ideas and language without fear of penalty in the form of grades.

as communities of learning – Terrance Riley, “The Unpromising Future.” Riley’s understanding of the writing center as community of learning refers to its collaborative instruction. Both tutors and tutees participate as equals. Everyone at the writing center is a writer.

as defacto WAC centers – Muriel Harris. Harris rightly concludes that writing centers that are open to all students and faculty across campus are necessarily WAC centers regardless of whether or not they have an explicit WAC mission.

as luxuries – Bell “When Hard Questions are Asked: Evaluating Writing Centers.” Bell classifies the writing center as unnecessary to the institution. They are nice to have, but they are not needed.

as academic support units – Jeanne Simpson. Simpson’s words implicitly undermine other characterizations of the writing center that position it as legitimate and innovative sites of teaching and learning. Their job is to supplement or back up university curriculum (I deliberately allude to North’s “Idea” here).

The first three descriptions indicate the writing center’s uniqueness. They assert an identity distinct from and even counter to the traditional classroom. The descriptions emphasize “new” ways of learning where judgment-free experimentation and community
are encouraged. The last three descriptions suggest that writing centers are useful, but not entirely necessary service units that serve the needs of the institution.

We see the same varied identities in writing center mission statements. Mission statements perform several functions. They encapsulate an organization’s reason for existing: their purpose, their concerns, and their work. They are advertisements, designed to reach a wide audience. They also convince “both internal and external audiences of the group’s credibility” (Degenaro 86). The following writing center mission statements indicate an array of perspectives about service and writing center work.

From Auburn University - a land-grant, research institution:

The primary goal of the English Center (EC) is to offer tutorial services to students enrolled in undergraduate English core courses at Auburn University. The consultants in the EC help students learn all aspects of the composing process, from exploring ideas to developing strategies for proof-reading the final document, and assist students in developing critical reading skills. A secondary goal is to provide support for students from any course at Auburn University in which writing and reading are required.

From the University of Arizona – a land grant, research one university.

Mission: The Writing Center recognizes the importance of conversation
among writers about writing and believes that learning happens most effectively in a non-judgmental and informal atmosphere. A central assumption of this philosophy is that peer consultants are first and foremost student-writers, not authority figures who have all the answers. Based on their own successful experience as writers, consultants model a problem-solving approach to writing by encouraging students to reflect on multiple issues such as individual writing processes, diverse learning styles, and the particulars of rhetoric (purpose, context, audience, craft).

Our Approach to Consulting: Our interactions at the Writing Center focus on conversation – questions and answers, problem-solving, and revision. Students meet one-on-one with a writing consultant and talk and write through their assignments. While our main concern is to assist the student in meeting the demands of his/her assignment, we attempt to foster an engagement with writing that extends beyond a single writing task.

Writing centers are institution specific. That is, while we speak of “the writing center” as a unified concept—eg. writing center scholarship or writing center pedagogy—each center serves the distinct needs of its home campus. We can therefore attribute some of the variations in the mission statements to institutional specificity. We might assume that writing centers housed in institutions that are similar in size and type (public, land grant or private liberal arts, for instance), would share similar missions. However,
the samples do not necessarily support this assumption. For example, Auburn University’s English Center (EC) quite clearly links its identity to the university’s core English courses. The EC’s writing tutors, or “consultants,” assist students with the composing process, working with them through brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. While their focus on the writing process indicates that they attempt to address each student’s individual writing needs, their end is to facilitate the students’ mastery of general purpose prose.

In contrast, the University of Arizona, a near-peer institution to Auburn University, houses a writing center that emphasizes collaboration and cooperation among tutors and tutees. It invokes the language from official writing center literature, specifically the “SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) Statement: The Concept of a Writing Center.” One of the first things that the statement forwards is that “Tutors are coaches and collaborators, not teachers” (1). The UAWC mission statement echoes: “peer consultants are first and foremost student-writers, not authority figures who have all of the answers.” The association with the SLATE statement lends the UAWC credibility, but the mission statement as a whole suggests that the center supports and serves students as a whole and for the long-term, as opposed to an imposed, skill’s driven institutional objective.

The UAWC’s closest kin in terms of its mission is Newman University’s Writing Center (NUWC).

From Newman University – a Catholic, liberal arts college
Mission: we provide personal or self-directed support to all Newman University writers through a variety of delivery systems. We assist at any phase of the writing process, empowering our clients to become more effective writers, thinkers, and learners as we help them achieve their academic and personal goals.

**Core Values**

Empowering writers for the long term: We seek to develop better writers, not better writing as we equip writers with the tools and self confidence they need to succeed independently in the future.

Newman University, a small, Catholic, liberal arts college, boasts a writing center that “empowers” students for the short and long term. They also borrow from the writing center canon when they assert, “We seek to develop better writers, not better writing as we equip writers with the tools and self confidence they need to succeed independently in the future.” Their obvious nod to North’s “Idea of a Writing Center,” suggests that they align themselves with the tenets he forwards, including his assertion that centers do not serve any external curriculum. And indeed, the NUWC does not appear to associate itself with any institutionally imposed writing requirements.

Whereas, Western Carolina’s writing center clearly endorses a skills-driven curriculum, like Auburn University. Western Carolina also promotes collaboration
among tutors and tutees, but the focus of the tutorial is on “textual, organizational, and mechanical aspects of written expression.”

From Western Carolina University – small, public university

Mission: The University Writing Center serves Western Carolina University students, faculty, and staff with assistance in the textual, organizational, and mechanical aspects of written expression. This mission is accomplished with one-on-one writing conferences, self-guided instructional handouts, on-line resources, and drop-in inquiries about writing. In collaborative conferences, tutors discuss with writers the development of ideas, organization of content, sentence structure, clarity, style, documentation, grammar, and punctuation. Tutors encourage positive attitudes about writing and help writers view revision as an essential part of the writing process. Tutors are not editors and will not correct a paper without the writer’s involvement. However, tutors will assist writers in using proofreading skills and strive to make useful suggestions for improvement.

While the missions of each of the sampled writing centers differs in terms of the focus of the tutorial, each mission statement indicates a service objective, whether it be serving institutional needs or serving students. Unlike the field as a whole, the question for writing centers is not whether or not they should fulfill a service role. The
scholarship and the mission statements indicate that they always serve. The question and the conflict arises, however, when we consider whose needs are served in the long-term and to whose advantage. Within these questions and conflicts, we see the same kinds of divisions—service as subordination or civic duty—that appear in the field at large.

If we take a closer look at the mission statements, we do not immediately see the division. Service is not perceived as submission by the writing centers to a skills-driven pedagogy. But we would not expect to see any resistance to the skills-driven model in a mission statement. However, in writing center scholarship we see an abundance of critique regarding centers that offer a pedagogy that only takes into account the particulars of students’ texts. Andrea Lunsford calls such places, storehouse centers: “‘The Center as Storehouse’ operates as an information station or storehouse, prescribing and handing out skills and strategies to individual learners” (“Collaboration” 93). These centers, she admits, do a lot of good work, but there is a sense in her text, and in writing center literature as a whole, that store-house centers do not fulfill a writing center’s potential, that they maintain the writing centers subordinate position within the academy.

Writing center service as civic duty is probably best captured in North’s statement: “our job is to produce better writers not better writing” – a statement that has become a mantra for writing center workers. For North it meant a focus on the writing process. A writing center’s job as he perceived it twenty years ago was to help students become aware of the writing process and carry that knowledge with them to each of their writing tasks. But the near-writing center cliché has evolved and come to mean a focus on discourse and language, meaning making, mediating various environments through
language, learning to work collaboratively, negotiation, and a focus on diverse learning styles and diversity itself. Again, students take the things they have learned from their center experience and carry it with them, and apply it, though this time they take it beyond the classroom and even the university.

Few writing center scholars, if any, suggest that centers should completely abandon their service roles. When writing center theorists make the suggestion to abandon service, like Nancy Grimm does in several of her publications, she does not suggest that writing centers cease in their assistance to students. She says, in fact, that she has no problem with the writing center’s service designation if the service is for students. But she does have concerns when the center is perceived as serving faculty. She argues that service to faculty keeps writing centers from developing into viable sites of research. Centers are strictly perceived as support units because many of the early ones were “designed to lighten the burden of the faculty” in their efforts to remediate student writing (“Spirit of Service” 42). These early connections have led centers to seek faculty approval (42). She argues that writing center scholarship has focused much of its attention on “educating faculty about what writing centers do” (43), but if those who produce writing center scholarship are only focusing on its services then they have little time to devote to more significant research areas like the “diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds” of the students who use centers (43). In her view, such research would perform several functions. It would “result in a healthier, more dialogic relationship with faculty, one that continued to ask for clarification of their expectations in student writing, but also brought to their attention the issues that students face when negotiating academic
literacy” (43). This research would also allow centers to better serve students by gaining a more complete “understanding of how academic literacy works as social practice. Additionally, it would legitimate center work within the institution and within composition and rhetoric because centers would be seen as academic units rather than service units (“Rearticulating” 534). Center scholars, she claims, do not pursue such research because literacy is generally perceived as a “value neutral skill,” and scholarship that focuses on literacy is then irrelevant: “When an individual fails to master the supposedly value-neutral skill of academic literacy, then the individual is to blame (“Spirit” 45).

I take no issue with Grimm’s call to refocus writing center research. Her suggestions for future scholarship have the potential to reshape academic literacy instruction. I do, however, find fault with her reasoning regarding why writing center scholarship neglects students’ linguistic backgrounds. It is entirely possible that literacy’s value-neutral fascia dissuades some from pursuing this kind of research, but Grimm considers no other possible alternative. Writing centers challenge institutional hierarchies of all kinds. They challenge the reward system based upon grades, the concept of single-authorship, the idea that there is only one correct answer. Their resistance to perform research that is perceived as more scholarly is also a visible sign of their resistance to a system that places research above teaching – knowing above doing. Many of Grimm’s publications ask center workers to challenge hierarchies within the institution that do a disservice to students, particularly those which situate literacy as benign and static. But while asking us to challenge one hierarchy, the analysis seems to
uphold another – the hierarchy of academic work: research, teaching, service. In many ways, Grimm’s desire to alter writing center research is not unlike the abolitionists’ (e.g. Crowley and Morris) desire to transform composition research so that it moves attention away from practice/service.

In direct contrast to Grimm, other members of the writing center community position the writing centers’ service duties in line with civic service. In Molly Wingate’s *Writing Center Journal* article “Writing Centers as Sites of Academic Culture,” she argues that writing centers create safe spaces and diverse communities. They promote and enhance academic seriousness among other things such as teaching “the life skills of non-violent problem solving, collaboration, and working with and through difference” (13). Unlike Grimm, who sees the writing center’s service function as oppressive to students, Wingate believes that the writing center’s service is liberatory. She offers the example of a peer tutor, Eddie, who also used the center’s services to work on his opening convocation speech. In his speech he wanted to “challenge students to move outside their comfort area; he wanted each student to meet and get to know students different from his or her usual circle” (13). His speech was successful and was referred to as “something stronger and more special than those of previous years. Faculty members referred to his talk [. . .] as evidence that students are willing to present themselves as different from the mainstream and simultaneously as a fundamental part of college” (13). Wingate believes that students and tutors, like Eddie, who have been influenced by the writing center “grow up, finish graduate school, join professions, have neighbors, vote, participate in their local schools, get elected, volunteer, and protest”
(14). She offers a vision of the writing center in which former writing center tutors and tutees employ in their public lives what they have gleaned from their writing center experiences, and thus work towards changing the world. Wingate’s writing center is reminiscent of service learning in that the center becomes a form of education that eventually promotes future social and civic responsibility through collaborative learning informed by an attention to linguistic and cultural differences.

*The “S” Word: Service as Profane and Profound*

Which conception of service is most true? Service as subordination is true in that many universities and colleges across the United States privilege research over teaching via rewards such as additional funding, recognition, promotion, and tenure. But service as civic duty is also true for those of us who choose to become members of the field (as classroom teachers and writing center tutors and directors) in order to foster critical thinking, reading, and writing among students. Our hope is that throughout their lives, students carry with them and build upon what they have learned. Both positions make arguments about the value of work within composition and rhetoric. It is also entirely possible that both visions and versions of service are true, that they can happen at the same institution at the same time. The potential negative result of each is that the teaching of first-year composition and writing center work are further denigrated and that we carry out an agenda that ignores student diversity and homogenizes learners.
The service dilemma cannot be easily solved. Institutional hierarchies cannot be wished away, but we can mediate those hierarchies. We may be able to look to a place like the writing center for some direction. I do not mean to suggest that writing centers have discovered a viable solution. My previous claims about centers and service identities should make that clear. However, writing centers offer direction by way of their guiding focus on collaboration. At its best:

1. Collaboration aids in problem posing as well as problem solving.

2. Collaboration aids in learning abstractions.

3. Collaboration aids in transfer and assimilation; it fosters interdisciplinary thinking.

4. Collaboration leads not only to sharper, more critical thinking (students must explain, define, adapt), but to a deeper understanding of others. (Lunsford 94)

Writing centers strive to be collaborative and cooperative enterprises. But centers tend not to bring the values or conceptions of collaboration outside of their centers. I see collaboration as a joint intellectual effort towards an end. It’s a dialectic or an exchange between discourses, ideas, and identities that are sometimes aligned and at other times in opposition.

Earlier I critique Crowley, Morris, and Dobrin for ignoring that composition and rhetoric has multiple and varied constituencies, and those constituencies invariably influence the field’s identity. Service is an identity that is laid upon composition from without (the institution, local, state, and national government, the public at-large). There
is a social expectation that students in our courses and at our writing centers are learning general writing and critical thinking skills that they will be able to apply in multiple situations. But service is also embraced from within. Many of us believe, like Molly Wingate, in composition’s civic mission. The forces push and pull against one another, each vying for primacy.

Because collaboration can lead to deeper understanding of others, it has the power to bridge divides. That includes the division between the two conceptions of service. In this chapter I have tried to place the competing definitions in a dialogue. Ultimately, collaboration is a dialogue in which each participant makes a contribution and, what comes out of the dialogue is something new. However, if we remain conscious of Philip Eubanks words, which I quote at the beginning of this chapter—“We cannot gain important insight into a single metaphor without also considering the metaphors that support it and to which it responds”—we must recognize that collaboration is no more a fixed concept than service. It too has multiple and competing definitions. Collaboration is rarely an easy process. Dialogues can be power struggles, and collaboration can result in coercion. As writing center workers, we strive for a harmonious collaboration where participants are equals in the dialogue. But we have also seen and experienced collaboration as coercion. In the case of a tutorial, the student yields to the expert-tutor and alters their text based solely on tutor feedback instead of their sense of the assignment or purpose for writing.

In the case of service, the principles of collaboration help us dismantle binaries. We are able to see who uses which definition and for what purpose and understand that
the ends of both service camps are the same: to strengthen the discipline in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. Through the principles of collaboration, composition may eventually embrace a service identity. But, at the same time that collaboration can help us come to a deeper understanding and bridge divides, it can also intimidate others into conformity. Service is an uneasy term in the discipline and within the institution because it calls attention to the labor functions of the university. It detracts from its “pure research” fascia. Few are willing to identify as service workers because service is the least significant criteria for evaluation in the hierarchy of university work.

Collaboration as coercion has worked to the writing center’s disadvantage as the center has sought after disciplinary status. There are many ways that writing centers have tried to align their practices with disciplinary and institutional conventions. In the first chapter, I focused on how writing center scholarship has conformed to field-wide expectations and on how they have resisted those expectations. In the last body chapter of this dissertation, I focus on three other instances: generating a writing center history, creating writing center coursework for graduate students, and advocating for the writing center director’s faculty status. These three moves are designed to bolster the writing center’s academic standing. I label the moves as collaborative/coercive because they illustrate centers as succumbing to the research, teaching, and service hierarchy. They yield to the system instead of challenging it. Ultimately, the goal of the final body chapter is to prepare my readers for the conclusion in which I revisit key terms and concepts from this dissertation: “center as misfit,” “service,” and “collaboration,” in order
to re-envision the writing center and reflect upon what it is and what it could be to academia as a whole.
In 1990 Ernest Boyer produced *Scholarship Reconsidered*, a Carnegie Foundation report credited with encouraging national, institutional reform. In the report, Boyer critiques the current system of faculty evaluation for prizing research or scholarship above all other faculty work. He argues that the current reward system does not account “for the full range of academic functions” (1). The alternate system that he proposes broadens the definition of scholarship. For Boyer, scholarship does not just mean “engaging in original research. But the work of the scholar also means stepping back from one’s own investigation, looking for connectors, building bridges between theory and practice, and communicating one’s knowledge effectively to students” (16).

In 1996, The Modern Languages Association answered Boyer’s call to revise institutional conceptions of scholarship. The MLA Commission on Professional Service’s report, “Making Faculty Work Visible: Reinterpreting Professional Service, Teaching, and Research in the fields of Language and Literature” formulated a new model for faculty reward. Instead of categorizing labor in terms of the traditional triad—research, teaching, and service, privileging research over other work—the new model assesses faculty work according to its “quality, significance, and impact” rather than “the category to which it belongs” (2). The commission recommends giving equal weight to all work that forwards a discipline as well as work that sustains and improves the infrastructure of the academy. This new model, then, divides faculty work into two
categories: intellectual work and academic and professional citizenship. Among the kinds of work slated within the intellectual category are: the production of original research, grant writing as related to scholarship, administering a writing center, co-teaching, mentoring, and offering faculty workshops. Work that falls under the category of academic and professional citizenship could involve serving on local, regional, or national boards, designing or participating in a community literacy project, fundraising, or organizing academic conferences.

Of particular interest to this dissertation is the MLA Commission’s designation of writing center administration as “intellectual work” (12). In the previous chapter, I map out writing center work as service work, and I indicate that the discipline defines service work in two ways: service as subordination (or in subordination to larger institutional forces) and service as civic duty. Service in this chapter is discussed in relation to teaching. Writing center work, whether it be administering or tutoring, has been characterized as both, though those who work at centers will more likely characterize their work as civic rather than subordinate. I also mention at the beginning of that chapter that colleges and universities define service as the work preformed by faculty and academic professionals that benefits the institution, the department, other professional organizations, or the community at large. Prior to Boyer’s Carnegie Foundation and the MLA report, writing center work, particularly center administration, fell under the category of academic service. It benefited the university community but was not situated by the institution as a site of teaching or scholarship. The reclassification of writing center work as “intellectual work”—as work that advances knowledge and learning
within the academy—supports the idea that writing centers are scholarly sites worthy of disciplinary consideration.

Writing center professionals see their own work as intellectual work, and in order to prove to others that their praxis-oriented activities hold disciplinary and institutional currency, they have made several moves that both fall within and outside of the traditional research, teaching, and service paradigm, including a call for writing centers to broaden their research and conform to more traditional forms of research and calls to reposition our understanding of service work—areas that I cover in the first and second chapter of this dissertation. In the previous body chapters, I discuss at length the ways in which writing centers have resisted institutional structures. Here I focus on where writing centers have tried to adapt their practices and collaborate with the academic hierarchy. I illustrate other moves that writing center professionals have made in order to gain a larger institutional and disciplinary presence, including the generation of a coherent writing center history, graduate training in writing center administration, and the call for tenure-track writing center administrative positions. However, I argue that the above actions have not resulted in increased status on a large scale. In other words, they have not positioned writing centers on the institutional level as sites of intellectual work. We can attribute some of the writing center’s lack of success in securing its institutional and disciplinary status to its historical ties to remediation—which I briefly cover in the introduction. But other more subtle factors affect writing center status.

I have spent much of this dissertation explaining that writing centers are unconventional bodies. They are not departments or classrooms. They do not impart a
standard curriculum. They produce a large body of practitioner scholarship, scholarship that is highly undervalued. They do not align themselves with one particular theory or another. They are sites of service, a problematic identity within a system that prizes research over other kinds of work. I believe that the more recent moves that writing centers have made—those I outline above—will bring writing centers no closer to their manifestation as sites of intellectual work because they argue for validity in a system that is not set up to value them. This chapter lays the groundwork for the conclusion to this project which offers yet another alternative for gaining disciplinary and institutional currency. This model draws on key concepts from this dissertation like service, collaboration, and revision. The difference, however, between the model I propose in the conclusion and the moves towards professionalization that I discuss in this chapter is that my model not only takes into account the writing center’s misfit within the academy; it also addresses the changing face of the academy.

Which Roads Lead to Professional Status?

A group of workers turns itself into a profession by grounding its practice in a body of knowledge, developing and guarding that knowledge within a universally recognized institution such as a university; limiting access to its lore and skills by requiring aspirants to pass through graduate or professional programs; and controlling certification of those aspirants for practice either by widespread agreement among employers (for example, to hire only those philosophers or biologists who have earned
doctoral degrees) or with the backing and enforcement of the State (as in medicine, law, public school teaching, and so on). When a group fully achieves these goals, it turns its resources into artificially scarce commodities, creates a monopoly over their sale, and controls the conditions of its own work with little or no regulation by outside agencies [. . .]. Of course no group of workers could make such a safe and comfortable haven for itself in a market society without persuading consumers and authorities that the service it renders is a needed one, that only certified practitioners can meet the need, that they understand it better than their clients, and that they will supply it in an objective and disinterested way—that is, in the interests of the client and by extension of the whole society, but to no special advantage of the practitioners, other than his or her fee. 227

In the above passage from “Professionalizing Politics,” Richard Ohman describes the process of professionalization. He argues that modern professionalization came about as a result of “industrial capitalism, with its increasingly specialized division of labor” (228). Market demands led skilled workers such as engineers and doctors to specialize, “elaborate their practice, demonstrate an absolute need for their expertise, build a wall of cognitive exclusivity around it, and turn that into a monopoly” (228). Other fields, including the academic ones, recognized the social and capital rewards of professionalization and followed suit. Composition and rhetoric, Ohman explains, came on to the academic scene later in the history of higher education and are therefore less cohesive as a field. But the process of professionalization still applies. In what follows,
I draw from Ohman’s description and use it to frame my discussion of writing center professional development, its outcome, and trajectory.

Writing a History

A group of workers turns itself into a professional body by grounding its practice in a body of knowledge, [and] developing and guarding that knowledge . . .

The first concrete manifestation of the writing centers as a professional body came in the form of The Writing Lab Newsletter. While its founder, Muriel Harris, may have initially designed the publication so that writing center workers across the country could establish contact with each other, the newsletter began to sow the seeds of the writing center as a profession. Academic publications such as journals are one such place where academic professions establish and continue to develop that knowledge. I focus on the issue of journals as sites of professionalization in chapter 2. However, equally and arguably more important texts than the journals themselves are the histories that emerging professions construct. These origin stories anchor and solidify a community. Social memory theory can help us put in context the histories that writing centers have constructed. Social memory arises “from interactions among individuals as members of groups” (Climo and Cattell 4). These groups “construct their own images of the world
through agreed upon versions of the past” (4). The memories themselves “create interpretive frameworks that help make experience comprehensible” (4).

Writing center scholars, like scholars in other disciplines, generate social memory through research that records and interprets the past. Writing center histories began to appear in writing center publications with consistency in the mid-nineties. At that point, writing centers were actively growing on college, university, and even high school campuses, a national writing center association with several regional affiliates was in place, and *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal*, had been in existence for nearly twenty years. The state of writing center affairs during the mid-nineties led many to declare that writing centers had “come of age.” Their significant and increasing presence prompted scholars like Peter Carino and Beth Boquet to generate histories that traced writing center growth and development.

In chapter one of this dissertation, I briefly explain that both Carino and Boquet reconstruct writing center histories in order to debunk myths that present writing centers prior to open admissions as “remedial fix-it shops” (Carino 10). However, their scholarship not only calls into question the assumptions the writing center community has made about early writing center practice, it also contributes to the larger task of carving out a professional space for writing centers. In his article, “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History” Carino examines articles from both the *English Journal* and *College English* dating from the early nineteen hundreds to the 1950s. These texts, and particularly the later ones, position writing centers as sensitive to individual student need and accessible to a range of students (not just those labeled remedial). He concludes that
past centers “confronted many of the same issues centers do today” (19) and did not see
themselves as dungeons where “students were banished to do grammar drills” (20). He
believes that previous writing center scholarship has not offered up his version of early
writing center history because other models (those in which centers evolved from skills
and drills methods) presents “a vision of progress” (11). In essence writing centers could
say each other and others, Look how far we have come. Our growth merits recognition.

Beth Boquet offers brief histories of the writing center emergence in Noise from
the Writing Center (which I also reference in chapter 2) and her CCC article, “Our Little
Secret: A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions.” In “Our Little
Secret,” she pieces together a version of the writing center’s beginnings, but her purpose
in this article is to expose the tension between two competing writing center identities:
those identities that are based on site and those which are based on method. In other
words, she explores the question of whether the writing center is a method of instruction
or is it a tangible site within the institution. After viewing the historical record, she
concludes that writing centers should neither be thought of in terms of “spatial
boundaries” or “replicable methods” because they exceed both site and method. Her
conclusions are similar to an earlier argument I make with regards to writing centers as
unconventional sites within the institution. In making this claim, however, Boquet’s
desire is to galvanize writing center scholarship. She is disappointed with the practically
oriented, how-to scholarship that dominates writing center publications. She calls for
others to author writing center histories that recognize the center as between site and
method, such as the center’s connection to WAC or the use of peer tutors in the
classroom (57). She believes that writing centers are not meeting their potential as sites of “sustained intellectual inquiry” (55), but histories that explore the in-between state of writing centers and the complexities that go along with such liminality would meet that potential.

Carino’s and Boquet’s work is representative of scholarship that both constructs and connects members of the writing center community. The memories or histories they record work to define the group’s identity. The two writers reconstruct the writing centers’ past, and in that reconstruction, we—as writing center workers—learn from where our values come. According to Stephen North, history is about “recovery and preservation.” It tells us “who and what has come before” us (The Making of Knowledge 66). History grounds a group; it offers stability, especially when historians point to tangible records. I do not mean to imply that histories are absolutes. History is interpretation. As North observes, a scholar approaches archival materials “with some predisposition—explicit or implicit—about which sorts of features to look to and, too, about the kinds of patterns he expects to find; and that predisposition will inevitably affect not only what kinds of features he emphasizes, but what kinds of patterns he will ‘discover’ among them” (76). The historian’s terministic screen shapes her or his interpretation of data. Carino and Boquet examine the same kinds of records: journal articles that address the form, function, and practice of a writing center. In some cases they examine the same articles, but they draw different (though not contradictory) conclusions from those materials. While historical record can be multiply interpreted and reinterpreted, we nonetheless look to history for coherence and for guidance. Carino and
Boquet offer us a version of the past but also a vision for the future. Carino suggests that we can learn from—instead of discount—early writing centers. Boquet argues that history has opened up a “space for new possibilities” in research, possibilities that will fulfill the writing center’s role as a site of intellectual work.

Histories or memories not only define and solidify a group, they also construct a vision of that group to others. Carino and Boquet (Noise from the Writing Center) challenge the idea that early writing centers were purely sites of remediation and error correction and in so doing, invite both members within and outside of the writing center community to challenge their assumptions about writing center work. The desired result is to produce a change of mind. The story of the writing center as grammar-fix-it-shop has been particularly damning to writing centers in their search for professional status. Carino attributes the process movement to the writing center’s alignment with error correction. As compositionists began to situate writing as a unique mode of learning, and the classroom became the space where writing instruction was increasingly specialized, many writing teachers saw the writing center “as a place to handle grammar” while they taught process (20). Real teaching happened in the classroom, and the writing center existed to cover the incidentals. In making this claim, Carino does not suggest that students who the institution labeled as academically deficient were only relegated to the writing center until after the process movement. But as composition pedagogy began to change from current traditional to process, the idea that clear and correct writing was good writing remained, and it was the writing center’s job to help students produce that clear and correct prose. As I discuss in chapter 2, the writing center’s relationship to
composition and other disciplines leads many to believe that centers are supplemental to instruction. They are support units without theory or methodology whose only job is to fix our broken students and make them ready for their coursework.

Histories like Carino’s and Boquet’s are designed to revise perceptions like those I present above. They present writing center work as specialized and even imperative to the success of the institution. Granted, Carino’s article originally appeared in *The Writing Center Journal*, so his immediate audience is the writing center practitioner/theorist. Boquet’s “Our Little Secret,” was first published in CCC, and holds the distinction of being one of the few pieces of writing center scholarship that has appeared in the journal. Because CCC has a wider readership than WCJ, her article has the potential to change more minds. Other such scholarship that is designed to produce the same effect is the University of Louisville’s, *Writing Center Research Project*. Since early 2000, the University of Louisville has been collecting “a research repository of historical, empirical, and scholarly materials related to Writing Center Studies.” This includes (but is not limited to) handbooks, reports, proposals, and annual reports written prior to 1985, oral interviews of writing center professionals who have made a significant contribution to writing center studies, and digital archives of WCJ. They are also interested in collecting electronic copies of writing center dissertations. Those of us who are interested and invested in writing center work have access to histories and have been given the materials to construct new histories which challenge preconceived notions. We can disseminate the histories to others beyond the writing center practitioner/theorist and the compositionist, thereby producing a change of mind on a larger scale. At least, all of
this seems theoretically possible, but the change of mind is slow in coming. Writing centers continue to grapple with the cumulative and persistent affects of the stories that position them as supplemental, subordinate, and remedial. It has become a near cliché in writing center scholarship to include a statement bemoaning the writing center’s low status. Directors declare that the faculty does not understand the kind of work that goes on in a writing center nor do institutions understand the writing center’s potential to infuse general writing curriculum. William J. Macauley, Jr. and Nicholas Mauriello currently have a book project underway, a collection of essays titled, *Marginal Words, Marginal Work? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers*. This collection is devoted to positioning writing center work as instrumental to the academy. It is yet another attempt to produce a change of mind, but will it work?

In the previous chapter, I use Margaret Marshall to illustrate that we inherit our ideas and our practices from “a time now dead” (2). In many ways, writing centers do not have control over the inherited perceptions of writing centers and writing center work even if we compose histories, create archives, or publish collections that are designed to educate the academy about our work. Given this reality, we should not abandon the above practices, but we should at least acknowledge the degree to which others have fixed our identities and the degree to which we have become complicit in those identities. My biggest criticism of current writing center scholarship is its single-vision. While much of it seeks to redefine conceptions of writing center work, it does so without placing centers in a larger context. It complains about institutional and disciplinary status or the lack thereof but doesn’t directly respond to institutional or disciplinary systems of
belief that suggest writing centers are unscholarly sites. In essence, it expects the system to change without really examining the system, a system of which they are a part.

**Graduate Training and the Tenure Track**

A group of workers turns itself into a profession by [. . .] limiting access to its lore and skills by requiring aspirants to pass through graduate or professional programs; and controlling certification of those aspirants for practice either by widespread agreement among employers (for example, to hire only those philosophers or biologists who have earned doctoral degrees) or with the backing and enforcement of the State (as in medicine, law, public school teaching, and so on).

Professional training and certification are fairly recent developments in writing center history. Training is part of a larger movement in Composition and Rhetoric to prepare graduate students for future writing program administrative work. Job trends suggest that most graduates will spend some or even all of their academic careers in administrative positions. In 1998, 33% of all composition and rhetoric positions (the highest percentage listed among the specializations in the field) were within Writing Program Administration, Writing Across or Within the Disciplines, and Writing Center Directing (Stygall 386). Two years later, the growth continues. Theresa Enos reports that the October 2000 *JIL* listed 62 administrative positions, or roughly 34% percent of
the total jobs in Composition and Rhetoric, and there were between 30 and 40 additional administrative positions or positions which required administrative experience posted on the WPA Listserv (63). However, we can also attribute the increased focus on administrative training to graduate students’ growing interest in writing program administration/ writing center directing. When I entered graduate school in 1998, I was the only incoming student (of nine) who had any previous writing center experience. Of the seven incoming students of the 2004 class, five of them have previous writing center experience and two have expressed interest in directing writing centers. According to the director of my program, this year nearly all of the applicants indicated that they had some writing center experience. My sense is that the same trend is happening in composition and rhetoric programs across the country.

Graduate student training in writing center directing generally takes on two forms: administrative internships and coursework in administration. According to Brown, Jackson, and Enos’ 1999 survey of Composition and Rhetoric doctoral programs, of the 65 programs, roughly 19 offered writing center administrative internships. Graduate students in these positions manage staff, maintain records on writing center operations, coordinate outreach efforts to other departments and liaisons with writing programs, participate in writing across the curriculum initiatives, tutor, train tutors, promote and advertise the center. These internships can greatly benefit graduate students in that they give students hands-on experience in an area of interest and they allow students to explore different specializations in the field, and they help with the student’s marketability. However, students in these intern positions are not usually given
opportunities to reflect on their practices as assistant directors; they do not have opportunities to theorize the work they are doing because the day-to-day tasks of running a center take up the bulk of their time. The positions themselves perpetuate the idea that a directing position is strictly managerial or service work and not intellectual work. As Daphne Desser and Darrin Payne warn in their article, “Writing Program Administration Internships” unless the positions enable graduate students to apply theory to practice and critically reflect on their roles “through dialogues, writing assignments, and other structured means” (92), administrative internships like the co-direction of a writing center have the potential to become drudge work. They also become sites of exploitation. Because the faculty may not have time and the institution may not have the funds to devote to the administration of a writing center, the position may be parceled out to graduate students: an ever-growing source of cheap labor.

Coursework in writing center administration offers more promise in the positioning of writing center work as intellectual work. To date, about a dozen programs offer courses in writing program administration (Enos 62). They focus on larger program administration, but often students have the option of concentrating their course projects on related aspects like writing center administration (White, Rose, Warnock). Approximately five programs offer specific courses in writing center administration. Rebecca Jackson, Carrie Leverenz, and Joe Law’s “(Re)Shaping the Profession: Graduate Courses in Writing Center Theory and Practice” outlines the curriculum of three of these courses: Wright State’s, Florida State’s, and New Mexico State’s. The seminars focus on the practical aspects of administration (managing budgets and keeping records) and the
politics of directing a center. The courses are designed to “encourage students to think and act like writing center professionals” (141). Linda Bergmann also offers a writing center administration course at Purdue. In her class, students complete five projects. Among the list, they can choose to observe tutoring sessions, write conference proposals and book reviews, compile annotated bibliographies, and participate in committee work for the school’s on-line writing lab (Bergmann). Students who participate in the course are encouraged to try a variety of projects, from the practical to the theoretical. In this sense, Bergmann’s course and others like it, offer the ideal: they validate writing center work as a site of serious scholarly inquiry; they allow students to participate in writing center work without the possibility of exploitation, and they encourage students to reflect on writing centers and their role in their individual institutions, composition and rhetoric, and the academy. Graduate students gain both practical and critical knowledge that they can eventually apply to future writing program work.

In a typical composition and rhetoric graduate program’s course offerings, we can expect to see Histories of Rhetoric, Composition Theory and Practice, Rhetorical Theory and, Research Methods, but not courses in administration. Unfortunately neither writing program nor writing center administration classes are part of most schools’ core curriculum. I find this odd given market demands and graduate student interest. However, I believe the lack of course offerings only supports the arguments that I have been building throughout this dissertation: the field and the academy find it difficult to accept administrative work as intellectual work. Graduate students are largely trained to become faculty, to become scholars, and not administrators or service workers. During
our graduate careers we learn that the institution hierarchically arranges the kinds of work we do. When faculty are asked by their colleagues what they are “working on,” they mention their research and up-coming publications and not their committee work or their administrative duties. Their service activities do not hold intellectual currency. The underlying assumption is that academicians advance the discipline. Administrators manage or direct the affairs of the institution but, their task is not to make knowledge.

We see the problem of administrative scholarship played out in the push for tenure-line writing center administrators. According to the International Writing Center’s Association (IWCA) official document, “What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers: Position Statement on Professional Concerns,” “The directorship of a writing center is a professional position, one that requires specialized preparation and administrative experience” (2). Jeanne Simpson, the author of the document believes that if writing center administration is perceived as a professional position, then directors will wield more power within the university: “the more professional we are, the more we can ask for; the more we ask for, the more likely it is that we will be recognized as professionals” (2). Her syllogistic reasoning makes sense. If writing center directors are ranked as faculty, though their job inevitably includes administration, they will have the same rights and wield the same power as other faculty members. She argues elsewhere that faculty writing center directors lend credibility to a center. They are more likely to be seen and/or accepted as campus leaders than their non-faculty counterparts (“War, Peace, and Writing Program Administration” 163). Many support Simpson’s line of argument. They see statistics like those in Writing Center Research Project or Valerie Balester’s and
James C. McDonald’s, “A View of the Status of Working Conditions: Relations Between Writing Program and Writing Center Directors,” which show that over 50% and even as high as 82% of all writing center directors are in non-tenure track positions. They see the job advertisements posted on the IWCA website: fifteen writing center jobs in total as of April 2005, positions ranging from instructor to director of a writing or learning center. Seven of those positions require PhD’s in Composition and Rhetoric (or a related field), but are non-faculty and/or non-tenure track. They see and experience first-hand the effects a low status reputation can have on a writing center, and they conclude, like Simpson, that writing centers maintain their unscholarly reputation because writing center administrators are not recognized as professionals.

In establishing tenure/faculty director positions, writing centers are “doing things the right way” or as Nancy Grimm says, “how the rich people does it” (16), aligning behaviors and practices with members of the academy who have power and authority. At the end of the last chapter, I discuss the negative aspects of collaboration, or collaboration as coercion. The instances of conformity or “doing things the right way” are a glaring example of collaboration as coercion. Nancy Grimm compares the call for professionalization to the plight of Irish immigrants who imitated the habits of the rich in order to garner some social standing. Doing things the right way however, does not change a director’s material circumstances. Grimm offers her experience as a representative anecdote. From 1978 to 1995 Nancy Grimm had worked in an English department. In 1995, she had completed her dissertation and successfully competed for a tenure-line position directing the department’s writing center. But she tells us:
with my new credentials, I earned a salary less than what I had made the previous three years and through the routine protocols of the university, I was regularly reminded that I had been admitted to that prolonged period of apprenticeship as an untenured assistant professor. Well-intentioned people who wanted to acknowledge my changed status in the department greeted me with, “Welcome to the department!” Being “welcomed” into a department in which I had already worked ten years in a full-time staff position and seven years in part-time positions. (19)

Tenure-line writing center directors face the same problems as their non-tenure/non-faculty line counterparts. While hiring a director on the tenure-track may suggest, that the institution is thinking about the writing center in the long-term—tenure is a twenty-plus year investment—by as Melissa Nicolas suggests, it does not mean that the institution or the English department regard “writing center work as important, serious, or real” (11). Tenure-line directors have amassed a mountain of anecdotal evidence that suggests tenure is not the cure-all for writing center status. Nicolas explains part of the problem. Tenure line directors find themselves in a double-bind: “In order to garner institutional respect, power, and authority, the writing center director (usually) needs a tenure track position. But when w/c directors do engage in the kind of intellectual work valued by the academy, they usually focus on the writing center, and scholarship on writing centers is itself marginalized”—a claim that I make at length in chapter one of this dissertation (12).
The problem though does not simply stem from writing center scholarship but administrative scholarship as well. Directors face barriers when trying to present their administrative work as scholarship. Margaret Marshall argues that department colleagues and central administration have difficulty understanding the “intellectual dimensions” of the director’s work. Directors compose annual reports that describe “major projects undertaken, the statistics of usage, and the plans for the following year. . . [They] compose or revise mission statements, put oral traditions into the written form of policy manuals, or create tutoring handbooks for new staff members” (77). The list is only a small portion of what directors actually do, but such work is “frequently overlooked when the time comes to evaluate” the director for continuing status, tenure, or promotion (77). Much of the scholarship that directors produce is local, that is, it is rooted in a particular time or setting and speaks to the community’s needs, but does not directly advance the discipline.

Writing center directors are members of the professional/managerial group within the academy. They are members of the academic workforce who:

do not fit squarely into the category of faculty or administrator but constitute an occupational type that bridges conventional categories. They may share many characteristics of traditional liberal professions—a technical body of knowledge, advanced education (and in some cases certification), professional associations and journals, and codes of ethics. Yet they also mark a break with the liberal profession of faculty, being more closely linked and subordinate to managers and indeed being very
much managers themselves. (Rhodes and Slaughter qtd in Strickland 51)

This membership binds the director to “a contradictory class status” (Bousquet 14). Mark Bousquet explains that the professional/managerial group “work to live”; however, their higher wages and status economy of their positions “tends to foster an identification with the class that enjoys real wealth” (14). Bousquet points to adjunct laborers in order to illustrate his argument. He cites Jill Carroll’s “How to Be One of the Gang When You’re Not,” a submission to an advice column for adjuncts in The Chronicle of Higher Education. The article advocates for adjuncts to “overcome the social ‘prejudice’ of research faculty by ‘acting like’ someone with a professorial job. This acting includes: showing up at guest lectures, eating at the faculty club, organizing conferences, volunteering for committee work, doing scholarship, writing items for faculty newsletters, and attending department and campus meetings” (17). Bousquet argues that Carroll’s discourse and others like it urge “professionalization [. . .] in the absence of concomitant reward” (18). The same can be said for writing center directors whose absent reward is the recognition of the value of their work. For example, I am about to become a member of the academic professional class as writing center coordinator at West Virginia University. My new position is somewhere between faculty and administration, and while there is no expectation to produce scholarship, I was told that my scholarly pursuits are welcomed and even encouraged. However, I am not given additional release time to research. My new faculty colleagues will be given preference on departmental conference travel money, and I will not receive the kinds of rewards for
research as my faculty colleagues. While I may produce scholarship like faculty, I am not faculty. Grimm, Nicolas, Marshall, and Bousquet all show us, class loyalty—allegiance to academic systems—do not change class status or the material circumstances of the academic laborer.

Conclusion

Professionalization is a rhetorical situation; a group sees a need to change reality or create a new reality (in the form of professional organization), and then effect that change through discourse/action. Jackson, Leverenz, and Law offer an outline of that process and apply it to writing centers:

(1) practitioners recognize that what they do differs fundamentally from the work done by the larger group with which they are associated; (2) practitioners form alliances that eventually are formalized, often in the form of local, regional, or national organizations; (3) practitioners develop a body of scholarship, often developing conferences, establishing new journals, or creating other means of disseminating that scholarship; (4) as this new field of study becomes sufficiently visible, it is gradually acknowledged (or at least tolerated) as a legitimate field of inquiry; and (5) it eventually takes its place with other disciplines taught in the academy. (131)
Jackson, Leverenz, and Law acknowledge that definition is rudimentary, but in its simplicity, it is lacking a fundamental precept. Their definition suggests that professionalization is a fairly independent movement. However, professionalization is a social process. This means that members both within an outside of the immediate group must acknowledge that group as specialized. As Ohman notes:

“no group of workers could make such a safe and comfortable haven for itself in a market society without persuading consumers and authorities that the service it renders is a needed one, that only certified practitioners can meet the need, that they understand it better than their clients, and that they will supply it in an objective and disinterested way—that is, in the interests of the client and by extension of the whole society, but to no special advantage of the practitioners, other than his or her fee.” (227)

Writing centers have been fairly successful at filling a need or asserting that their service is a needed one, but the have been significantly less successful in asserting that the service they offer is specialized enough to become a welcomed member of English Studies, even with the Writing Program Administrator’s (WPA) Position Statement, “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration.”

The WPA position statement uses both the Boyer Report and the MLA Report (texts that I briefly discussed at the beginning of this chapter). The position statement, applies the concepts of the two reports specifically to various writing program administrative positions like directing first-year composition or directing a writing center. The statement suggests that writing administration is intellectual work if “it meets two
tests. First it needs to advance knowledge—its production, clarification, connection, reinterpretation, or application. Second, it results in products or activities that can be evaluated by others.” In short, “writing administration must be viewed as a form of inquiry which advances knowledge and which has formalized outcomes that are subject to peer review and disciplinary evaluation” in order to be considered intellectual work.

Of course, there are larger issues underlying the position statement. What happens for instance when your colleagues do not understand and are even suspicious of writing administrative work? I outline this issue earlier.

All three documents make noble attempts to reposition service as intellectual work, but in so doing, they have repressed the service paradigm altogether. Donna Strickland explains the reasoning behind this repression in “The Managerial Unconsciousness in Composition Studies.” She argues that “If a significant part of one’s duties involves service, and yet service is the least valued of the three criteria for evaluation, it would make little sense to actively align oneself with the term” (49). I believe the abandonment of the concept of service in WPA work is yet another example of class alignment, collaboration by coercion, or doing things the way the rich people does it. What I have tried to show in this chapter is that as writing administrators, instead of making attempts to change the system, we have looked for ways to adapt the work we do to the system.

I’d like to return to Marshall and her ideas on inheritance. We have inherited systems, beliefs, and practices “from a time now dead” (2). We are fundamentally influenced by history “even if we do not support the prejudices of a prior era.” (2).
Marshall makes this argument in relation to literacy and professionalism in college writing instruction, but her words have universal appeal. She believes that we must become self-conscious of our inheritance. If we do not, we will continue to repeat, unwittingly, the patterns of discourse that have generated the very conditions we wish to alter or refute” (2). My goal in this dissertation has been, as I say in the introduction, to get my readers to reconsider the writing center. The most obvious members of my audience to whom I direct these words are the compositionists outside of writing centers. However, I want my words to impact those who work within writing centers. My goal is, like Marshall, to push my writing center readers to become self-conscious of their inheritance so that as a community we do not mimic behaviors that or perpetuate beliefs and practices that do not help us grow. In the conclusion that follows, I suggest that writing centers have the power to contribute to real disciplinary and institutional change if they are willing to revise or re-envision themselves.
CONCLUSION: CUTTING OUT AND FITTING IN: REVISION AND THE WRITING CENTER

At the start of this dissertation, I claim that this dissertation is about the meaning and value of work in composition and rhetoric and the institution, and my task is to get my readers to reconsider and re-envision writing centers. The acts of reconsidering and re-envisioning are acts of revision. I see this dissertation as a revision of writing centers. My idea of revision, however, has little in common with the kind that we teach in our composition classrooms: one that requires students eliminate that which does not fit in their writing in favor of clarity, concision, and cohesion. Instead I offer a revision that speaks to Nancy Welch’s conception of the term. Revision begins with a sense of dissonance of something that hasn’t or won’t adapt—[It] is an insight we can extend by claiming that this dissonance isn’t really a problem to be corrected, an unruly sentence to be excised. Instead, this dissonance may be the start of a productive struggle that can lead to a change of direction, a change of thesis, a real re- visioning of a text, its meaning and intentions. (30)

Welch’s purpose in Getting Restless: Rethinking Revision in Writing Instruction is to reconceive the way we teach revision at our writing centers and in our writing classrooms. She argues that instead of requiring our students to rein in their texts and manage the unruly voices that impede “completeness, unity, and consistency” (26), we encourage them to listen to, explore, and cultivate those voices. When students nurture
the dissonance in their texts, she argues, they necessarily “come up against the limits of their discourse and glimpse possibilities for venturing elsewhere, for introducing something else” (30). When we feel restless when we read or write “it may be because the text is telling a new tale” we need to examine “or because this text is glossing over a place of genuine complexity” (6). Sensations of dissonance and disturbance are ultimately “the start of discovery and learning” (6).

Welch’s reconsideration of revision, while specific to writing instruction, has important implications for the writing center, composition and rhetoric, and the academy. She makes a provocative claim. Early in her undergraduate career she saw how traditional conceptions of revision – “cutting out and fitting in” – shaped her “understanding of how identity and authority within a discipline are produced” (19). She does not explore her claim in depth, but I believe that it speaks to the arguments that I have made in this dissertation. Disciplines shape and constrain discourse and practice. They are, as Jim Coder defines them, “tribal.” They provide us with “a way of seeing, knowing, and taking experience” (305). As scholars, we give our allegiance to a discipline. We cut out that which doesn’t fit – other ways of knowing and doing – in order to fit in with the prevailing order.

What does this mean for writing centers as members of composition and rhetoric, English studies, and the institution? How does that cutting out and fitting in manifest? It reveals itself in Stephen North and Lil Brannon’s words when they defined the boundaries of publishable scholarship for their newly minted Writing Center Journal. They wanted scholarship that aligned itself with current composition theory/research at
that time, scholarship that was attentive to the student writer and her/his process. They wanted case studies similar to those which were published in *CCC* and *College English*. They did not want anecdotal submissions—the bulk of what early writing center scholars sent to them—because, they claimed, such texts lacked general appeal (chapter one).

*Cutting out and fitting in* is also apparent in Sharon Crowley’s edict to abandon first-year composition because it places composition and rhetoric in a service or subordinate position, thereby preventing it from achieving respectable status within the institution. Nancy Grimm echoes Crowley when she argues that writing centers should refocus their research because, among other things, such repositioning would lend writing centers academic credence; they would then be seen as academic units rather than mere service units (chapter two). And finally, *cutting out and fitting in* is glaringly apparent in the writing center community’s multiple and varied moves to gain professional standing—generating a coherent history, offering administrative internships and graduate coursework, forwarding that the directorship of a writing center should be a tenure track position, and arguing for the validity of administrative scholarship—in their continued attempts to garner institutional status (chapter three).

Writing centers have continually shaped and reshaped their practices in order to *fit in* with disciplinary and institutional structures that dictate the value of work. They have done everything “right.” They have developed an ever growing body of scholarship in the form of journals, books, and the Writing Center Research Project. They have created an international association with regional affiliates. They have established an international conference. Writing centers are increasing on college, university, and even
high school campuses. From the outside, it appears as though they are enjoying and reaping the benefits of disciplinarity: stability, respect, and even prestige. And yet, if you listen to writing center workers—if you read their scholarship, if you attend their conference presentations, if you read their posts on WCenter, if you talk to them on your campuses—you will find that by-in-large, writing centers are not stable, not respected, and hardly prestigious. In essence, I am arguing, and have been arguing throughout this dissertation that cutting out and fitting in has not worked.

*Re-visioning the Writing Center*

What if we began with Welch’s sense of dissonance—the idea, the practice that hasn’t or won’t adapt? While writing centers have been cutting out to fit in, they have also resisted conformity. They have not or will not adapt to traditional, institutional structures in their scholarship. A large portion continues to be anecdotal. This is a sign that writing centers accept “reflection on practice” as a legitimate form of theorizing. In essence, they will not separate “knowing from doing.” Writing centers also resist subscribing to a unifying theory such even though such theories lend to disciplinary legitimacy (chapter one). Writing centers will also not likely revoke their service identity. They serve students, and because they are inextricably tied to the colleges and universities that house them, also serve the institution (chapter 2). Many scholars imply that writing centers are dissonant spaces—spaces that can never completely adapt. Boquet claims that writing centers are seen as bastards or monsters who threaten
institutional legitimacy. Her characterization of writing centers as monstrosities is particularly interesting because *monster* literally means child abomination. The designation sheds light on the writing center’s relationship to its parent discipline, composition. It is a relationship that I have tried to portray throughout this dissertation.

As I discuss in chapter one, others, like Terrence Riley argue that centers *cannot* acquiesce to English studies and professionalize because if they do they will no longer be liberatory. And still other writing center scholars deliberately expose, explore, and encourage dissonance like Bonnie Sunstein when she characterizes writing centers as liminal spaces lacking in concrete pedagogy, theory, or measures of assessment (chapter one). Likewise, Stephen North and Lil Brannon characterize writing centers as marginal but instead of lamenting that status, they urge centers to celebrate their rhetoric of marginality and use their status to their advantage (chapter one). Sunstein argues that because writing centers are without boundaries and therefore have the potential to affect writing throughout the entire institution. They do so via their connections to writing across the curriculum, their commitments to serve ESL, LD, and non-traditional students, to link full and part time faculty, to employ students as tutors, to tutor faculty or conduct student and faculty workshops, they. And while boundarylessness is a disciplinary nightmare (If you can’t say what you do, how you do it, where do you do it, it is nearly impossible to a claim disciplinary identity), because writing centers are domainless, because they do not “belong” or fit into traditional institutional structures that they are able to achieve “great moments of teachability” (23). The writing center as misfit attracts students who want to learn in an environment that is different from the classroom. It
attracts tutors who love to write and talk to others about writing, and it attracts
compositionists who value the richness of communication and collaboration. Similarly,
Stephen North and Lil Brannon believe that writing centers should “exploit the uses of
the margins” (12). Their institutionally viable work “is enabled by their lack of
institutional viability: no grades, no mandatory attendance, no classroom, and no
professor. The writing center offers straight talk, informal conversation, someone who
cares, someone who can demystify the institution without making the student feel dumb”
(10). All of this gives writing centers an “enviable teaching edge” (10).

Sunstein, North, and Brannon believe that a writing center’s dissonance can lead
to change, or in Welch’s words, their “dissonance may be the start of a productive
struggle that can lead to a change of direction, a change of thesis, a real re-visioning of a
text, its meaning and intentions” (30). But all three stop short of their claim: writing
centers need to celebrate or capitalize on their boundaryless or marginal status. Sunstein
claims that writing centers should keep doing what they are doing even if it means that
they are unaccepted on college and university campuses. North and Brannon assert that
writing centers “must claim their institutional space within the academy as well as their
connectedness to the periphery, to the areas and spaces outside. They must find ways to
build alliances or collaborate within the university, while continuing to open its doors to
those who have traditionally been excluded from university life” (12). However, they do
not suggest how to reach these goals or offer examples of writing centers that are
capitalizing on their marginal status. In the previous chapter, I claimed that I would offer
a model of professionalization that takes into account a writing center’s misfit status and
the changing face of the academy. In essence, in this conclusion I make attempts to continue where Sunstein, North and Brannon have stopped short. I believe that writing centers cannot and will not gain institutional status if the system remains unchanged.

However, at this point in history, the university and subsequently areas such as English studies are in flux. Since the 1970s, economic forces have led to the trimming down of the university. English studies has responded to these cut backs with a decrease in tenure faculty lines, growth in adjunct and part time positions, and an increase in graduate student labor. Other departments, particularly those in science, engineering, and medicine, have responded by increasing their industry partnerships. Critics argue that academic/business liaisons will result (and have already resulted) in student neglect, especially at the undergraduate level, and departments imprisoned by corporations (Downing et al. 9 English Inc.). In *Academic Keywords: A Devil’s Dictionary for Higher Education*, Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt call attention to the University of Cincinnati and Yale Psychiatry Departments; they conduct clinical trials for pharmaceutical companies. Nelson and Watt argue that these departments are no longer academic units, but corporate extensions. Corporations co-opt university researchers with “stock options, bonuses, and future contracts,” who face increasing pressure to become “company public relations personnel” (87).

English studies, and particularly composition and rhetoric, has begun to develop relationships outside of the university. The extra-university collaborations have taken the form of service learning initiatives in writing classrooms. They also take on more subtle forms such as the recent boom in professional communication, subtle because
professional writing courses like the one I teach are not directly connected to businesses or organizations outside of the university. However, such courses are nonetheless tied to businesses and organizations because they prepare students for writing in the world of work. As in other fields that have developed business/community partnerships, composition and rhetoric has been criticized for being too attentive to business needs, “stressing entrepreneurialism over academic freedom” (Zebroski 169) and “outsourcing teaching to charity and corporate sponsors” (171). If writing courses with service learning components and professional communication courses do not prompt students to use language to look at the world—including the world of work—critically, then such criticism is warranted. But the field advocates a critical stance, and researchers urge teachers to take caution when teaching non-academic, rhetorical writing, and they urge those involved to ask:

To what degree should educators in academia train students to adapt to and perpetuate the ongoing workplace communication practices? To what degree should educators in academia train students to adapt to and perpetrate the ongoing workplace communication practices describes in research reports and other literature? To what extent should these educators encourage student writers to analyze, critique, and even change those workplace communication practices? How can they help students know how to act as agents of continuity or agents of change, and to determine when to assume either role? (Spilka 207)
The same critical perspective applies to service learning initiatives. Scholars such as Ellen Cushman believe that service learning has ethical, civic, social, and pragmatic potential:

while it helps students gain a foothold in the workplace upon graduation, this knowledge has been imbued with a socially just application. The students often come away from these applied learning situations with an understanding of how to change institutions from working within and against them. (213)

She asserts that service learning has the power to infuse English studies making it more socially viable and publicly relevant.

Like service learning initiatives, writing centers are in an optimal position to assert themselves as frontrunners in academic reform. Writing centers already have permeable borders because they have relationships with departments outside of English. Many have branch locations in business and engineering colleges and fine arts and women studies programs. They are frequently connected to writing across the curriculum initiatives. They are also increasingly developing partnerships with other entities like the university library (see Elmborg and Hooks). Centers are networked and connected. They are collaborating with the university and developing reciprocally beneficial relationships. They can tap into their boundarylessness and their acts of collaboration for additional strength.

Scholars like Ede and Lunsford believe that universities will look to writing centers as they reimagine and reconstruct themselves: “Centers create spaces for the kind
of work that needs to be done in higher education, work that is difficult or impossible to
do within traditional disciplinary frameworks” (33). Ede and Lunsford refer to the
connections that centers make not just within their institutions but also outside as well:
their “outreach efforts with schools, community organizations, businesses, industry, and
government” (32). In recent years, I have seen multiple examples of these efforts, for
example:

- the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Connections program –a high
  school/writing center outreach initiative. Writing center tutors visit
  Chicago area high schools, offer one-on-one tutoring and group tutoring in
  English classrooms and deliver writing workshops on issues such as the
  college personal statement or the Advanced Placement writing prompt;

- Belmont University’s writing center in Nashville, which facilitates a
  writing group at the Magdelene House, a recovery program for women
  with a history of addiction and criminal prostitution. The women in these
  writing groups, use writing to heal, but they also use writing more
  pragmatically – to write letters to family members, to construct resumes;

- Salt Lake City Community College, Community Writing Center whose
  mission is to support the writing goals of out-of-school adults. This
  center, a branch of Salt Lake City Community college, support one-on-one
  tutoring sessions with these adult writers, as well as larger workshops in
  areas like: grant writing, how to write letters to solve problems, how to
  write a narrative. They also partner with community agencies and
organizations in order to work with those agencies on specific writing projects: revamping a newsletter, or putting together a federal grant. In 2004, the Community Writing Center won a CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence Award for their innovative programs. The awards committee cited the center’s ability to “change the lives of its users and writers” as well as help “imagine how we might change the way we think about our writing centers” (<<slcc.edu/pdf/collegeAcompDec.pdf>>).

Additionally, the entire April 2005 issue of The Writing Lab Newsletter was devoted to community writing centers and writing center outreach initiatives.

The above examples represent model sites that universities (not just other writing centers) can look to as they search for ways to better serve the community. But they do not directly respond to the increasing partnerships between discipline and industry, a partnership that Joseph Law and Christina Murphy believe will inevitably influence the writing center. They assert that centers will find and create “new identities within technology and industry” (141). We can see seeds of this new identity in Purdue’s Online Writing Lab which offers numerous professional writing resources (advice on document design and professional writing samples). But there are possibilities beyond the OWL. Drawing from the writing center outreach models above, I envision mobile writing centers, traveling centers that move from local area schools, non-profit organizations, and businesses, conducting workshops, group, and one-to-one tutoring. As far as I know, the mobile model only exists in the form of discrete outreach efforts. A
college or university writing center with a mobile branch offers possibilities. It has the potential to garner public recognition, respect, and support for the writing center thereby removing centers from their institutional obscurity. A mobile writing center also makes the academy accessible to the public at large, increasing visibility for the institution itself.

The dangers in the kind model of Law and Murphy advocate are reminiscent of my discussions in chapter two. Just as writing centers do not want to position themselves in service of or as purely supplemental to the classroom, the same can be said of center/extra-university collaborations. Collaboration can equal coercion, and centers run the risk of serving the interests of capital rather than the interests of those who use them. Yet, I agree with Law and Murphy. As writing centers create new identities, as they develop community and business partnerships, they will be developing alliances that allow them to “shape and participate in the ‘in-house-training’ that corporations provide” (143). This is important because writing centers will have the capability to increase their civic dimensions. I return to Molly Wingate who I cite in chapter two. She argues that writing centers have implicit civic dimensions because they inspire former tutors and tutees to employ in their public lives what they gleaned from their writing center experiences: non-violent problem solving, collaboration, and working with and through difference. Wingate’s claim is similar to Cushman’s above: students learn from their service learning experiences how to work towards change with and against institutions, and they apply this knowledge once they leave the university. If writing centers are indeed moving towards extra-university partnerships, then they will not be simply relying
on their former students to filter their pedagogy. They will be direct agents of change because they will be shaping pedagogy.

Many may question whether such a move is just another example of the writing center making attempts to fit into new institutional conventions. But I believe that writing centers will be operating from a place where they can initiate change and because writing centers that develop community and business partnerships are wanted from the outset (unlike most of our early and even some of our current writing centers which were/are positioned as unwanted necessities), the necessity to fit in is less of an issue. Certainly, there are many who will inevitably resist the model I suggest here because it encourages university/community/business partnerships. The fear is that departments and programs will become extensions of corporations, abandoning their “original research in favor of a corporate-directed plan” (Nelson and Watt 87). Profit-making will dominate departmental activities, and the classroom will become an extension of corporations because the department has allowed corporations to influence curriculum. Some may see the solution I pose as part of a larger trend where “Administrators function like either corporate leaders or bureaucrats. Faculty members are either star entrepreneurs or contract workers. And students are, at best, clients, but even more commonly customers and consumers” (Stimpson 1147). But just as Nancy Grimm has prompted us to carefully examine our praxis and critique our roles as writing center workers, as gatekeepers of the university, and to examine the literacy practices we espouse and teach to students, so should we begin any future partnerships with caution. I am in agreement with Cushman as well. She asserts that just because an English department may be “held
accountable to the practical needs of workplaces and communities, does not necessarily mean that English studies’ scholars must forsake interpretive theories, history, and consumptions of texts.” It must “avoid simple vocational training: the uncritical, unexamined acquisition of skills that apply mechanically to workplace production and distribution of information, products, and services” (212). She explains that there is a difference between vocationalism and utilitarianism and pragmatism. Utilitarianism and pragmatism are knowledge and practice put to use by socially conscious citizens who try to improve the public and private institutions on which they rely and of which they are critical. I propose that as writing centers continue to develop extra-university partnerships that those partnerships are based on utilitarianism and pragmatism. In addition to the socially empowering work that existing community writing center initiatives do, I envision future centers that also help its users resolve conflict and confront and challenge unfair and unethical workplace practices.

Many believe that “corporatization is here to stay. It cannot be stopped, but it can be shaped and, where appropriate, resisted” (Nelson and Watt 94). The writing center has the potential to be a leading site and model for such shaping and resisting in part because they have resisted traditional institutional structures for so long in order to maintain their integrity. I am referring to those structures that dictate publishable scholarship and the value of work. They have given us a vision of collaboration that can be applied to many situations. I don’t believe that my solution is a cure all. I don’t believe that future partnerships with the community or with businesses will entirely erase stigmas that position writing centers as remedial sites, as non-intellectual, service sites.
But centers have been fixated for too long on one path in their search for academic validity, and thusly have not considered alternate paths. Now is the time to act. Too much writing center scholarship talks about how they have been acted upon. In this dissertation, I have tried to show how writing centers can act and have been acting all along, how they can be a large force in the reformation of English studies and the institution as a whole. The hope and the real possibility is that they will not just contribute to but shape academic reform/academic revision – in doing what they are already doing, starting in the places where they don’t fit into hierarchies of research, teaching, and, service – starting at the source of their greatest weakness and greatest strength – on the borders and in between.
In the film, *The Never Ending Story*, the main character Bastian steals a fantasy novel from an old book shop. The novel centers on Fantasia, a mythical place threatened by a dark and powerful force called “The Nothing.” The hero’s charge is to save the land. When Bastian reaches the end of the novel, he comes to a profound realization. The fantasy story he has been obsessively reading throughout the film is a kind of allegorical autobiography. In essence, he has been reading about himself. I had the same kind of experience at about the midpoint of this dissertation. I realized that I was writing about myself. Many of my peers have undertaken dissertation projects in which they were removed from their subjects. For example, they have focused on the histories of deaf rhetoric and immigrant literacy. They have created new lenses through which we can examine rhetorical discourse. I know that my peers were fully invested in their projects, so I am not making a comment about their seriousness or devotion to their work. I am saying, however, that they were not directly or personally affected by their topics. They did not write autobiographies. When I began my dissertation, I approached it in the same way as my peers. I gathered my research and began examining texts in a kind of disinterested way. But as I started to put together my job search materials, I became more personally invested in the scholarship and the conversations on WCENTER and the WPA. I began to realize that I was not simply offering an analysis but that I will fully confront the issues that I raise about scholarship, service, and teaching as I embark upon my new job as a writing center director.
Throughout the dissertation, I have discussed the disciplinary and institutional value of writing center work, but I have not talked about what I find personally or professionally valuable or why I want to direct a writing center even though as I was warned, “It is such a low status job.” Writing centers are embodiments of the idea that none of us write alone. We all write with and respond to others. Often, when we write, the process itself is solitary or lonely: we sit in our offices; we type at our computers, but we are nonetheless in conversation with theorists, with historians, with writers of all kinds. But, we have those conversations in silence. What I’m ultimately drawn to in writing center work is what Elizabeth Boquet calls, the *noise* from the writing center: the aural indications of human interaction, the conversations, the active and dynamic collaborations between writers and readers.

In addition, I decided to enter graduate school and study composition and rhetoric because the discipline focuses on applied knowledge. It is intellectually vital because of its focus on teaching and service. It has real world impact. Writing centers, like the composition classroom, call attention to the human meaning of what we do. Since I value writing centers as sites of conversation and collaboration and practical wisdom (because of their focus on teaching and service), I believe that they have been and still have much to contribute to composition rhetoric and the academy. Therefore, I must take up my own charge as a writing center worker (a tutor, an administrator, and a scholar), to revise the writing center.

In portions of this dissertation I return to narrative and self-definition. In chapter two I cite Margaret Marshall (inherited perceptions from a time now dead) and Audre
Lorde (we must define ourselves for ourselves or run the risk of being defined by others).

In chapter three, I examine how writing centers have rewritten histories but negative perceptions of centers are nonetheless the result of stories that have been written upon them. Is there a way to rewrite the writing center story? In the conclusion, I suggest that if writing centers further develop their extra-university partnerships, the institution and the public will form new perceptions of writing centers because they will become instrumental to the infrastructure of both.

As a writing center director, I can create such partnerships and if the partnerships are successful, they can serve as models for other centers. But can I do more? Lately, I have been thinking about how other cultures have successfully revised their stories and changed public perception. Since I currently live in the Southwest, one group stands out: Los Chicanos. The term “chicano” was used as a derogatory label for Mexican immigrants. In the 1960s many Mexican-Americans reappropriated the racial epithet, and it became a symbol of self-determination and ethnic pride. “Chicano” is now a fairly common synonym for Mexican-American. I offer this example because I think there is at least one term that I can personally embrace as a new writing center director: service. The comparison is a bit superficial because writing center work is a choice. Mexican-Americans obviously cannot choose their ethnicity. However, I think it is a useful and meaningful example as we revise our identities. Service is an uneasy term. I have said it before, but I am drawn to writing center work because of its rich service and teaching identities. For me the term suggests possibility. I see myself as a service worker. I apply knowledge with others in order to make new knowledge with others, knowledge that
changes the way we think, talk, and write about writing. I invite others to join me in service at the writing center.
WORKS CITED


Balester, Valerie, and James McDonald. “A View of Status and Working Conditions: Relations Between Writing Program and Writing Center Directors.” Writing Program Administration (WPA) 24.3 (Spring, 2001): 59-82.


Climo, Jacob and Maria G. Cattell. *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives.* Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira P, 2002.


Downing, David B, Claude Mark Hurlbert, and Paula Mathieu. “English


---. "Rearticulating the Work of the Writing Center." *College Composition and Communication* 47.4 (1996): 523-548.


Harris, Muriel. “Centering on Professional Concerns.” *College Composition and Communication* 52.3 (February 2001): 429-40.


