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The History of Writing Centers: How They Have Become and Must Remain a Necessity

There are many different ways to define a Writing Center, from a setting for student dialogue, to a place for students in all disciplines to receive help on writing assignments, or even a space for students to become more confident writers (UNT; “The Final Draft;” “The University”). No matter how a University defines a WC, these centers have grown to become essential to college campuses nationwide. A WC is more than the center itself, it is the practices and ideas that make up the center. Hessler et al. (304) states that “at the heart of a writing center session is conversation about student writing” and that WC tutors help fellow students to best improve their assignment. Hessler et al. (304-305) adds that keeping WC visits voluntary is essential, as requiring visits could “result in disgruntled students not engaging.” The International Writing Center Association writes that “there are more than a thousand writing centers in American and Canadian postsecondary schools” (Harris). Since the earliest idea for a WC, there has been evolution and steady growth; many students now in school use these centers to their advantage (Harris). Despite a lack of sufficient budgets and space, WCs continue to help college students as best as they can. Looking at Writing Center history and how they have impacted college students, they must remain a staple in Universities nationwide.

There are many theories as to how and when the fundamental ideas within a WC came about. These fundamentals include treating a space dedicated to English disciplines similarly to a

laboratory— a space that provides guidance and hands-on assistance. In his book, *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory*, Neal Lerner leads the reader through a series of possible origins for the WC. Lerner starts his search for the origin of WCs with Helen Parkhurst. Parkhurst devised a plan that centered student learning around this more laboratory-like fashion— The Dalton Laboratory Plan (The Dalton Plan). On her use of the word Laboratory, a word that is traditionally related to the sciences, Parkhurst reasoned that she wanted students to see school as a “sociological laboratory where the pupils themselves are the experiments, not the victims of an intricate... system... they have neither part nor lot” (Lerner 18). In other words, Parkhurst wanted these sort of “writing laboratories” to be a place where “community conditions prevail as they prevail in life itself” (Lerner 19). Lerner points out that this idea is one possibility for the origin of just the concept of a WC, although the center is not named directly. Parkhurst had a very similar idea to WCs, especially a sense of community among students and tutors. This point in history is one to keep in mind when considering the theories of how WCs originated.

We can see the outcome of Parkhurst’s ideas when The Dalton Plan was put into action. In the mid-1920s, The Dalton Plan was tested out in a high school in Dalton, Massachusetts, which is where the concept earned its name (Lerner 18). According to Lerner, “students received predetermined contracts... that they worked through individually, seeking out the help of the teacher as needed” (19). The Dalton Plan seemed to solely utilize the teachers at this point. However, students did in fact work at tables with each other, tables that had a variety of materials and references available, just like WCs commonly have today (Lerner 19). Although The Dalton Plan seemed promising, there was a major dilemma— the way that schooling was structured at the time did not cater to The Dalton Plan. Lerner states that because the “system [was] set up in discrete blocks of time and predetermined units of labor,” The Dalton Plan could

not easily be integrated. The solution to this problem was to pull aside and assist students who required it, and these students received one-on-one teaching. Though this was beneficial to the student, it was not helpful as a whole. Lerner (20) states that “Whole-class solutions could proceed quietly once those *other* students were whisked out of the room”. Rather than thinking of the best for the student, the school alienated those who needed this extra help. Pulling these students who were behind allowed the majority of the classroom to continue on as normal and not be burdened or held-back because of *other* students. In fact, Lerner tells readers that the concept of putting the student first is a fairly modern idea. Therefore, The Dalton Plan seemed to focus on what was efficient, rather than what was helpful. When put into action, The Dalton Laboratory Plan was not as effective as was hoped. However, schools would soon devise a new way to assist students in need.

In order to teach college students English Composition, schools began to utilize remedial programs. The IWCA considers these remedial classes an early type of WC (Harris). According to Lerner (29), many of these classes, which were sometimes taught by graduate students, counted for no credits and were primarily for upperclassmen. They were designed to “separate the unpredestined from those who belong’ [in order] to maintain the value of a degree” and assess skills of “(a) capitalization, (b) punctuation, (c) grammar, (d) sentence structure, and (e) spelling” (Lerner 29 and 31). However, colleges also utilized these classes to save themselves. Through these classes, colleges could prove that they were upholding “the quality of that degree,” lifting the burden of teaching the remedial classes off of teachers, and not wasting class time re-teaching unprepared students (Lerner 29 and 30). These classes became such a staple in colleges, that by 1928, 40% of institutions surveyed included them, 90% incorporated remedial classes by 1939, and 67% of 292 schools had basic writing classes in their curriculum (Lerner

30-31). These remedial English classes served not only to teach students what they should have already known going into college, but the school also had to ensure that they were seeming responsible about the situation to important outsiders. Although these classes may not have had entirely positive motives behind their implementation, they helped to pave the way for the principles of a WC.

Another theory as to the origin of the WC is that their formation could be due to the higher education enrollment increase in 1969. At this time, colleges became much more diverse as well (Lerner 24). With this higher enrollment rate came a large amount of college students who did not have college-ready English skills. The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) called this “the ‘literacy crisis’ of the mid- 1970s and the subsequent “back-to-basics” movement” (Harris). Because of this, colleges had to rework and improve upon their English curriculums. As Lerner puts it, this new challenge required schools to find new solutions, and Harvard found one; it began to require English Composition classes for these underprepared classmen (Lerner 24). Fred Newton Scott of University of Michigan offered the idea that these composition classes should be taught in a laboratory setting, and that this teaching would “prove to be important themes” when searching for the origins of WCs (Lerner 25 and 26). However, Edwin Hopkins of University of Kansas states that “Higher education was not structurally set up to allow for laboratory methods” (Lerner 27). Because of this, Hopkins suggested that schools test students on their current abilities, then see if those abilities could be improved through remediation (Lerner 27 and 28). When faced with unprepared students, schools decided to help the students strengthen their English composition through new curriculums.

In their book *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Lauren Fitzgerald of Yeshiva University and Melissa Ianetta of University of Delaware discuss another possible origin of the

WC— the first writing course in the United States of America. Though not a WC, in 1872, Harvard University launched their first national writing exam for all incoming students (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 20). This test was designed so that it would assess potential students' English skills. Specifically, the test evaluated their "writing skills and intellectual fitness for college" (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 20). Through giving this test, Harvard discovered that *many* of the potential students lacked basic English skills (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 20). In order to help students improve their English skills, Harvard also formed the first ever writing course, and other Universities followed in their path (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 20). Fitzgerald and Ianetta stated that "by 1900... every college had an array of English courses'," and that these common English courses did not become a staple in colleges until approximately 1975 (20 and 22). Although Harvard started the trend of general English courses, the school did not have their first official WC until the 1970s (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 22). The WC at Harvard University has those original required English classes to thank. With the launch of these classes by such a well-known and revered school, Harvard was able to get many other colleges on board with the idea of general, required English classes. But, these classes are *still* not the true and pure origins of the WC.

So far, there are historical English events that have similar principles as WCs, such as helping students improve their writing, but there are no concrete examples of any. According to a study done in 2001, "96 percent of respondents [agreed that] writing centers that went back no further than the 1970s" (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 22). This mention of a specific time period could be due to "an increase in concern with the individualities of student writers" in the 70s (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 23). With a concern in writers' individualities, WCs could possibly have sprung up suddenly in order to help students individually. However, Lerner argues that another solid and plausible example of an early WC could be the writing lab found at University of

Minnesota General College. This college's Writing Laboratory was founded in 1932. Likewise, Central State Teachers College in Mt Pleasant, MI also incorporated a writing lab on their campus in 1936. This lab was described as one that "co-operates with other students and with the instructor in a study of the essentials... the desire is to help the student grow in ability to write by providing direction in the fulfillment of his ordinary writing requirements" (Lerner 31). These laboratories were extremely similar to modern WCs, but they still are not considered the origin. In his book, Lerner (32) concluded that there is no true origin of the WC. Instead, there are origins of the principles of the WC. These two laboratories are the closest theorists will get to finding the origins of a WC itself.

The origins of the WC fall within many ideas within institutions of similar concepts. The Dalton Laboratory Plan took a slightly more individualized approach to English, as students were pulled from classes and only went to the teacher as necessary. Through this, the Dalton Plan pushed forward the principles of WCs being separate from the classroom. The 20th century remedial classes for unprepared students involved ideas of bettering skills that students already had through out-of-class help, such as WCs do today. Writing Laboratories, such as those in Minnesota and Michigan, were able to provide direction to students in need of help. These students were able to better their own writing through seeking help with everyday writing assignments. Today, most WCs also help college students improve their writing skills through class assignments that students bring along. Most of these aspects of writing history helped to present ideas and principles that would later be utilized by WCs.

Although WCs in general have no concrete history, Salisbury University's (SU) Writing Center has a fairly rich history within itself. As of the year 2018, Salisbury University's campus houses a WC that students, both on and off campus, can use to their advantage. However, before

this center could become what it is today, the school's WC had much to build up. The first mention of SU's WC dates back to the Fall semester of 1974, which would be around the time of the previously mentioned "literary crisis" (Harris). In its first semester of operation, the WC helped 108 students total, and 11 out of 16 students reported that they received at least a C in entry-level English, and 15 out of 23 wrote that the WC "definitely" improved their grade ("Writing Center Report for 1974-1975"). According to data analyzed, in the Fall semester of 1975, the Writing Center saw the number of students utilizing the WC double within only a year, however, the number of sessions per student fell from 3.5 to 2.9, and the center saw about 42 sessions per week. Darrell Hagar, the WC director at the time, attributed this decline in attendance to many aspects, which included "a large number of students who came only once or twice with specific problems with papers for their English 101 classes," there being "fewer students in more sustained programs" in the Spring semesters, and "problems [that] arose last fall when students received conflicting advice from student tutors and teachers" ("Report of the Fall Semester, 1975"). In 1976, students sought help from the WC 1 to 6 times per semester and 58 out of 60 students later surveyed saw an improvement in their writing ("Writing Center Report for the Fall 1976 Semester"). These outstanding numbers could have been due to the Writing Proficiency Requirement that was enacted that same semester.

Just as the remedial classes from 20th century, the Writing Proficiency Requirement aimed to help students improve on their writing skills ("Spring 1976"). Specifically, the goal for this requirement was to change Freshmen's perception of English 101 and 102. Hagar wrote that "if these students knew that all instructors would expect them to demonstrate these skills each time they wrote, the students might see the course for what it is— a course that attempts to give them resources that they will need throughout college and later" ("Communication"). If a student

was not able to pass a test that would assess their English abilities, said student would get help from the WC for approximately two hours per week until they could pass the given test. Tutors at the WC would create a specific program tailored to the student's needs, so that there was no time wasted. This requirement had to be met to graduate from SU. Hagar stated that the reason for this requirement was because "the faculty and Administration... believe that the ability to express ideas in a logical, organized, coherent, and convincing manner is an integral part of a liberal arts education" ("Writing Proficiency Requirement"). However, this requirement did not do so well in action. Only 16 faculty members referred 109 students to the WC, which declined in the Spring of 1976 to 15 faculty members referring 61 students, which Hagar deemed "inequitable," because he did not "believe that the natural benefits of English 101 and the natural attrition of weaker students can account for a 44% decline in referrals" ("Spring 1976"). Hagar also suggested that the WC/Requirement was only being utilized by entry-level English classes, such as English 101 ("Spring 1976"). Because of these outcomes, Hagar suggested to make the WC for voluntary use only ("Spring 1976"). This reflects one important component of a WC—solely voluntary visits (Hessler et al. 304-305). In its first two semesters of operation, the WC's statistics had already declined significantly, and it was only being used by a handful of students.

In addition to helping SU students, the WC formatted programs to help the surrounding area in 1976. One program that was made possible because of the WC was one where middle and high school English teachers were instructed on how to teach proper English Composition. This program focused on educating Delmarva teachers of 7-12 graders. This was instituted because Hagar believed that "composition is not taught in Eastern Shore schools with intensity..." and teachers do not have adequate training in it ("A Proposed"). Teachers focused on aspects on English such as linguistics, rhetoric and composition, teaching composition, spoken and written

English, the “nature of the essay”, and the “nature of the writing assignment” (“A Proposed”).

This program run by SU relates back to the sudden increase in higher education enrollment in the 70s. By educating grade-school teachers on how to properly teach English Composition, SU helped future students learn proper English skills prior to starting college. Because of this program, these high school students were able to better their English capabilities, and they were able to enter college with the skills necessary to be successful in college-level English courses.

The WC at SU continued to attempt to benefit the entire student body in the Summer semester of 1977 through implementing a Reading-Writing Enrichment Program, which was run through the SU Learning Center. This program was designed to “bolster the students’ basic skills and to facilitate their further entry into [SU]” (“Proposal”). The program was run by Hagar and two graduate assistants, and it consisted of two separate three-week sessions. To keep the work personal to each student participating, diagnostic tests were given. Hagar wrote in a proposal for the program that it aimed to improve students’ reading and writing, introduce students to the many college services available, and to collect information regarding “the inter-relationship of reading and writing” (“Proposal”). This Summer program could have possibly been a result of SU seeing a decrease in adequate English Composition skills, such as many schools saw in the 1970s with the “back-to-basics” movement” (Harris). The heavy focus on how individuals are performing in writing also harkens back to the same sudden increase in concern in terms of individual writers in the 70s (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 23). Lastly, this pre-college program worked to have a similar outcome as Harvard’s pre-college tests and entry-level English course (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 20). Both operations sought to improve students’ writing prior to university, so that the students would be readily equipped with quality English Composition skills.

The most recent mention of the SU WC available in the NAAB Center archives was in February of 1977, which would be the Spring semester of that year. Hagar reported that in the Fall semesters of 1974, 1975, and 1976, the WC helped a total of 539 students. In 1977, the center was open four evenings a week, and tutors were now required to take a course in “Teaching composition” prior to tutoring (“Writing Center”). Most students came to the center one to six times per semester, received a C in entry-level English, and 58 out of 60 students reported that their writing improved because of the WC (“Writing Center Report for the Fall 1976 Semester”). In addition to this, SU also began to run many summer classes through the WC. One such program was the Reading-Writing Enrichment Program that was planned for the summer session of 1977. According to Floriani and Hagar, this program “[sought] to bolster the students’ basic skills and to facilitate their further entry into Salisbury State” (“Proposal for a Reading-Writing Enrichment Program for the Summer of 1977”). This program continued for two three-week sessions that were run by Hagar and two graduate students. This program too was personalized to each student through a diagnostic test. Hagar aimed to improve student writing, introduce students to many college services available, and collect “information concerning the inter-relationship of reading and writing” (“Proposal for a Reading-Writing Enrichment Program for the Summer of 1977”). Many school programs within SU were made possible because of Salisbury’s WC, which would soon become the Learning Center.

The earliest solid mention of the University Learning Center was in 1989. This was a center that, according to a Freshman handbook from that year, assisted students with both reading and writing. At this time in history, the center was run by peer tutors, and students could be recommended to visit the center or choose to visit voluntarily (“Freshman” 15). The center still had quite a big role in entry-level English courses at SU, because if students could not pass

English 101 their first semester, they were required to seek help from the Learning Center while repeating the course the following semester. The manual states that the primary goal of this center was to “assist students while they are taking English 101” (“Freshman” 16). In 1990 and 1991, the Learning Center appeared in English Freshman manuals once again. However, the center now became much more part of English 101 and 102. The manual states that “English 101 and 102, should be valued as a means of obtaining the writing proficiency that must be demonstrated throughout the four years at the university” (“The Birth-Mark” 17). This description of these courses sounds very similar to the description of the Writing Proficiency Requirement—a requirement enacted to attempt to change students’ perspectives on entry-level English courses at SU. By 2006, the Writing/Learning Center was omitted from Freshman English manuals; only Writing Across the Curriculum was mentioned, and the manual stated that if a student needed help, that they should “let [their] teacher help [them]” (“A Manual”). In 2008, *From Inquiry to Academic Writing*, a generic Freshman English manual, gave only the publishers website as “additional resources,” as the manual was not specific to SU (“From Inquiry”). The general knowledge of the WC faded from SU’s mind, as the last year that the archives mentioned the Learning/Writing Center was in the English manuals from the 1990s.

The WC at SU has done a lot to involve itself on campus in the past, and the numbers reflect that. However, as of 2017 and 2018, the WC has truly evolved to assist a wide variety of students. Data analyzed from these years (Fall 2017, Winter 2017, Spring 2018, and Summer I and II 2018) reveal that 84.16% of students who visited the WC came one to three times (Davis). In fact, the Fall 2017 semester saw 2,704 total appointments, and Spring 2018 saw 1,155 (Davis). These numbers tell us that what Hagar stated about the decrease in clients during the Spring semesters still holds true, and it is still just as dramatic. In both semesters, the percentage of these

appointments increases as the semester comes closer to an end— during week two of Fall 2017, 43.67% of available appointments were booked, and this percentage increased to 93.71% by week fourteen, whereas in Spring 2018, the numbers jumped from 24.14% to 87.25% (Davis). Through these five semesters, 77.50% of students found that the sessions were “very helpful” (Davis). Of the students surveyed, 35.35% worked on English assignments, 12.41% worked on History, 7.28% on Communication Arts, 3.70% on Social Work, and 3.28% on Honors (Davis). Students also came to the WC for help with assignments in disciplines such as Biology, Art, Education, and even scholarship essays— all these disciplines came in above the 1% mark for five semesters (Davis). Although the WC still primarily attracts students who need help with English essays and assignments, data shows a wide variety of disciplines that utilize the center and its services, unlike how the WC focused on assisting English students in the past.

Writing Centers themselves do not have any pinpointed origin, but there are many times in history where principles of these centers can be traced back to. Many different authors have theories as to different places and times these principles originated, but overall, they claim it was between the late 1800s and mid-1900s. No matter the time or place, a WC is essentially a tool for college students to improve their writing and English composition. Records from SU’s archives showed that the University implemented its own WC in 1974. The WC first served to help students in English 101 and 102, inform other teachers about English composition, and assist incoming or current students with their writing skills through various programs. Today, the WC helps students in a wide variety of disciplines with different types of assignments. Although the WC at SU was forgotten for some time, today it has improved greatly and continues to uphold the principles of a WC.

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