

CHAPTER 2. LENDING OUR VOICES: THE ROLE OF WRITING CENTER LEADERSHIP IN INSTITUTIONAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT AI

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Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) is a private STEM university with three campuses: two residential campuses in Daytona Beach (DB), Florida, and Prescott (PC), Arizona, and a Worldwide (WW) campus primarily focusing on online education. These two aspects of our institutional context—its STEM focus and its multi-campus structure—have shaped our opportunities and our strategies for engaging in AI-related dialogues at ERAU. First, each campus has its own writing/communication center, each with a slightly different focus, to serve the needs of the distinct student populations. Each campus also has its own center leader: at the time of writing this chapter, Cassandra (Sandy) was Director of the Center for Communication and Digital Media at DB, Ashley was Director for the Writing & Design Lab at PC, and Meghan and Alex were Co-Directors for the Virtual Communication Lab at WW. Although ERAU has recently introduced a “one university” model intended to unify the campuses, there is a history of inconsistent policy creation and implementation, as well as inconsistent faculty support, across the three campuses. This has also been the case in the institution’s response to generative AI (GenAI) in two major ways. First, while there has been clear interest in and concern about GenAI among both faculty and university administrators, including cross-campus conversations about GenAI led by groups such as our Centers for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE), as well as policy statements used by two campuses, there are still many differences in how each campus is addressing GenAI. Second, ERAU’s emphasis on STEM (and its comparative lack of faculty specializing in writing and communication studies) led to somewhat polarized dispositions about AI among our faculty: those who were immediately prepared

to wholeheartedly embrace AI in the classroom, likening it to “autopilot for writing,” and those who were convinced that AI would devalue our academic programs entirely by removing all opportunities for valid assessment (see Chapter 8, this collection, for Bleakney et al.’s discussion of a similar range of tutor attitudes toward GenAI). Both these perspectives pose problems that writing specialists can help bring to light.

In the wake of inconsistent university support and subsequent faculty confusion, we became involved in our campus and institutional conversations about GenAI in various ways and to various degrees. As we all hold faculty ranks along with our writing center leadership roles, we are not only considering the impact of GenAI in our own classes, but are also dedicated to providing support to students (both tutors and tutees) in our respective centers. We have each been involved in institutional conversations about GenAI outside of our respective classrooms and centers; however, it is important to note that, in most cases, rather than being asked by upper administrators to participate in these discussions because of our roles as writing center directors, we instead found ourselves leveraging our own expertise in order to articulate the importance of our presence in these conversations.

In this chapter, we argue that writing center administrators are ideally positioned to help faculty respond to this unique and challenging moment in higher education. While writing center staff, including both administrators and tutors, can support students in using GenAI as a writing tool, center leaders should also be proactive in guiding faculty, in part because we can build upon our existing knowledge and experience to do so. First, writing center leaders already find ourselves needing to bridge the gaps between faculty expectations for and student experiences with writing. Second, we are typically well-versed in the tools and technologies used by students and faculty for completing writing tasks and are accustomed to providing support for both groups seeking to use these tools effectively. Above all, our experiences with students have prepared us to approach these conversations in a way that centers student agency, equity, and ethics.

MAKING STUDENT WRITING PROCESSES VISIBLE TO FACULTY

Our experiences at ERAU indicate a wide gap between faculty concerns about students’ AI-enhanced writing and students’ own anxieties about ethical AI use, a gap that has been observed in national studies. In this section, we argue that this expectation gap constitutes an opportunity to help faculty better understand students’ writing processes, something with which writing center leaders are well aware.

INSIGHTS FROM NATIONAL AND LOCAL SURVEYS

While the overwhelmingly plagiarism-focused reactions to GenAI have somewhat calmed since 2022, many faculty across institutions remain concerned about students' use (or more specifically, overuse) of AI in producing written text. For instance, a 2024 ITHAKA survey of instructor perceptions and practices surrounding GenAI use revealed that the vast majority of instructors across disciplines feel skeptical about the use of GenAI in academic settings, with one respondent arguing, "LLMs and Generative AI are going to undermine the trust between faculty and students. This is serious for all courses that involve writing" (Ruediger et al. 6). Moreover, faculty who may be interested in encouraging students' ethical AI use in their classes feel unprepared to do so due to a lack of knowledge about how to use GenAI themselves or lack of support for AI integration in their teaching.

The latter sentiment has also been found at our institution in similar surveys of faculty. The CTLE at our DB campus hosts a Taskforce for Innovation (TFI), consisting of leaders across the DB campus who form subcommittees to research important topics, one of which is focused on GenAI in higher education. Sandy was invited to join the TFI in fall 2023, after participating as an external member of a Students-as-Partners subcommittee, and subsequently volunteered to be part of the GenAI subcommittee. In the 2023-24 academic year, this subcommittee developed and deployed two surveys, one for faculty and one for students, to learn more about their views on GenAI as well as its role in the classroom and students' future careers.

504 students and 284 faculty from all three campuses completed the survey. 85 percent of students surveyed acknowledged using GenAI tools in some way, with 44 percent of students acknowledging use of GenAI in writing and research, as shown in Table 2.1 (for data from other localized surveys on student use of AI, see Essid and Cummins; and, in this collection: Bleakney et al., Chapter 8; Fledderjohann and Perkins, Chapter 9; Miftah et al., Chapter 10). Students also revealed they were more likely to learn about GenAI through informal avenues than from academic or professional sources, as shown in Table 2.2. Importantly, this survey also reveals that students are eager for more guidance from their professors on the use of GenAI, as shown in Table 2.3. These findings demonstrate that students are not only aware that GenAI will likely be an important tool in their future professions, but that they also crave instruction and guidance from faculty. Survey results reveal the need for formal support for students and faculty on GenAI, and writing center professionals are ideally positioned to provide that support for faculty in curriculum-related professional development.

Table 2.1. Students’ Current Use of and Understanding of AI Tools (n=504)

Students’ AI Use	Number and % of Responses
Not used AI	77 (15%)
Some use of AI	258 (51%)
Use of variety of AI tools	141 (28%)
Use of AI in writing/research	222 (44%)
Use of AI in personal life	230 (46%)
No understanding of AI	69 (14%)
Understanding of AI strengths	315 (63%)
Understanding of AI limitations	314 (62%)
Understanding of AI ethical risks	350 (69%)
Understanding of AI in discipline	187 (37%)

Table 2.2. How Students Learn about AI (n=504)

Sources for Learning about AI	Number and % of Responses
Self-taught	318 (63%)
Learning from friends and peers	268 (53%)
Learning through social media	223 (44%)
Learning from professors	144 (29%)
Learning through professional development	76 (15%)

Table 2.3. Students’ Interest in Further Support Related to AI (n=504)

Areas for Further Support	Number and % of Responses
AI in my field/discipline	365 (72%)
Clearer course expectations around use of AI	302 (60%)
Using AI as a learning support tool	297 (59%)
Using AI to save time	295 (59%)
Understanding AI as it relates to the honor code and plagiarism	293 (58%)
The benefits and abilities of AI	282 (56%)
The biases and ethical risks of AI	260 (52%)
Limitations of AI	239 (47%)

The need for faculty support is further demonstrated by the 53 percent of faculty surveyed who indicated that GenAI impacted their course design or teaching. However, only 18 percent of faculty surveyed had an AI policy beyond that provided at the university level. 85 percent of faculty respondents indicated that they used GenAI tools themselves with varied levels of proficiency and understanding, as shown in Table 2.4. While this data indicates that the majority of faculty are using AI tools, these findings also suggest that faculty may not feel well-enough informed to craft their own policies or to have classroom discussions with students about GenAI regarding disciplinary best practices. However, because students crave this type of information and guidance from faculty members, universities must provide faculty with professional development opportunities focused on GenAI that prepare them to fill these needs for students.

Table 2.4. Faculty’s Current Use of and Understanding of AI Tools (n=284)

Faculty AI Use	Number and % of Responses
Not used AI	44 (15%)
Some use of AI	157 (55%)
Use of variety of AI tools	72 (25%)
Use of AI in writing/research	99 (35%)
Use of AI in personal life	100 (35%)
Use of AI in teaching	96 (34%)
No understanding of AI	44 (15%)
Understands AI strengths	182 (64%)
Understands AI limitations	161 (57%)
Understands AI ethical risks	181 (64%)
Understands AI in discipline	111 (39%)

RESPONDING TO FACULTY CONCERNS WITH WRITING CENTER KNOWLEDGE

While faculty across institutions and disciplines display varying levels of familiarity and comfort with the use of GenAI, as indicated by the ITHAKA and the ERAU surveys, many faculty familiar with GenAI have concluded that product-focused grading is no longer an effective method for assigning and assessing learning, particularly when it comes to writing (Bedington et al.; Chiang et al.; Sakzad et al.). Proponents of GenAI use in higher education argue that these tools can help faculty shift to more process-oriented, individualized learning

models in their courses by encouraging AI tools as partners in the learning and writing process. However, even among faculty who have come to this conclusion, many may be unsure how to implement process-based or labor-based writing instruction effectively (for a recursive, process-based approach to GenAI, see Violini, Chapter 24, this collection). Writing center leaders, therefore, are particularly well-equipped to help faculty better understand students' writing processes and how they might make those processes a more fundamental part of their courses. After all, writing centers see those processes in action more than perhaps any other entity on campus. This is particularly true in online courses where the composing process is largely invisible to instructors.

In addition to providing insights about student writing processes, writing center leaders can also help faculty better understand student anxieties about GenAI. While faculty may worry about students use or overuse of GenAI, students, meanwhile, may be afraid of being accused of plagiarism for using tools like Grammarly, which have been shown to trigger AI detection software, or may simply be unsure where to draw the line of ethical AI use, especially if their instructors have not issued clear policies or guidance (Deans et al.). ERAU's survey of students confirms this finding, with 58 percent of students indicating a desire for further support in understanding GenAI as it relates to the honor code and plagiarism (see also Cleary and Rymer's Chapter 6 within this collection for discussion of students' "enthusiasm for discussing ethical implications and considerations of AI usage"). Writing center administrators are also well-suited to respond to these concerns and to bring them to faculty attention, in part because we have been in the middle of academic integrity conversations for decades, but also because we hear students' anxieties about navigating inconsistent course expectations on a regular basis (Lindberg et al.). Speaking from the middle in this way allows us to hear faculty concerns while also guiding clear messaging toward students.

As writing center administrators, we have long histories of working to bridge the gap between faculty and student concerns about writing. For example, when establishing the Writing and Design Lab on the PC campus, Ashley implemented a participatory design approach to invite students, faculty, and staff to take on co-designer roles (Rea et al.). Participatory design as a methodology values users' knowledge and experiences, demanding reflexivity and co-determination of research goals between researchers and users (Spinuzzi). Using a participatory design approach allowed Ashley and her center staff to better understand student and faculty writing needs and concerns and work to create solutions together. This participatory design approach carried into our campus conversations about GenAI as the PC writing center supported faculty and staff in drafting departmental AI writing policies.

At ERAU's WW campus, the writing center was also able to capitalize on a history of providing faculty development programming in addition to our support for students: we have hosted Communication Across the Curriculum Conversations and faculty research/writing groups since 2019, often in partnership with other campus stakeholders like CTLE. The emergence of GenAI has spurred us to provide more professional development focused on process-oriented instruction, including sessions on scaffolding larger writing assignments and incorporating reflection activities into courses across disciplines. While these topics are far from new, faculty anxieties about GenAI offered a new sense of relevance for these teaching practices. Our strategy echoes Hartung and Sharp's process of leveraging existing partnerships to build collaborative instructor development programming related to GenAI.

Finally, our status as center directors who also hold faculty appointments gives us additional ethos, allowing us to talk about faculty perspectives and anxieties with empathy. For example, in fall 2023, Alex participated in the pilot of a WW campus AI Incubator program designed to explore AI in the online writing classroom. Leveraging a virtual community of practice model, faculty in the program redeveloped their courses with newly created AI instruction and assignments. Participation in this program not only demystified the use of AI in Alex's own courses, but it also provided her opportunities to engage alongside faculty colleagues in open dialogue about the expectations and realities of AI in instruction. Writing center administrators are often used to engaging in these kinds of cross-campus conversations from their positionality as center directors, but this co-director's participation as a faculty member offered new opportunities to learn and collaborate with colleagues. As a result, she gained familiarity with using AI to enhance student learning and writing skills in a supportive setting, leading to increased confidence in the classroom and enabling her to be an example and source of peer support for fellow faculty. While we acknowledge that not all writing center leaders hold faculty appointments, we encourage their presence in professional development programs offered to faculty whenever possible to gain a "behind the curtain" view of the institution's faculty guidance on AI usage. When this is not possible, conversations between writing center leaders and faculty/teaching and learning support centers on campus can provide similar insights.

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE: WRITING CENTER LEADERS ON THE FRONT LINES OF TECHNOLOGY

In addition to making writing processes more visible to faculty, writing center administrators can also help faculty better understand AI within the context of

the many tools and technologies students and faculty use to assign, create, and review writing. Composing technologies, after all, have often been at the forefront of writing center scholarship and practice (Bryan). Many of us have been early adopters of emerging composing technologies, fueled by a need to meet our student tutees where they are and with the tools they use to write, and, as a result, have become de facto “tech experts” among our colleagues in humanities and communication fields. This reputation can serve writing center directors well when it comes to supporting faculty usage of GenAI.

At the WW campus, center co-directors Meghan and Alex have typically been the point people for piloting new composing technologies adopted by the university, including tools like Grammarly, Canva Premium, and Turnitin’s Draft Coach integration. Students and faculty alike have been directed to us for help in using these tools effectively, and we have directed workshops and created resources to help faculty understand the benefits, limitations, and ethical implications of these technologies. We were therefore able to leverage this ethos after the launch of ChatGPT, adding workshops on AI to our existing faculty development programming as early as spring 2023. At first, these sessions focused on holding space for faculty concerns about academic integrity while educating them on the role of GenAI in professional sectors, providing examples of how to talk to students about GenAI, and reassuring faculty that the writing center would also directly support students in ethical GenAI use. Since then, our faculty workshops have focused on more specific topics, such as how instructors can use GenAI as writing and research partners or how GenAI tools might be used (in partnership with humans) for course material development or student feedback and peer review. We believe that our experiences as technology experts over the past several years prepared us well to be a trusted provider of faculty support for AI.

Likewise, writing center administrators have a keen awareness of how access to composing technologies can be uneven, often putting underrepresented students at a disadvantage. Writing center expertise in translanguaging and equity-oriented pedagogy can be productively applied to conversations on GenAI use (for greater detail, see Marcum and Bell, Chapter 26, this collection, and Gebers et al.). In part to address this inequity, and in part to prepare students for the wide variety of written, spoken, and digital communication tasks they will perform in their professions, many writing centers, including those at ERAU, have adopted aspects of multiliteracy centers and design labs. Providing students access to and training to use digital composing and editing tools that may be cost-prohibitive, such as those offered by Adobe, as well as providing access to and support in using more affordable composing tools, such as Canva, equips students to be stronger, more experienced, and more professional communicators. Additionally, as these types of digital composing tools also have GenAI integrations, the experience writing

center professionals have in working with these tools further prepares us to help students and faculty negotiate their use. By directly supporting students and providing them a space to play, experiment, and learn technical skills with AI and non-AI tools, writing centers can help faculty understand the potential inequities presented by their AI policies or practices.

Similarly, writing center administrators can leverage our technology expertise to contribute to conversations about AI-detection tools and policies. While much of the early discourse around AI and writing positioned AI use as violating academic integrity (Alexander et al.), writing center scholarship has long highlighted the problematic nature of plagiarism detection software (Vie). Rather than encourage use of AI detection software, writing centers can reframe the conversation around academic integrity to advocate for writing curriculum development and policy design, echoing calls from scholars like Lauren Short to move past AI policing both within and beyond writing center tutorials.

CONCLUSION

While the impact of GenAI on education is only beginning to be felt, it is important to remember that the concerns it raises regarding issues such as academic integrity and the integration of new technologies into the classroom are not. Writing center administrators and staff have the opportunity to observe students across the disciplines communicating in multimedia for varied purposes and audiences, and our experiences as and working with faculty help us to create a bridge between student and faculty perceptions of writing. As such, writing center administrators should feel empowered to join and guide university conversations regarding GenAI in the classroom.

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