CHAPTER 3. LEADING THE CONVERSATION: WRITING CENTERS AS INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS ON AI

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Writing centers have come a long way since their modern inception. Once on the margins of institutions, writing centers are now ubiquitous in higher education, growing rapidly internationally, and expanding in secondary education. Rather than an afterthought, they now function as a core service to students, faculty, staff, and, sometimes, to the broader community. At the same time that writing centers are becoming more established in institutions, artificial intelligence has taken higher education by storm. Institutions have scrambled to develop policies, procedures, and practices to address a nascent technology that is quickly evolving. Writing centers, meanwhile, are primed—as hubs of communication—to assist institutions in dealing with, and responding to, artificial intelligence.

While writing centers may have once been viewed as liminal spaces (Sunstein) or on the boundaries of institutions (Davis), that is no longer the case. More recent studies have shown the broad scope of writing centers, including Sabatino and Rafoth, who estimate that there are more than 3,000 writing centers domestically in the United States and internationally. Meanwhile, Salem challenges the idea that writing centers are marginalized and powerless:

> Inside a single institution, a writing center might well seem "marginalized" and powerless, and if we reason forward from those impressions, we will conclude that writing center work is marginalized and powerless. But in the system of higher education overall, writing centers are neither. The fact is that writing centers are the single most common model for academic support, and a majority of institutions have them…. More importantly, writing centers clearly serve institutions in their efforts to compete in a stratified university system. Writing centers allow universities to signal the kind of literacy

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> they sponsor, and they give universities a concrete venue for operationalizing institutional goals and agendas. (37)

Writing centers serve as an important service that signals an institution's support for the kind of literacy they sponsor and a place to carry out those literacy goals. Salem recognizes that even though writing centers are different from each other and are frequently institutionally specific, they are still the most common model for academic support at institutions of higher education. Because of their importance for institutions, writing centers are well-placed to join institution-wide conversations, especially on artificial intelligence.

As a field, writing center personnel are very much engaged with issues surrounding artificial intelligence. There has been a flurry of threads on the WCenter listserv and posts on artificial intelligence to the Directors of Writing Centers Facebook group. Topics include the ethics of a session with a paper written with artificial intelligence, collecting artificial intelligence resources, plagiarism detection software and artificial intelligence, working with Grammarly and artificial intelligence, and more. There has also been this edited collection (*Writing Centers and AI: Generating Early Conversations*) and two special issues of *The Peer Review* focusing on generative AI (GenAI). All of this is to say that writing center administrators and tutors are engaged in these debates about artificial intelligence; in fact, I can't think of many people on campus more ready and prepared to lead discussions, develop policy, and inform decisions on artificial intelligence.

This work makes the case that writing center personnel, both tutors and administrators, should be institutional leaders surrounding conversations on artificial intelligence in higher education. In this chapter, I begin by describing institutional and faculty approaches to artificial intelligence. I then make the case that writing centers should build and use social capital to confront what some view as the existential threat posed by artificial intelligence to writing centers. Lastly, I provide multiple ways that administrators and tutors can be institutional leaders in artificial intelligence before concluding with the benefits to writing centers from this positionality.

INSTITUTIONAL AND FACULTY APPROACHES TO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence has presented a unique challenge, and potential opportunity, for institutions, disciplines, departments, and even individual faculty members. As a part of my previous institution's AI Rapid Task Force, I was a witness to how artificial intelligence splits faculty members from even the

same discipline and the difficult challenges facing an institution in creating a unified response to it. I experienced first-hand that the main problem is that there was not an agreement on how to approach artificial intelligence on any level of the institution; individual faculty members, even sometimes those within the same fields, had an array of pedagogical responses to artificial intelligence. On one extreme, some faculty members were quick to embrace artificial intelligence for the benefits it can provide to writing and research. In particular, faculty members thought they could use artificial intelligence to increase productivity, save time, assist in brainstorming, guide content creation, and assist with proofreading and editing. Meanwhile, on the other extreme, faculty members viewed artificial intelligence as an existential threat to their teaching and even careers. And, in between these two approaches, were many faculty who were just trying to figure out how they feel about, relate to, and engage with artificial intelligence.

As part of the AI Rapid Task Force, we were not tasked with creating an overarching institutional policy because of the array of ways faculty were choosing to engage, or not, with artificial intelligence. A singular policy supporting the use of artificial intelligence, or the ban of it, would have run afoul of many faculty members. Rather, we were tasked with creating syllabi statements that would allow individual faculty to customize their pedagogical approach to artificial intelligence. The committee's three approaches reflected how faculty were engaging with artificial intelligence—now, this is not the official language of the policy, but rather the spirit of it. The first was a "No use of artificial intelligence in the course." The second was "Artificial intelligence allowed only with specific instructor permission and only in specific ways." The third was "Artificial intelligence can be used in any way that students see appropriate and helpful without limits." In many ways, the institutional approach reflects the broad array of faculty approaches to this issue.

Just like individual faculty members, institutions of higher education often do not have a singular approach to artificial intelligence. While there is often a lack of overarching institutional policy regarding artificial intelligence, there is frequently guidance in the form of institutionally sanctioned syllabi statements or pedagogical approaches that faculty can take with artificial intelligence. Moving out of the first few years of working with artificial intelligence, how will institutions deal with artificial intelligence going forward? They are currently scrambling to create ad-hoc committees, standing groups, and, in some cases, permanent institution-wide committees to address this issue. In the next section, I make the case for why writing centers should build and use social capital in order to position the center as an institutional leader on artificial intelligence.

BUILDING AND USING SOCIAL CAPITAL: WRITING CENTERS AS INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, writing centers are ubiquitous at institutions of higher education. They are also a core student service that often serves the entire student population and, in some cases, faculty, staff, and community members. While tutoring functions as a common denominator among vastly different and disparate writing centers, they do more than just tutoring. According to Jackie Grutsch McKinney, "Tutoring is seen as the great connector; the single thing that all writing centers have in common, the *work* of a writing center" (59). But writing centers do much more than tutoring and have a broad portfolio. In her survey of 141 writing center directors, McKinney found that most (81% or more) provide workshops for students, most (61–80%) provide Writing in the Discipline (WID), Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), or Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC) initiatives, many (41–60%) conduct workshops for faculty, among many other services the writing centers offer. Writing centers also provide numerous services outside of peer tutoring, including workshops, writing retreats, community partnerships, embedded tutoring, dissertation/thesis programming, writing groups, speaker series, and more. These statistics highlight how writing centers engage with, and serve, institutions in a variety of different ways and functions. They also show how writing centers are often doing WID, WAC, and CAC initiatives that span the institution.

The pandemic highlighted for many institutions the importance of the writing center and the services that they offer. When the pandemic hit, writing centers were quick to shift their services online (if they weren't already providing online tutoring and resources) and to find unique and creative ways of providing services to their institution. Many writing centers were able to find inventive ways of taking what they had been doing in person and shifting it online. With the rise of artificial intelligence coming on the heels of the pandemic, writing center personnel can capitalize on this unique moment to argue for their enhanced role in working through issues surrounding artificial intelligence on an institutional level.

Artificial intelligence represents a seismic shift to writing centers because of the potential for it to mimic many of the moves that tutors do when helping a client with the writing and composing process. It is during these types of seismic shifts that it is important for writing centers to build and use social capital. Social capital is "value derived from positive connections between people," which "[i]n industry, … is described as a set of various relationships, reputations and assets existing within an organization or with its partners and customers that enable

business processes to function as efficiently and effectively as possible" (Mask). It is important for writing centers to develop and build social capital as a way of increasing goodwill, trust, and relationships between the writing center and various stakeholders within and outside of an institution. This social capital can be used to support, maintain, and sustain the writing center. If artificial intelligence presents a potential threat (or even an existential threat, according to some) for writing centers, then being proactive rather than reactive would be beneficial. This would allow writing centers to help mitigate the negative effects of artificial intelligence while advocating for their own role in the institution. Being proactive for writing centers builds on Rebecca Hallman Martini's work *Disrupting the Center*, where she argues that writing centers must be proactive in responding to "crises" in higher education. If artificial intelligence is not a "crisis"—if only because we are not sure how, as a field, to approach it—then I am not sure what is.

Artificial intelligence is a technology that is not going away and, if anything, will continue to quickly evolve. In this situation, it is important for writing centers to be among the leaders at the institution in addressing the issue of artificial intelligence. One way to do this is to build and use social capital. Writing center administrators should develop partnerships and collaborations with other members of the institution are leading the response to artificial intelligence. This will allow administrators the chance to build a coalition of support and stakeholders that can help the center. Hallman Martini writes, "When writing centers can find ways to respond innovatively to potential disruptions in higher education, they increase their chances to build social capital" (6). With social capital comes the opportunity to influence the future of the writing center.

Since the advent of artificial intelligence, I have worked at two institutions of higher education as a writing center administrator. Both experiences have been drastically different in terms of how the institution responded and how I was able to use social capital. At my previous institution, institutional administrators were quick to respond to artificial intelligence by developing an AI Rapid Task Force; artificial intelligence was viewed as a harbinger of a seismic shift in higher education. However, each institution has responded to artificial intelligence in different ways and, as Buck and Botvin note in their introduction to this collection, the "application of AI within higher education settings is highly contextual." And, in Chapter 2 of this collection, Velez et al. observe that even among campuses in the same system, there are differences in how each is addressing GenAI. This demonstrates the institutional differences, not to mention the potential drastic differences, among writing centers in approaching this issue. However, it is important in both situations to develop social capital and position the writing center to participate in important conversations about artificial intelligence when they happen.

How can we, as writing centers, build social capital at an institution? Here are some strategies that have worked for me:

> **Run the Center Well:** It seems obvious, but a well-run writing center is the foundation for developing social capital at an institution. The center should have effective tutor training, assessment, supervision, management, and mentoring.
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> **Shameless Self-Promotion:** Take any opportunity to promote the writing center on campus through listservs, emails, and other forms of communication. Other forms of self-promotion include semesterly and annual reports disseminated to campus partners and institutional administrators.
>
> **Develop Partnerships:** Connect with other programs and services both on- and off-campus. This helps to create advocates who understand what the writing center does and defenders of the writing center. Additionally, partnerships help build goodwill towards the writing center.
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> **Create Programming and Initiatives:** Expanding writing center services beyond tutoring will help to insulate it against changing tides in student learning (like artificial intelligence). This also helps writing centers diversify their offerings to students, faculty, staff, and community members so that when there are challenges to one program, it does not necessarily mean that that program is the only thing the center is invested in.
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> **"Speak" to Institutional Administrators:** Use semesterly and annual reports to "speak" to administrators with data featuring the impact of the writing center on student GPA, retention, persistence, as well as usage rates. It may be helpful to collaborate with institutional research (or a similar office if the institution has one) that can help provide demographic and other information about students who use writing center services.

These are just a few of the ways that I build social capital at my institutions which I can then use to advance the goals of the center. In the next section, I discuss how writing centers (both tutors and administrators) are on the front lines of addressing issues of artificial intelligence.

WRITING CENTERS ON THE FRONT LINE

In a recent workshop I provided on artificial intelligence, I queried the

participants on their use of it. The responses from students, faculty, and staff could not have been more different. While students admitted that they use artificial intelligence tools frequently and in a variety of ways, most faculty and staff members present acknowledged that they rarely, if ever, had used artificial intelligence tools. In fact, some faculty and staff members had not even used the tools. It was telling that even if faculty and staff were not using these tools, students were. The downside is that this mismatch does not necessarily place many faculty and staff members in a strong position to contribute to artificial intelligence conversations at institutions. For writing centers, this situation highlights just how important it is that tutors, often students, are prepared to talk with other students about artificial intelligence.

Writing centers are uniquely positioned to address artificial intelligence considerations because they are on the front line of working with students on artificial intelligence in their writing and communication. Scenarios abound where students may bring in works that intersect with artificial intelligence, including:

1. During a session, a student indicates that they used Grammarly to help them improve their language in their work. However, unbeknownst to them (but known by the tutor), some Grammarly versions use artificial intelligence.
2. A student is using artificial intelligence in their work and comes to the writing center to see if it can be detected by a tutor. Their idea is that if a tutor can detect it, then so can a teacher; if a tutor can't detect it, then maybe the teacher can't as well.
3. A student does not want to plagiarize and wants to learn how to properly cite the portions of their paper that they used artificial intelligence to assist with.
4. A student is encouraged by their instructor to use artificial intelligence to help them develop their paper. However, the artificial intelligence software is not giving them the responses they want, and they need assistance in how to create better prompts for the tool.
5. A student is using artificial intelligence to help develop their work but still wants feedback from a tutor.

These are just a few of the many ways that artificial intelligence may appear during a tutoring session. And, outside of the classroom, this may be the place that sees the most issues connected to artificial intelligence.

Outside of teachers, tutors are most likely to encounter issues of artificial intelligence in their daily work; tutors are also well-positioned to help students navigate artificial intelligence. In particular, within any given session, tutors can

help students with artificial intelligence literacy, ethical considerations, and creative applications.

> **Literacy:** Writing centers have the opportunity to help teach students about artificial intelligence. Tutors can teach students how artificial intelligence is based on LLMs, how to provide iterative instructions to artificial intelligence in order to get the program to do what they want it to, and about the biases inherent in artificial intelligence. How to incorporate artificial intelligence into a student's work and how to cite artificial intelligence.
>
> **Ethical Considerations:** Tutors can work with students to discuss and examine the ethical considerations of using artificial intelligence. This can include how and when artificial intelligence can be used in a work, as well as proper citation when it is used. This could also involve reviewing an instructor's individual policy or the institution's policy to ensure that the student is in compliance with all requirements.
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> **Creative Applications:** Artificial intelligence is not limited to just composing texts but also has creative applications for other forms of composing. Artificial intelligence programs, according to faculty in the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University, "can make suggestions for visual editing (such as color correcting or enhancing the image), assist with the design of 3D models, make suggestions on typography based on context and the intended audience, and generate complex patterns and designs that humans might not be able to do on their own." Artificial intelligence can also help create videos, photos, images, and more.

Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli, in *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, list what they call the "many hats" that tutors wear. These include ally, coach, commentator, collaborator, writing "expert," learner, and counselor. We can add "Artificial Intelligence Practitioner and Authority." While tutors can work with students through these areas of artificial intelligence, writing center administrators and professionals can also assist faculty and staff in navigating artificial intelligence issues.

Writing center administrators are also on the front line of artificial intelligence considerations. Administrators must not only prepare tutors to work with students on issues of artificial intelligence, but also prepare tutors to navigate the myriad of policies put in place by the institution and individual instructors. Not only must

tutors be trained to be literate in artificial intelligence, but tutors also need to be able to talk about ethical considerations and creative applications. That means writing center administrators must understand artificial intelligence, have the ability to develop tutor training for it, and know how to implement policies for the writing center concerning it. Additionally, faculty and staff may query administrators about how they should pedagogically approach artificial intelligence or how students are working with it. For both administrators and tutors, there is much they can contribute to institutional knowledge regarding artificial intelligence.

CONCLUSION

Much of this work has been devoted to why writing centers should be part of institutional conversations and policymaking regarding artificial intelligence; however, there are also benefits for writing centers that result from being party to these discussions. Part of it is self-serving—if artificial intelligence presents a potential crisis or disruption for writing centers, then being proactive, rather than reactive, is beneficial. Being proactive allows writing centers to help mitigate the negative effects of artificial intelligence on the center while advocating for their own role in the institution. It also allows writing centers to build important partnerships and collaborations—namely, social capital that can then be used to support and protect the center. And, it ensures that writing center administrators are preparing tutors to work with a technology that is here to stay.

Throughout this work, I have argued for the important role that writing center administrators, staff, and tutors can, and should, play at institutions of higher education surrounding conversations and decisions about artificial intelligence. Others in this collection, including Girdharry (Chapter 4) and Johnson and Wynn Perdue (Chapter 1), make similar arguments about writing centers. While the situation of each writing center is different, they are bound together because of the way that they serve as hubs of communication at the institution. Even though this work has argued and laid out the case that writing center personnel should help plan and implement an institution's approach to—and policies surrounding—artificial intelligence, it remains an open question if institutional administrators are going to welcome writing center personnel to a seat at the table.

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