

# CHAPTER 4. FROM MARGIN TO MAINSTREAM: WRITING CENTER VOICES IN GENAI STRATEGY

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Tell me if you can relate: every summer, about two weeks or so before the fall semester starts, I have a wacky teaching dream where I show up to class without a syllabus or any preparations done, and my classroom is a hotel room or something equally as awkward, distracting, or uncomfortable (most recently, we were in some kind of aquarium situation with water-splattered whiteboards and large fish with pointy noses). Although I love teaching and have been at it for a while now, I still get those little anxious dreams of worst-case scenarios (students awkwardly sitting on hotel beds is way worse to me than some stinky fish water).

During July 2023, still weeks ahead of my annual teaching dream pattern, a new type of anxiousness emerged around my sleep cycle. The public releases of generative AI (GenAI) platforms were becoming increasingly prominent in students' lives, and I worried we might see a decline in our writing center's appointment numbers. Would students still seek our guidance when some GenAI could potentially offer instant feedback and writing support? And at all hours of the night? In my head I imagine students tapping away on their computers, chugging energy drinks at 2am with lo-fi Spotify playlists coming through their headphones (either curiously small or almost comically oversized—there's no in between in my brain's rendering of students in headphones); how could our modest writing center compete with a form of accessibility we would never be able to offer?

Determined to face this challenge head-on, I devised a strategy to maintain my writing center as a neutral, welcoming space for students, regardless of their engagement with GenAI. The guiding principle was simple: honesty and openness. It was important for students to feel comfortable discussing their use of GenAI to allow us all to learn and adapt together. To this end, I reached out to my department that month and urged colleagues to include clear GenAI policies in their syllabi, even providing sample language to make the process easier, whether they were all-in, all-out, or open to experimentation with GenAI. That fall, when I announced the opening of the writing center to the larger faculty

community, I outlined our stance on GenAI and emphasized our commitment to fostering a critical and ethical approach to these new tools, should they be allowed by instructors. To support my staff, I also developed a mini-training session to begin equipping them with knowledge and strategies to address GenAI-related queries during tutoring sessions.

These efforts were not just about managing a potential decline in usage; they were about positioning the writing center at the forefront of this advancement in writing and technology. By taking on GenAI with a critical yet open mindset, I aimed to enhance our support for students and remind them that conversation is a critical part of the writing and learning process (Bruffee). But why stop there? In just a short amount of time, higher education is being reshaped by the public availability of generative GenAI technologies. While this new age of GenAI presents unique challenges, it also offers opportunities for innovation in teaching and learning. Writing center leaders, with their long history of adaptability to technological advancements and close eyes on the kinds of writing happening across campuses, are positioned to play an important role in navigating these changes.

## FIRST, A FEW CAVEATS AND SOME CONTEXT

This chapter builds on Joseph Cheatle's argument in Chapter 3 that writing centers are not only ready but well-positioned to lead institutional conversations about GenAI. While Cheatle underscores the importance of building social capital and proactively addressing GenAI's challenges, my contribution offers a closer look at what that leadership can look like in practice. Drawing from my experience as a director, I explore how writing centers can leverage their positionality, pedagogical knowledge, and cross-campus visibility to shape ethical and practical responses to GenAI without losing sight of the very real labor and resource constraints many of us face.

Before saying more, there are a few caveats to consider. Writing centers still often continue to be marginalized within academic institutions, with their leaders juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, often without adequate financial support (see, especially, *Disruptive Stories: Amplifying Voices from the Writing Center Margins*, edited by Elizabeth Kleinfeld, Sohui Lee, and Julie Prebel). This marginalization can exacerbate the strain on writing center staff when they are called upon to contribute to new initiatives, such as GenAI integration. Moreover, it is also important to note that being at the GenAI table does not necessarily mean advocating for an all-in approach to GenAI. Even the most technologically excited writing center directors can, and probably should, voice concerns about GenAI integration to ensure that the ethical and pedagogical

implications are carefully considered. Lastly, writing center professionals should be consulted on students' learning and writing regardless of GenAI integration, as they have a strong pulse on what is happening across the college. Writing centers are still perhaps "the last best" neutral spaces on college campuses that can offer unique insights into writing practices and challenges across disciplines (Waldo). This neutrality makes writing center professionals essential voices in broader institutional conversations about writing, and their involvement should be seen as part of a broader commitment to thoughtful and balanced strategies (with or without GenAI) that prioritize student learning and support.

While acknowledging the constraints faced by writing center administrators, it is essential to take seriously Jackie Grutsch McKinney's argument to "complicate the writing center narrative in ways that include what now lies at the periphery of our work" (6). Writing center professionals possess unique expertise that can significantly contribute to institutional GenAI initiatives; however, having a seat at the table must mean more than just being present: it must also come with the necessary resources and recognition to ensure sustainable and effective contributions. While this may seem like a line of pie-in-the-sky thinking given the fiscal challenges many institutions are facing (Marcus), we need to take seriously the creative ways we can best leverage the expertise various constituents across campus bring, given the historical dimension of our field and the breadth of ways writing centers can add depth to further institutional strategic initiatives. Given the experience we bring to the GenAI table as well as the caveats around labor and valuing expertise, what might having writing center professionals in GenAI strategy roles look like? In the following section, I offer a brief narration of one way my writing center has been brought into a positive spotlight when it comes to GenAI and writing. For context, I direct the writing center at Babson College, a small, private business school in Wellesley, Massachusetts, with 29 percent international students as well as 21 percent first-generation students. I manage a staff of around 20 undergraduate peer consultants and one or two professor consultants each semester. I am a non-tenure track, full-time teaching professor who receives one course release per semester, which equals a 2-2 teaching load. In addition to teaching and directing the center, I have service and scholarship requirements. Our writing center is not open during the summer.

## **COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP IN GENAI INTEGRATION**

Soon after emailing my department about GenAI policies, I received an email from associate professor of entrepreneurship Erik Noyes: he was putting together an interdisciplinary team of faculty to build community around GenAI, which was called The Generator (The Generator). The team wasn't trying to create the

tools—we'd leave that up to the labs at places like MIT and Stanford—but we were trying to see what we could do with the tools in our context as a business school with an emphasis on entrepreneurship. As Erik explained during those first months of planning, this was about thought experimentation (*and ethics*, I'd add); this was about classroom innovation (*and pedagogy*, I'd emphasize). When I accepted the invitation to “play” with this group—and it was playful in its very nature of coming to try something new and share our successes and failures, like children pretending to be stranded in the forest gathering sticks and leaves to ford a stream—I found myself with a team of curious and thoughtful colleagues with disciplinary backgrounds in IT, strategy, and theater as well as the director of The Foundry, our on-campus makerspace where students do things like make prototypes with cardboard and scissors. We'd eventually add a few more colleagues to the team: a design-thinker, a philosopher, an academic technology specialist, and a data scientist who specializes in machine learning.

I emphasize my colleagues' areas of expertise not to just highlight the interdisciplinary nature of this team but to share something intentional on my part: I was always promoting the writing center. Given that my duties involve maintaining and sustaining the work of the writing center, promoting its work is a major part of that. Given that my main collegial interactions had been with other liberal arts faculty members who knew my role on campus yet still needed reminders on what exactly happens in the writing center, being physically present in spaces with these colleagues from other areas of campus further reemphasized the role of the writing center. And given the visibility this work would go on to give me as part of the team—through events for faculty, meetings with various stakeholders, a think tank with the college's president, and a presentation to the Board of Trustees—being director of the *writing* center meant something because GenAI and writing were so bound up in this moment.

To be clear, I do not recommend that writing center directors immediately create an interdisciplinary team for the sake of potential think tanks with their presidents or anything like that (and, chances are, many are already engaged in some form of committee work in this area). What I do recommend, however, is strategically making GenAI part of your work and then strategically making that work visible to others. In my case, this included giving a GenAI-focused workshop for our Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching, speaking about how GenAI has impacted writing at our Academic Technology Innovation Center's semesterly kickoff meeting, conducting research on GenAI (surveys, interviews, and teacher research), and supporting my staff in these conversations. Most of these opportunities emerged because of my visibility through The Generator—chairs, deans, and other administrators were now casually reminded of both me and the writing center beyond the opening-day email I send every semester.

## STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR WRITING CENTER DIRECTORS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

To move from individual case to broader application, the next section offers a set of strategic initiatives designed for writing center directors working in a range of institutional contexts. While my own experience at Babson has been shaped by interdisciplinary collaboration and administrative visibility through The Generator, I recognize that not all writing center leaders have access to the same networks or resources. Yet, across contexts, many share a common imperative: to understand and respond to the shifting terrain of writing and GenAI while protecting the core values of student-centered support. These strategies build on the ethos of relational, context-sensitive leadership that has shaped my own work and that I believe can guide writing centers through this moment of change. The following chart outlines strategic initiatives that writing center directors could implement to examine GenAI and/or integrate it into their services and potentially raise visibility of their important voices in larger GenAI strategy. These initiatives are categorized by complexity and resource availability, ranging from basic steps to more advanced, resource-intensive strategies. Each level offers actionable ideas that can be tailored to the specific needs and capacities of different writing centers and are meant to inspire contextualized projects as opposed to offering any sort of blueprint to follow.

**Table 4.1. Actionable Ideas for Writing Center Directors**

Level	Initiative	Description
Basic	Data Collection	Collect data on the usage of GenAI tools in clients' drafting (e.g., as part of an intake form or exit survey).
Basic	Pilot GenAI Tools	Start with small-scale pilots of GenAI-powered tools such as Grammarly.com and MyEssayFeedback.ai to see if they might complement writing support services. These tools can provide immediate feedback on grammar, style, and structure, but how effective are they in your context?
Basic	Staff Training and Workshops	Organize training sessions or workshops to familiarize staff with GenAI tools. While highlighting the benefits and drawbacks of using GenAI in writing support can be useful, I recommend prioritizing listening to staff and students' concerns and feelings.
Intermediate	Collaborate with IT Departments and Librarians	Partner with campus IT departments and librarians to explore more advanced GenAI tools and literacies. Leverage their expertise to integrate these tools and ideas into writing center services.

<b>Level</b>	<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Description</b>
Intermediate	Interdisciplinary Workshops	Host an interdisciplinary workshop, seminar, or speed-share event on GenAI that involves faculty from various departments.
Intermediate	GenAI Tools Evaluation Committee	Form a committee within the writing center that regularly evaluates emerging GenAI tools for their pedagogical value and ethical implications. This committee could provide recommendations on which tools to adopt and how to integrate them effectively into writing support services, which could then be shared with other interested parties.
Advanced	Advocate for Institutional GenAI Policies	Engage in discussions with administrators to advocate for the inclusion of writing centers in institutional GenAI policies. Let them find ways to compensate you for labor beyond your job description.
Advanced	Develop a Campus-Wide GenAI Literacy Initiative	Lead a comprehensive, campus-wide initiative aimed at increasing GenAI literacy among students, faculty, and staff. This could involve creating online modules, hosting a series of seminars or workshops, or developing resources that teach the basics of GenAI, ethical considerations, and practical applications in writing and beyond.
Advanced	Host a GenAI and Writing Symposium	Organize a symposium or conference focused on GenAI and writing. This event could bring together scholars, educators from all levels, and/or industry professionals to discuss the latest developments, share best practices, and explore the future of GenAI in writing education. This would also provide opportunities for networking and establishing the writing center as a thought leader in your local context.

By starting to think about initiatives that, firstly, serve your writing center's needs and, secondly, could be of interest to the larger institution, one might naturally be able to make moves towards the center of the GenAI storm (for better or worse, of course) in ways that fit with one's job description as opposed to adding too much to it. Whatever the efforts, we can aim to not only enhance writing support but also position writing centers as key voices in shaping the future of writing instruction and policy within their institutions.

## **LAST, ANOTHER CAVEAT AND SOME FINAL CONTEXT**

Although I anticipate wacky teaching dreams to continue for as long as I have the honor of being an educator, and while—at the beginning of each semester since the proliferation of GenAI tools started impacting my work—I still

secretly wonder if *this* will be the semester students stop making appointments with us, I feel more confident than ever in the work of writing centers. I further feel immense pride in my writing consultants and what we are able to offer that GenAI cannot. I also, at times, feel overworked and, far worse, guilty that my attention is diverted away from my staff and students. As much as I think that engaging in this work from my position ultimately benefits the learners my institution supports in various contexts, it can sometimes feel like a full-time job on top of my regular, full-time job. As Lepp Friesen and Buettner argue in Chapter 16, sustainable engagement requires reimagining our roles as collaborative and caring rather than endlessly responsive. At the heart of writing center work lives conversation and collaboration, and my final caveat for writing center professionals is that we consider ways of working that protect our time and peace. For some, this might mean that conversation is the main driver of participation—it’s coffee with colleagues from across the institution; it’s committee work on policy and best practices for writing and pedagogy; it’s finding allies who have the capacity to carry part of the load at this time. For others, actively collaborating on events and initiatives with those on your staff and beyond are the best starting points for making a difference. To be certain, my experience has been invigorating, but I may benefit from some self-advocacy for continuing this work: additional payment, a course release, an assistant director to help with the day-to-day tasks of managing a schedule, a staff, and a physical space. To offer some final context of what I’ve accomplished from the list of strategies in my current context at Babson College, here is the list again but with a sense of what I have done:

- **Data Collection:** My writing center uses WCOOnline (<https://myw-online.com/>), a widely used writing center management platform, for scheduling and data collection. On our student intake form, I added the following question: “We are here to help you succeed in writing and would never judge (or share information about) your AI usage. Are you/will you be using AI? (check all that apply).” Students choose from a list of options:
  - Yes—because my professor wants me to
  - Yes—because I want to
  - No—because my professor doesn’t want me to
  - No—because I don’t want to
  - Other—will explain below
- The addition of this question was inspired by conversation, and nervousness, in my tutor-training practicum, where a source of stress came from the idea of “calling out” a student for potentially using Ge-

nAI. While it is hard to gather how this is impacting sessions, I don't feel that it is hurting them at all.

- **Pilot GenAI Tools:** Although I have dabbled with GenAI tools specifically meant to support writers, such as the ones listed above, this is not where I'm putting my energy, beyond a couple of informational meetings with Grammarly and trying out MyEssayFeedback.ai with my own writing.
- **Staff Training and Workshops:** GenAI has become a regular part of our center though I haven't necessarily done any rigorous training for my staff: in spring 2023, I simply asked how they felt about GenAI (they were horrified); in fall 2023, we worked through scenarios inspired by the blog post "AI in the Writing Center: Small Steps and Scenarios" (Deans et al.) (they were curious); in fall 2024, I ran a storytelling exercise where small groups of consultants co-wrote very short stories about Princess Babson, and then we collaborated on a story as a whole group by having consultants add one word at a time, which modeled how LLMs work (there's a reason we all started the story with "once upon a time"; they were delighted, particularly when we saw how much better our small-group stories were vs. the predictive-text story). Like several contributors in this collection (Beardsley; Greene and Kupsch; May; Cecil-Lemkin and Johnson), I've found tutor training to be an evolving space for navigating GenAI through tutor reflection, roleplay, and revision of their own understandings of GenAI as co-writers, evaluators, or rhetorical readers. These activities reflect a broader shift across the field toward training tutors to navigate GenAI as a site of rhetorical and ethical complexity (Craig; Crull; Partida; Krasova and Othman). Like recent professional development efforts at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, which combine theoretical grounding with practical strategies, our approach encourages tutors to explore both the possibilities and limitations of AI within the context of student-centered learning.
- **Collaborate with IT Departments and Librarians:** Our digital literacy librarian created a "Generative AI and Information Literacy" Canvas course as part of a badging initiative; she asked if I would consider piloting it in my first-year writing classes. I did. This meant adding my current students to her course site and giving them homework credit for completing the modules in one week.
- **Interdisciplinary Workshops:** Although my Generator colleagues have really been the ones to step up and lead interdisciplinary workshops for faculty, one initiative I've been a part of is helping to co-facilitate

a full-day AI Teacher Training Program (AITTP); using a peer-training model (sound familiar?), after three iterations of the AITTP, 50 percent of our faculty have been exposed to various GenAI tools and concepts—I specifically focused on AI-powered tools for research and talked about prompting in relation to the rhetorical concepts students learn in our writing program (audience, purpose, genre, exigence).

- **GenAI Tools Evaluation Committee, Advocate for Institutional GenAI Policies, Develop a Campus-Wide GenAI Literacy Initiative:** I have not done any of these.
- **Host a GenAI and Writing Symposium:** On November 1, 2024, I hosted 40 representatives from over 30 institutions to talk about GenAI and writing. There was so much enthusiasm and gratitude for creating space to share successes, challenges, and plans for the future that I hosted a second symposium on June 14, 2025, that grew to 60 representatives from over 40 institutions.<sup>1</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As this edited collection illustrates, GenAI presents challenges and opportunities for writing that need to be addressed contextually. The case of Babson College demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and strategic planning, and the initiatives outlined in this chapter offer a menu of strategies to navigate the complexities of GenAI integration. Whether through small-scale projects or comprehensive institutional collaborations, these strategies emphasize the importance of various perspectives and the need for continuous dialogue with faculty, students, and administrators.

Further, in this moment of GenAI, the inclusion of writing center voices more specifically in broader institutional discussions is not just beneficial but necessary. Their unique perspective on writing pedagogy, coupled with their ability to balance technological innovation with student-centered support, positions them as essential contributors to the ongoing evolution of higher education. Whether advocating for thoughtful and responsible GenAI use or offering informed concerns, writing center directors can ensure that these tools enhance, rather than undermine, the core mission of supporting learners. As we look to the future, writing centers should continue to play a role in shaping the way GenAI is used in education and ensure that technology serves as a tool for empowerment rather than a replacement for the rich, interactive processes that define learning. Or, at least, one can dream.

<sup>1</sup> For more context on what this looked like, see <https://theimportantwork.substack.com/p/spilling-the-ai-tea>

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