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## Launching a High School Writing Center

Fall 2004 / Focus

by *Peggy Silva*

**A behind-the-scenes look at how one high school developed a center that not only helps students fix their writing, but also helps promote and celebrate it.**



Peggy Silva

We cast a very wide net when we established our high school's writing center in 2002. The Center's mission statement promises "to foster an active writing community for all members of **Souhegan High School**. We had a writing center twelve years ago at our school's inception, but in that start-up environment we did not have a clear sense of the primacy of this work with student writers. Consequently, we did not retain this position when our writing teacher left the school. Our student population grew from 550 to over 1000, however, and our parents were urging us to dedicate more resources to student writing to support classroom instruction. I left my position as an English teacher on an interdisciplinary, heterogeneous ninth-grade team to become the school's writing coordinator. We are now working to place our writing center at the intersection of teaching and learning in our school.

Although we initially wrote a very broad statement of purpose outlining a wide range of writing opportunities and support, I knew that the school community would eventually define the appropriate work of the Writing Center. It was important to me that the Center address the entire continuum of student ability. I wanted to support struggling writers and also to work with students for whom writing is a joy. I wanted students to learn basic skills, and I wanted to help students and adults seek publication for their writing.

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It was difficult to find sustainable models of high school writing centers that were not strictly places of remediation. I met one writing coordinator who trained students to work with peers and was successful in his work. He taught a full schedule of courses, however, which severely limited his time in his writing center. His program has since disbanded—a cautionary tale for writing center work at a high-school level. Fortunately, our administration recognizes that the writing coordinator needs to be available full-time to support students, and we designed a comfortable environment with comfortably tacky cast-off furniture, eight computers, a printer, and a small copier.



### Souhegan High School Writing Center

I knew that from a marketing perspective the first initiatives had to be very public, so I designed a series of monthly writing contests in celebration of writing. Broad themes have worked best. Students do not want to write on specific topics. One of the contest themes, “From the Refrigerator Door,” encouraged students to submit a piece of writing that they had written for one of their courses. The most popular contest themes have been “Simply Good Writing”; “Gatherings,” personal narratives or memoirs of seasonal memories; “To Rhyme or Not to Rhyme,” our annual poetry contest; and “Witches and Wizards and Elves, Oh My!” our fantasy and science fiction contest.

I convene panels to discuss anonymous submissions and select winning entries. The student panels give me immediate insight into the work happening in our English classrooms; students are able to provide thoughtful feedback, posed in terms of strengths and suggestions. Each contest participant receives a letter that includes both warm and cool feedback. During the first year of the contest, 130 students contributed writing to these contests; this year that number has been much, much lower. One reason is that as more students use the Writing Center, I have less time to market the contests. Until this initiative gains strong institutional support, the number of entries will be erratic.

Looking for opportunities to contribute to writing initiatives within the school, I have helped the guidance department develop a packet of sample college recommendations, r̃©sum̃©s, and application essays. I guide students in the writing component of our Senior Project and have worked with others to develop an assessment rubric for our mandatory junior-year research paper. I also offer workshops for English teachers in memoir and nature writing, research various publishing opportunities for my colleagues, and respond to alumni who would like feedback on their first college writing assignments.

Our English department has indicated a desire to sponsor a Writing Fellows program, similar to one offered by Brown University. We would train student fellows in writing and mentoring skills and assign them to assist a specific teacher. Fellows would receive an honors designation for their work. We will wait until the Writing Center is operating at full capacity to investigate this option further. Until a majority of teachers request help with student writing, there will not be widespread commitment to working with student fellows.

In the Writing Center’s second year of operations we have doubled last year’s contacts with students and teachers. Over 350 individuals have scheduled time at the Center: seniors come to work on their college essays and their Senior Projects, juniors come to write or revise their research papers, and sophomores schedule time to work on narratives for their portfolio presentations. Although I

participate in writing conferences in ninth-grade classrooms, very few of our youngest students ask for help. The ninth grade will therefore be a focus of next year's work.

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In order to serve the needs of all constituencies within our high school, I have to be very attuned to the work happening in our classrooms. Our district has decided to implement the 6+1 Traits model of writing instruction and assessment. Over time this program will give students and teachers from all academic disciplines a common language to discuss effective traits of writing. Students from kindergarten through twelfth grade will use common tools to discuss ideas, organization, voice, fluency, word choice, conventions, and presentation. This program will make the coordination of writing initiatives flow more smoothly and demonstrate successes as students rise through our school system. It will also give us many more opportunities to celebrate rather than bemoan students' writing habits.

Although I have published two books and several articles, I am a novice in technology. I carry only a vague awareness of the influence we can have in our small New England setting to affect others with our work. Our technology coordinator encourages, cajoles, and nags me to place student and faculty writing on our school's Web site—another focus for next year. I am eager to enter the conversation about the power of places in which students can engage in serious work that matters to them. I have only begun to scratch the surface of opportunities to make a difference in my work with student writers.

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