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Minding the Gap: Realizing Our Ideal Community Writing Center

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Realizing Our Ideal Community
Writing Center

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What does it mean for a community writing assistance program to bridge the gap between the university and the community? What makes for a successful alliance between these two worlds usually considered distinct? Our paper addresses these questions by reflecting on the factors that have contributed to the growing success of our CWA program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Taking into account the varied alliances forged through our work—between the funding organization, instructors, community leaders, and writers themselves—we hope to offer a multi-faceted picture of local literacy outreach and partnership.

On a Saturday afternoon in May at the lively South Madison Public Library, our Community Writing Assistance instructor is busy. She helps a sixth grader write a book, talks with a prospective graduate student about a personal statement, assists a retired teacher brainstorm places to publish her memoirs, and coaches a job applicant on the rhetorical differences between English and Spanish. Subsequent Saturdays and Mondays see a continued array of diverse writers and writing as our staff work with community members on their novels and short stories, their online advertisements and personal essays, their cover letters and resumes. Each writer arrives not just with a project, but with a unique set of skills, questions, and investments; instructors bring the same. Together these collaborators foster an alliance between worlds often imagined as distinct—those of the community and of the university. This alliance, as it emerges from community writing assistance programs, is our focus here. Specifically, we will explore the potential of Community Writing Assistance (CWA) programs to redraw traditional borders and transform them from "zones of division" to "zones of conjuncture" (Kaiser and Nikiforova 12).[1]

We explore these borders by reflecting on our two-year old CWA program, housed at two public libraries and staffed by three graduate instructors trained at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center. As we examine the practices that have contributed to the growing success of our program as well as the assumptions and motivations that have helped shape these practices, we address the following questions: How has the CWA program been shaped by its changing connection to the community? What is the link between this connection and the way CWA work is valued—by the charitable organization that funds it as well as instructors, community leaders, and writers? Each of these groups provides a lens through which to view the different facets of a community-university connection. Our hope is that by considering these unique yet

interrelated perspectives, we will be able to develop a more complete picture of these partnerships. We frame these questions with a concept we call "minding the gap," since the phrase captures some core truths about our work: we mind (both in the sense of being *bothered by* and *attentive to*) gaps of all kinds, between townships and universities, between instructors and writers, and between theory and praxis.

CWA History in the Community

The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Community Writing Assistance program was founded in 1999 by a graduate student who identified a need for community writing assistance. A handful of volunteer graduate students and one full-time staff member from the university writing center staffed a "Writing Help Here" table for a year and a half at a neighborhood center, then for two more years at the main branch of the public library. They tutored writers of all kinds, but business was never truly steady.

One possible reason the program faltered in these early days was its reliance on volunteers. However dedicated, our instructors were juggling paid employment, school, and personal obligations along with their CWA teaching. Did they care about the program? Certainly. Did they appear for shifts as consistently as they would have if they were being paid? Probably not. Another possible explanation is that the program did not have a strong champion in the community and therefore lacked a clear delineation of the community's writing needs. There was, in other words, a gap between the university writing center and the needs of community writers that the original founders of the program did not have the resources to bridge.

These resources appeared a few years later in the form of funding, initiated by Emily Auerbach, a University of Wisconsin professor and the director of Odyssey, a rigorous nine-month, college-access course in the humanities for adults facing economic or other barriers. Professor Auerbach requested and provided grant money to establish the Community Writing Assistance program's presence in the library. Our instructors worked with Odyssey students as well as other library patrons and business started to bloom. Now paid to tutor, instructors became more committed; they canceled only when absolutely necessary and then found a substitute. We have since dissolved our ties with Odyssey (because they were meeting their own writing needs), found a new funding source, and turned our attention to the ever-growing need for writing assistance in the rest of the community. Those early days taught us an invaluable, if axiomatic, lesson: programs improve when endowed.

The second important ingredient for our program's growth was Chris Wagner, a community leader who gave us a sense of local writing needs. Branch librarian at the South Madison library for thirteen years, Wagner has actively promoted the library as a community meeting place where librarians help patrons become self-sufficient in using its services. Wagner initiated an enthusiastic publicity campaign for CWA that included putting flyers up in neighborhood businesses and continually recommending our services to community members. She explained that before CWA came to the library she "spent a lot of time, both my own personal time and library time, helping people with just basic writing needs that are presumed when you walk into most libraries." She added that she "could not provide anywhere near the need that was there." Her sense of what community writers needed and her position in the community was essential in further establishing the CWA program.

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Developing community allies and reliable funding sources allowed us to take a step towards bridging the gap between the university and the community. As Wagner noted, past efforts at university/community partnerships do not work well when university representatives try to "impose their ideas and their structures and their beliefs on what communities should be or what people should be working towards." When reflecting on this perceived and actual gap, she added, "It seems absolutely ironic that on one end of Park Street is the University of Wisconsin and on the other end of the *same street* a few miles away is a completely different world." With a rueful shake of her head, Chris said that to her it is "amazing that the two seem to have such difficulty bridging that gap" and that "CWA has been one of the most successful ways."

Minding and Bridging the Gap(s)

What, then, does success mean in this context? In other words, how do we know that we are, in fact, successfully bridging a gap between the university and community? To answer these questions, we turn to the first of our partners—the charitable institution that funds our work.

The Evjue Grant

The idea of successful bridge-building is inherent in our program's funding. We owe our current success in no small part to generous grants from the charitable arm of Madison's city newspaper, the Evjue Foundation. In 2004-05, the Foundation's support allowed us to hire graduate students from the UW Writing Center to teach two three-hour shifts a week in the public library; renewed support in 2005-06 allowed us to add a third weekly shift. It is worth noting that the road to winning this civic grant ran straight through the university. Applications for Evjue monies first went to a committee housed in the Chancellor's office that reviews all of the university's entries. The committee then sent its recommendations to the Foundation, where university and city projects compete. Funding for this program, in other words, was collaborative. In some ways, this strong collaboration between one of the city's largest charities and the university comes as no surprise: the UW's guiding philosophy suggests that "the borders of the University are the borders of the state itself." In practical terms, this philosophy—long called "the Wisconsin Idea"—constructs community outreach as integral to the university's purpose; it also frames everything beyond the university as a classroom, another place where students can learn. This concept reflects what David Maurrasse, for example, sees as essential to effective university-community partnerships: prioritizing their inclusion in the university's mission.[2]

Meeting the terms of this mission is essential to our funding. In order to convey the substance of our project to potential funding sources, our coordinator, Melissa Tedrowe, emphasizes that we meet a unique need in the community, that what we provide is not offered by anyone else. It can be difficult to prove a void, so we present year-to-year statistics augmented by individual success stories. We also stress reciprocity. Invoking the community-as-classroom vision embedded in the Wisconsin Idea, we propose that a distinct kind of learning takes place for graduate students who teach in our CWA program—learning that their university seminars and teaching cannot provide. Citing the current affinity for service learning in higher education, we argue that CWA teaching readies our instructors for future academic careers.

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In offering repeated funding, the Foundation recognizes that community writing assistance counts as much as any other university work. This commitment is shared by two of the program's instructors, Kate Vieira and Julia Doggart. As Kate puts it, "It's time for those of us involved in community writing programs to interrogate the notion that our work is charity." In other words, we need not position ourselves, in Margaret Himley's words, as "the one who provides the service, as the one who *donates* time and expertise, as the one who serves down, as the one who writes up" (430, italics ours). "We pay for what we value in this society," Julia notes, "and we value what we pay for." What some might characterize as "giving back" becomes not about "giving" at all, but about providing a valuable service. Implicit in the funding, then, is an expectation that there would be a natural flow of educational services and resources between the university and the larger community and that those services could be central to graduate students' employment. Financial support ultimately eases the process of minding the university-community gap in more equitable ways.

Instructors

Just as our funding supports university-community interdependence, our instructors' motivations and personal values place this relationship in a central position. Both Kate and Julia value—and in fact actively pursue—a sense of community that extends beyond the university and ultimately accentuates what they see as the porous nature of the university-community border. On a practical level, community writing assistance requires more of a time commitment than other writing center work at our university. The two library locations are a bus or car ride away from campus, and the CWA hours are on two weekday evenings and Saturday afternoons. Although semesters are packed with classes, teaching, dissertation writing, and various meetings, CWA instructors make trips across town after hours. Moreover, until recently a commitment to CWA came with the expectation that those teaching in the program would continue their shifts during semester breaks.

This level of commitment by instructors is motivated by a desire to "bridge the gap" between the academic world and the world outside of it. Julia wanted to bring writing out of the classroom and into the community to alleviate her sense of the academy being cut off from the rest of life. She sought involvement in CWA to feel that university learning was not something divorced from the community or feeding off it, but an experience that could be about moving into the community in productive ways. Kate also actively sought out a role in CWA. More than reaching out or giving back, however, she wanted to connect with a community that was different from her current one in the university, but shared some similarities with three other communities she had been close to. Kate was attempting to bridge her new graduate student world with other worlds with which she was familiar, all three ethnically and linguistically diverse like South Madison.

Both Kate and Julia had previously integrated themselves into different communities, and this naturally drew them to work in CWA. Kate had worked under the formal umbrella of the Peace Corps; Julia had lived on a Kibbutz in Israel and in an Ashram in India. While taking a trip down Park Street is certainly not comparable to travel overseas, Kate and Julia both believed in the satisfactions and challenges of connecting across differences and weaving their academic lives into a larger frame. At the same time as they were both eager to be a part of the community, they also wanted to con-

tribute to it. Julia describes her desire to assist people with their writing needs, a desire with both pragmatic and ideological benefits: it would have fundamental value because of the central role that writing plays in our culture, and it would extend university resources to those who did not have immediate access to them.

CWA is one way to make a link to the university; however, it is important for instructors to acknowledge that those of us in the university can easily take excursions into the community, while those in the community can less freely explore the university. We need to consciously be aware of the tension between acknowledging real power differences and nurturing our desire to see the university-community border as porous. As we interrogate the language of "community *outreach*" that suggests that the university must not simply reach, but reach far to meet those who live and work outside of it, we would like to propose that "reaching out" can become less of an immense stretch and more of, say, a handshake. As instructors, one of the ways we can begin to achieve this goal is to focus on the value that flows in both directions when the university and the larger community meet. As Linda Flower writes, it is a rare relationship in which "partners work in the same room—and on the written page—together" (95). In this way, we mind the gap.

Community Leaders

Without Chris Wagner's belief in both us and in her community, such a reconceptualization of the university-community border would be impossible. Wagner stressed the importance of recognizing the skills, abilities, and value offered by each side of the partnership. "I don't want our library and our community perceived as poor little South Madison," she insists. "When, instead, it's perceived as a vibrant community with lots to offer, then I think…the partnership is more likely to succeed." The learning curve for those of us on the university side is especially high. For instance, as instructors we learn about community activism, local politics, and the diverse contexts in which people put pen to paper. Instructors and writers also develop meaningful and mutually supportive relationships. As Chris Wagner notes, our exchanges are not one-sided conversations. From her perspective, a "true connection is being made," and she rightly assumes that our "lives are much richer" from these interactions.

Wagner emphasizes that the key to a successful partnership comes from meeting actual needs, not imposing idealized needs onto community members. As David Maurrasse puts it, "making a societal contribution has to be a more active process, in which communities present their priorities to the academy" (16). In a recent CCCC presentation, our colleagues Julie Wilson, Dawn Fels, and Tiffany Rousculp cited the various ways their programs heeded local imperatives to everyone's gain (Wilson, *et al.*, "Building a Community Writing Center."). For our part, we have done best when we all follow the lead of those closest with the people we hope to serve. For example, when we were just starting out, Chris Wagner told us that, "It's presumed that [everyone] can fill out an application for a job, apply for financial aid, write a resume or pay someone to do it…even very basic things like that," she told us. "I know from our experience that's not true of a lot of patrons who walk through our door." Wagner's recognition that she could not fulfill all these needs given the many demands of her job affirmed her vision that "CWA would be a great hit and it was." Since then, she has helped the CWA program succeed by continually publicizing our services to a diverse array of people in the community.

Since CWA is based in mutuality and in meeting the actual needs of this diverse community, we have a central placement in the library. We set up our writing assistance table in the middle of the library, just past the circulation desk and directly adjacent to the double row of computers. This means that anyone entering the library is likely to see us and our sign, and most people will either walk past us or near us as they seek out books or go to use a computer. Even those library patrons unfamiliar with CWA will frequently ask about us because of our central placement. It also means that those who might be unsure of the services we offer can observe us interacting with patrons and perhaps feel emboldened to approach us. This central placement (both materially and in the value system of the librarians) shows that CWA is integral to the mission of the library and dedicated to serving more than superficial needs.

One way to accommodate these diverse needs is to keep our definitions of community-university boundaries fluid, a conceptualization of "community" that is reflected in the constantly shifting nature of Madison itself. In Wagner's terms, Madison is "often the first stop for people—the first stop in the United States and the first stop in Wisconsin." Madison has what Wagner refers to as a "stable base" that has "existed for a long time." She describes the community's identity as "based in African American culture with a widening acceptance of other cultures and a wide range of tolerance for different ways of looking at the world." Her description of the Madison community aligns with Jeffrey Grabill's definition of community literacy: a "commitment to others" that is also a "commitment to collective action *and* difference" (91).

This sense of expanding our notion of community is part of an ongoing conversation with Wagner about the differences between community" and "university members." So far, we have noted that community members access university resources when they come to us, but the opposite also applies: UW students occasionally use our services because of proximity or some other reason. This has raised some debate among our staff, some of whom think we should consider defining CWA clients strictly as community members as opposed to university students. Yet Wagner wisely points out that community members are university students and that library patrons are community members. Perhaps she is right. While we do want to serve writers who might otherwise not have access to the university's resources, who are we to identify who fits into our idea of "community" and who does not?

Writers

While funding, our own reflections, and community leaders' perspectives give us insights into the ways that our program bridges the gap between community and university, ultimately the voices of community writers themselves carry the most weight. As a nexus for different strands of the community (however we define community), the South Madison Library offers an ideal place for the university and community to intersect. What do writers believe about the value of CWA services? And how do they experience the connection between the university and the community? The writers we interviewed are a small sampling of those who regularly use our services, and their comments reflect the kind of feedback we tend to receive on a more informal basis.

Mares,[3] a Mexican entrepreneur and mother of four, heard about community writing assistance on one of her biweekly visits to the library with her kids, where she noticed the advertisement for our services. She is writing a novel and was eager to

work on her writing each week in a setting free from family or household distractions. Initially, she thought the program would be a writing group where she would share her work with other writers. While she recently suggested that this might be a productive way to expand the program along with adding a bilingual component, she finds significant value in one-on-one time with an instructor. In fact, she decided to write her novel in English to accommodate the monolingual nature of our program. She expressed her views in an interview with Kate:

> I really value your ideas and input, the way that you suggest things without saying. You know, [you're not] the type of person that would impose something that you would suggest. And that's very good. Because it's different. If I read my story and I can say, 'Oh, it's great. It's perfect,' but . . . your input and your ideas, your suggestions, are very good.

Most of all, she says, she appreciates the instructor's time. When Kate reminded her that, after all, she did get paid and was not a volunteer, Mares replied, "But still, if you are willing to do it, it's because you want to help people. That's the first thing I value, because there are not many people who would do it, who would be willing to help others."

Mares' relationship with her instructor suggests some ways, then, in which the gap is being bridged and affirms the notion that value goes both ways. She feels that her writing is respected and that the CWA program gives her an excuse to do something she had always wanted to do—write. She says of her novel writing, "It's a way to express my ideas, thoughts, and feelings. It gives me a chance to mix fantasy with reality." In other words, she brings her own agenda to this particular literacy program, and that agenda is taken seriously.[4] In the spirit of mutuality, she also seeks to give back to the program that she feels has helped her. She hopes to create a handout of writing tips she has picked up since she started coming to CWA for other community writers. Mares appreciates the help and the time the instructor offers her, and for her part, Kate enjoys the stimulation of reading drafts and exploring different novelistic strategies. They exchange books related to the project and have developed a friendship that extends outside of their tutoring time.

Mares and the other two CWA writers we interviewed share an appreciation for the impetus CWA provides for their writing, the increased focus and engagement with it, and the non-evaluative environment that allows them to flourish. In the context of an ongoing tutoring relationship between one writer and instructor that has grown and deepened over months, the writer expressed that, "I came here to practice my English, but I realized that I liked actually writing itself." This "liking to write" is revealed in the development of his stories from simpler to more complex and colorful plots and word choice, along with incorporating a clever sense of humor. "People can express more in writing than in speaking," he says.

Another CWA writer, a woman in her seventies, echoes the significance of writing and, in particular, the value of working through her writing with a reader. She came to CWA for help narrating her history for her grandchildren. She says, "I had started a few paragraphs and it wasn't satisfactory or organized. I thought this is hard work…When I found [Julia], it didn't seem so hard." In particular, she says that Julia "made me start

by asking me questions." Over the course of several months, she developed her writing voice, and the writing proved to be generative as well: the more she wrote, the more she remembered. While she had initially believed that she "wasn't an author" and didn't think she "had the skills" to write the memoir, her experience with CWA gave her the confidence to continue writing.

Some of the writers we work with have pointed out the importance of coming to the library and being in an environment that is conducive to mutual respect and openness. The library, as a community resource that is open to all, is the perfect setting for a meeting of university and community members, and the informal nature of our CWA setup seems key. Wagner notes that while she knew the services we offer would be a hit, she wondered at first if library users would feel at ease with newcomers. She was pleasantly surprised when people were comfortable right away: "It was very un-bureaucratic…You're not walking into some stark university room where you are uncomfortable to begin with, and it felt like an integral part of the library and not imposed, but offered."

> **Without erasing the power differentials between those ostensibly assigned to the community versus the university, we do imagine an instructor's and a community member's connection over a piece of writing as a way of redrawing—or more modestly—re-sketching boundaries.**

This informal tone and interdependence is best represented by our community writing assistance box, which contains materials contributed by the university writing center, writing center instructors, the librarian, and those who come for writing assistance. As such, this box serves as an apt metaphor for a community that, as Grabill calls for, includes and respects collectivity and difference. This box is located on a crowded shelf in the library's office. Rifling through the box is the ritual that begins our weekly shifts. It contains a manuscript that a client has left for us to read, a spiral notebook to keep records, some writing center handouts in a folder, flyers for community writing assistance, a music stand on which we prop our writing center sign near the entrance to the library, and a flag that says "Writing Assistance Here" on a thin pole supported in a sand-filled aluminum dog food can.

Although UW-Madison is featured on our promotional materials, the association seems informal and does not scream "university." We have learned that there are varying degrees of awareness about our association with the university. We concluded that what was more significant than an overt link to the institution was the quality of the interactions with writers. One writer said that our connection to the university was "irrelevant"; another said that it gave him confidence in the level of our writing expertise. In one interview where we did not ask about the connections between CWA and the university, the writer did not mention the university at all. The fact that our findings around this issue seem inconclusive might suggest that we have in one sense successfully bridged the gap, since each of the writers interviewed spoke most passionately about their own relationship with their writing.

Conclusion

Although we cannot completely bridge the university and community gap—and minding it may be a hit and miss endeavor—our project here has been to take this gap into account. We have attempted to think through the ways in which our partnership might help to shorten the distance between the North and South ends of Park Street, or perhaps no longer view it as a linear relationship. By becoming more conscious of why and how we are invested in community writing assistance, we hope to improve our future—to become more responsive to new people and circumstances, to become better prepared to branch out to new locations, and, perhaps most importantly, to become more effective allies to those we serve. Without erasing the power differentials between those ostensibly assigned to the community versus the university, we do imagine an instructor's and a community member's connection over a piece of writing as a way of redrawing—or more modestly—re-sketching boundaries. Perhaps writing itself, as a potential locus of particular kinds of social agency, offers a way to rewrite these roles.

While we would never propose that our model can or should look the same around the country, we have found that our simple approach is effective and fits the geographic and material conditions of this city. We are blessed with community partners willing to talk and explore and stretch and commit right along with us, and with local writers who frequent the space in which our program is housed or who are willing to travel to find us. In this relationship we carry the trust of writers willing to temporarily place their words, their stories, in our care.

End Notes

[1] Although Kaiser and Nikiforova use these terms in a geographical context, we like their conceptual point: borders are simultaneously meeting places and points of separation.

[2] Maurrasse's chapter on Xavier University, for example, shows that while Xavier, like other institutions, has "not been able to fully incorporate community partnerships into its overall way of doing business," its mission's explicit focus on "social responsibility" (that in part stems from its status as an HBCU and a Catholic institution) has allowed for much good and innovative work to be done (141-2).

[3] All interviewees chose their own pseudonyms.

[4] See Sandra McKay's *Agendas for Second Language Literacy* on the importance of learner-defined agendas for second language literacy programs in particular.

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