Chapter 3
HBCU Writing Centers Claiming an Identity in the Academy

Dwedor Morais Ford
Central State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Due to the dearth of literature regarding HBCU writing centers a team of writing center professionals at a North Carolina started "The Conversation" to claim an identity and to secure a place for HBCU writing centers in the larger institutional context. The team invited the writing center staff of the other 10 North Carolina HBCUs to join in the effort. Within a few months, "The Conversation" evolved into the North Carolina HBCU Writing Center Consortium.In this chapter, the author shares the history and future of the organization.

IMPACT ON STUDENT RETENTION

Since the early 1980s, writing centers have become a major support initiative for student success. Hence, it is essential that institutions establish writing centers that can sustain themselves around identities that students can recognize and trust to aid students in developing their written communication skills. Students who make use of support systems like writing centers are more likely to complete their coursework successfully and persist. Persistence leads to retention and graduation.

INTRODUCTION

With enormous institutional budget cuts across the United States, it is becoming increasing difficult to fund writing programs adequately let alone set aside sufficient funds for writing centers' staff to travel to professional conferences. At many institutions, funds are reserved for those presenting at conferences. Nevertheless, whether one is presenting or not, conferences are faculty/staff development opportunities and should be supported.

As writing center administrator, the author valued the opportunity to attend conferences to help her develop skills she needed to manage her program as well as develop the voice and expertise to communicate with upper administrators, faculty/staff, students, and the local community. Attending professional conferences enables attendees to experience a smorgasbord of sessions to get a sense of the successes and challenges of managing a program.

One of the first sessions the author attended as a new writing center director addressed building a relationship between the writing center and the campus library. This session was timely in that when she took the helm of her institution's writing center, the associate provost for academic affairs requested that she establish satellite centers across campus. The author was excited that the conference offered several sessions like "Librarians and Writing Advisers Merge Intentions, Information, and Identities" which focused on how librarians can collaborate with faculty and peer tutors to teach research skills. Within weeks of the conference, she established two satellite centers—one in the library and another in the School of Education—at her institution. Sessions like "Line Dancing: How Professional Tutors Can Promenade Between Roles of Teacher and Tutor" and "Draw, Erase, and Redraw: Blurring the Boundaries Between Classrooms and a Writing Center Staffed by Faculty" provided the insight she needed to work with eight composition instructors, who were serving as professional tutors in the writing center. The knowledge the author gleaned from these sessions helped her to get instructors involved in much needed research regarding composition pedagogy and effective writing center practices.

Conference attendees can gain valuable information by paying close attention to poster presentations. As a new writing center director, the author attended poster sessions like "Paths, Edges and Nodes: Kenneth Lynch's the Image of the City and Roles of Writing Centers." Poster sessions, mostly one-on-one, gave her a visual understanding of complex writing center theories and the language necessary to translate theories into practice.

With a doctorate in Rhetoric and Professional Communication, the author has been linked with writing centers for many years in one way or another—as a writing instructor, as a graduate teaching assistant with writing center duties, as the office mate of a writing center director, as a director of composition, as a writing center faculty, and as a writing center director. Attending writing center conferences over the years connected and strengthened the links she describes above. However, much of her exposure to writing center literature and practice was at majority-serving institutions. When she joined the writing center staff at a historically Black college and university (HBCU) several years later, she recognized the paucity of literature relating to writing centers situated at HBCUs, many of which were established in the 1890s, and wondered what had contributed (is contributing) to the lack. The author understands that since Philo Buck's presentation, "Laboratory Methods in the Teaching of English" at the 1904 American Education Association conference (Lerner, 2009), writing centers have gradually but consistently increased in number in the United States. Undoubtedly, writing centers exist at all types of institutions—majority-serving, minority-serving, community colleges, professional schools, and high schools. The existence of writing centers at majority-institutions is easy to verify because they are documented in writing center literature and are easily discovered by googling. However, when it comes to minority-serving institutions, the discovery process is a bit tasking.

The lack of minority-serving institutions' visibility in mainstream writing center literature has led to the persistent assumption that writing centers do not exist at HBCUs; however, a recent internet search revealed that many of the 105 HBCUs in the United States have some form of a writing center. But less than a handful of these centers are mentioned in mainstream writing center publications. Unfortunately, not enough HBCU writing center personnel tell their own stories.

Related Content

Empowering Civic Responsibility: Insights From Service Learning
Miftachul Huda, Kamarul Azmi Jasmi, Yabit Alas, Sari Laelatul Qodriah, M. Ihsan Dacholfany and Ezad Azraai Jamsari (2018). *Engaged Scholarship and Civic Responsibility in Higher Education (pp. 144-165).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/empowering-civic-responsibility/188575

Examining the Benefits of Teaching Active Study Strategies as a Part of Classroom Instruction
Melissa McConnell Rogers (2020). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (pp. 41-55).*
www.irma-international.org/article/examining-the-benefits-of-teaching-active-study-strategies-as-a-part-of-classroom-instruction/260948

Engineering and Information Technology: Challenges and Opportunities for Exchange Studies
Shanton Chang, Martina von Imhoff and Rikke Ilona Ustrup (2016). *Handbook of Research on Study Abroad Programs and Outbound Mobility (pp. 300-324).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/engineering-and-information-technology/164123

Building Capacity to Implement Community Schools
Jane Quinn (2020). *Emerging Perspectives on Community Schools and the Engaged University (pp. 62-79).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/building-capacity-to-implement-community-schools/237495

Learning Design Thinking Through a Hands-On Learning Model
Norman Gwangwava (2021). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (pp. 1-19).*
www.irma-international.org/article/learning-design-thinking-through-a-hands-on-learning-model/274939