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Back to the Center: Press Rewind and Then Fast Forward: A Historical Look at The Writing Studio at Georgia State University

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By Beth Godbee, Georgia State University

Rewind

Like many centers founded in the 1970s, Georgia State's writing center began as a writing clinic and then shifted into a writing lab, focusing on skills and grammar correction. While the center was established to serve students from all disciplines and levels of study, its primary purpose was to offer remediation for students who failed the Regents' Test, a timed writing exam required for graduation within the state university system of Georgia. In 1979, the university required students to enroll in remedial courses if after seventy-five quarter hours they had not passed the Regents' Test. The writing clinic responded by offering "Regents' Readiness Review," a combination of workshops, one-on-one tutoring, and self-directed learning with grammar films, audio tapes, spelling worksheets, and handbooks.

According to an early handbook, the writing lab was created "to provide free help for Georgia State University students with any kind of writing problem, from essays in lower level English courses to graduate theses." Although walk-ins were welcome, the center encouraged students to make regular weekly appointments. Tutors could then "diagnose" students' writing problems and keep



Hiu Liu and Corey Green discuss a paper.

records on what "treatments" were made in tutorials. All faculty (full-time professors, part-time instructors, and graduate assistants) teaching first or second year courses were required to "volunteer" thirty minutes in the writing center for each course they taught. Additionally, two graduate assistants staffed the center, and even the chair of the English department was known to tutor in the writing center. The center's hours and staff varied from semester to semester. Like the hours, the physical setting changed in the early years from a single office, to three disjointed rooms, and finally to its own space and current location within the English department.

During its first twenty-five years, the center had three directors: Marguerite Murphy, Dabney Hart, and Pat Graves, all of whom were professors of British literature. In 2002, Marti Singer became interim director until the English Department could hire a full-time, tenure-track faculty member. The department conducted a national search and in 2004 hired Beth Burmester to direct the center, conduct research, and teach classes on writing centers and composition pedagogy. In the past two years, under the leadership of Marti Singer and Beth Burmester, the center has undergone a number of changes. Notably, the English department has established paid graduate assistantships for tutors, provided the writing center with its own budget, and funded a renovation of the center's space. Singer explains that perhaps more than any other factor, "The changes in physical space facilitated the changes in operation."

Play

The physical environment of the center has been transformed from a dark room divided by carrels for private tutoring and composing on computers to an open space where tutoring is conducted at tables, often among groups of tutors and students. Changes in lighting, flooring, and furniture have affected the personality of the center. Windows have been uncovered to add light and a view of the city skyline; paintings and plants now create a friendly, homelike atmosphere; and a coffee area encourages writers to congregate in the space. We hope to make additional changes to the environment by adding sofas, showcasing student work, and rearranging the sign-up desk so that it becomes a more functional work area. As we make changes to the layout of the center, we are also updating our center resources by creating a sample papers collection, adding books about composition and tutoring, and cataloging journals not in the university library, including *Writing Lab Newsletter* and *Writing Center Journal*.

Interestingly, at a time when many directors are introducing technology into their centers, the opposite has occurred at Georgia State. Computers were removed from the center in 2002 for budgetary reasons and because the university opened two new computer labs. Despite the removal of computers for student use, technology has not entirely left the center. Efforts are underway to improve the center's website and to encourage email correspondence. Rather than answering questions through the "grammar hotline," a telephone service in use since the

early 1980s, tutors now ask community members to send quick questions through email. A database, established to track the number of conferences conducted each semester, provides insight into students' disciplinary interests, types of assignments, genres of writing, and experiences in the writing center. By recording student and tutor responses, we hope the database will be used for research into the writing center's practices and progress.

This emphasis on research led to a name change in 2002 to the Center for Writing and Research. Now, in 2004, Georgia State's writing center has again changed its name to The Writing Studio. The new name, researched by Beth Burmester, first appeared in the late 1990s at University of South Carolina and is now being used by a variety of institutions from Duke to Grinnell College. The new name indicates both a place and a method for teaching writing. For Georgia State University, The Writing Studio reflects a philosophy that embraces work-in-progress and collaboration and will allow for an expansion of programs to include creative writing and research projects with graduate students. We will begin a publicity campaign this summer to continue the center's transformation and introduce it to the university community.

As part of a large, urban university, Georgia State's Writing Studio faces distinct challenges, but also has unique opportunities for outreach. Like the early writing clinic, today's studio still helps students prepare for the Regents' Test and even keeps exam

By the Numbers

Georgia State University: a public research university located in downtown Atlanta with more than 25,000 students at undergraduate and graduate levels in seven colleges

Director: Beth Burmester

Associate director: Brennan Collins

Consultants: number varies by semester but ranges from fifteen to twenty-five tutors, who are graduate students with stipends from the English, psychology, or the WAC program; we currently have two undergraduate tutors, one from English and one from WAC.

Student visits: during 2002-2003 academic year, 5,530 tutorials, thirty or sixty minutes each

Hours open per week: Monday through Thursday 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; staff meetings Tuesday noon-1 p.m.

scores for students to pick up. Although we encourage appointments and believe that tutors and students alike benefit from regular collaborations, we do experience periods of quiet followed by waves of walk-ins. We have yet to find a way to balance the greater demand that arises during midterms and finals. Despite these challenges, The Writing Studio supports

multidisciplinary scholarship by working closely with the college's writing across the curriculum (WAC) program. Additionally, the studio is staffed by tutors from a variety of disciplines and provides volunteer opportunities for students interested in tutoring or teaching. The studio provides a referral network for the Atlanta community, where companies and individuals can find tutors or editors to help with their writing projects. The Writing Studio is increasingly involved in outreach to Atlanta's academic community and hopes to organize a coalition of area writing centers in the near future.

Fast Forward

Our future direction will include further professionalization and community building. In addition to improving studio resources and enhancing the environment, we are working to make ourselves better known on campus through increased publicity and publications, such as handouts and a quarterly newsletter. Our current projects include developing a tutor handbook, holding weekly staff meetings, and coordinating conferences and outreach programs. The Writing Studio plans to sponsor a series of workshops to increase collaboration with teaching assistants and faculty. Furthermore, we are in the process of reconstructing tutor hiring and training to include a formal and competitive application process and required tutoring portfolios like the ones teaching assistants keep. These changes are aimed at improving the overall quality of our tutoring, while legitimizing the work we do in The Writing Studio.

Reaching back to our past, we acknowledge the original mission of the center to help all university students with all types of writing, and we work to continue this tradition.

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Matt Garbett leads a group discussion.