2021

Interchapter 6A

Pandemacademia: Sustaining Programs in Times of Crisis

Roberta D. Kjesrud, *Western Washington University*

Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

About the Author

Roberta was a peer tutor, a staff supervisor, and a director at Western Washington University's Writing Center between 1988-2015. In 2015, she became the Director of Writing for Western Libraries' Hacherl Research & Writing Studio. The editors welcome communication about this piece through the Studio's email: rws@wwu.edu.

RECOMMENDED CITATION, APA 7TH ED

Kjesrud, R. D. (2021). *Pandemacademia*: Sustaining programs in times of crisis. In R. D. Kjesrud, P. Hemsley, S. Jensen, & E. Winningham (Eds.), *Learning enhanced: Studio practices for engaged inclusivity* (pp. 6A.1 – 6A.6). Western Libraries CEDAR. https://cedar.wwu.edu/learning_enhanced/11

I write this interchapter under my state's stay-at-home orders, where I've been quarantined for close to three months[1] during the SARS-CoV2 pandemic. My home office is comfy and my commute a breeze; nobody minds what I wear to work, and I don't miss meetings. What I do miss is students, both colleagues and clients. Yet it seems fewer students may become the new normal in higher education institutions (HEIs): Gen Z is smaller than preceding generations, more schools are competing for them, and the pandemic's economic fallout, what I'm calling *pandemacademia*, may put tertiary education financially out of reach. Of course, reduced enrollments create economic fallout for institutions as well; fewer tuition dollars and recession belt-tightening stands to curtail both state and private support for some time to come. Although academic support programs outwardly attract students in a competitive HEI marketplace, tutoring centers, learning centers, writing centers are often seen internally as frills that drain resources from departments. Pandemacademia creates an above average risk that administrators will see boutique services as important window dressing but ultimately as drains on central resources[2]. From a management perspective, the solution is to consolidate; in doing so, institutions gain fiscal efficiencies and students gain one-stop shops.

Few campus stakeholders will object to such consolidations. For those who believe that learning begins and ends in the classroom, support services are most desirable in times of abundant resources. Representing an unusual group who likely achieved success without needing support, faculty are likely to perceive support

[1] At the time of publication, classes (and my work) have now been online for most of a year.
[2] See Chapter 6, "Value Added," for a more detailed explanation of demographic and economic realities affecting HEIs.

programs as luxuries that shouldn't be necessary, because Johnny or Suzie should have mastered [insert name of literacy here] in high school. Finally, faculty often don't trust peer-based learning because they fear their students will get mixed messages about how to research and write. Although most faculty welcome our programs when they need to outsource educational goals (everything remedial), in the scramble for shrinking resources, many secretly harbor suspicions that support programs syphon departmental funding, provide services that shouldn't be necessary, and offer inferior expertise. Students are also unlikely to oppose consolidation efforts. Most value both the convenience and clarity of the one-stop shop. When they are research-writing, they don't have to know where to locate three different services for research, reading, and writing, they simply show up in the Learning Commons. For administrators, faculty, students, and parents, consolidating can only be good.

Despite professional stand-alone ideals, consolidating can also be good for support programs. Of course, one-stop *McTutoring*[3] may offer clarity to students and demonstrate good stewardship to the public, but consolidations harder to love when your job is on the line. Just today I learned of two long-term, high profile writing centers crippled by forced mergers that replaced credentialed directors with generic managers lacking writing expertise. While it's likely these particular moves are wrong-headed, writing center professionals typically respond to *any* consolidation efforts with petitions, angry letters, hurled insults—and a deep commitment to shore up our defenses against the invading hordes. Unfortunately, these professional conversations

[3] *McTutoring* is the unflattering term I once used for the conglomerate approach to academic support services.

often cast administrators as ignorant at best and cruel at worst, despite compelling evidence HEI administrators take to heart both student and public good.

No matter what motives them, consolidations present incredible possibilities for innovation and student learning. For years our writing center lacked stability; it was highly itinerant, woefully under-resourced, and benignly neglected. For example, in the same two-year period during which the program was moved six times, we had as little as $3500 to support tutor salaries; furthermore, I had an audience with my vice-provost boss just once a year. The writing center was a stand-alone program led by a writing professional (the disciplinary ideal), but we lacked perceived relevance to students or the University mission. A defensive win for autonomy and short reporting lines, perhaps, but a near total loss for teaching and learning. The University had fulfilled its obligation to support student success. Have writing center? Check!

Defensive moves seldom succeed in the face of institutional inevitabilities, and when those are driven by non-negotiables like economics and demographics, inevitabilities are even more, well, inevitable. Yet so much of the professional rhetoric focuses on prevention, that is, how to avoid unsavory alliances that threaten autonomy. But autonomy is overrated, especially from the perspective of increasing learning for students. The same energy writing center scholars spend defending against encroachment would be far better spent pro-actively seeking alignments that benefit student learning. Of course, merging organizational structures can be difficult to navigate, but a high ethical standard of duty to students demands that we find ways to partner despite structural challenges.

In the case of Western Washington University's former Writing Center, moving to Western Libraries was spatially desirable and organizationally expedient. For the first four years after becoming a founding partner in the Learning Commons, we continued pursuing optimal autonomy until it became obvious there were no wins for anyone in this approach. We moved three times within the library, all to less-than-ideal spaces, and we enjoyed little advocacy and support. For instance, when minimum wage more than doubled, the allocation we came into the Libraries with was no longer adequate. In a merged mindset, this resource problem garnered the no small clout of Libraries' advocacy. It quickly became apparent that collaborating more broadly would solidify our resources and facilitate more learning, so we didn't wait for the institution to mandate a merger. Instead, we initiated merging research and writing support based on optimal alignments for students.

Has merging been roses? It has not. Although our values increasingly align, we still run across distinct differences in writing center and library cultures. Library faculty now have a Studio role, but the traditional authority they carry has sometimes been an awkward fit with the flattened hierarchy writing centers value. Faculty librarians answer solely to their department chair, so the Studio leadership team relies mostly on good will when it comes to creating congruence between student and faculty practices. And finally, while the writing credentialed folks associated with Studio leadership have done much to learn research as a new discipline, library faculty have slower to acquire writing and writing pedagogies. This halting integration will become more noticeable when I, the only Libraries' staff member with writing credentials, retire in 2021. Some ten years

after I joined the Libraries organizationally, there is still limited traction for hiring Libraries' faculty who are credentialed in writing rather than information literacy.

Remaining tensions notwithstanding, from my perspective now ten years on, I believe it's high time for professionals in our home disciplines to do better adulting. Conflict is normal and survivable, so let's invest less scholarly and emotional labor in strategies for resistance and more of both in strategies for pro-actively envisioning new structures and negotiating new alliances[4]. I leave you with a summary (Figure 1, page 7) of what continuing autonomy would have cost stakeholders in contrast with the benefits they now enjoy from our merger. For us, the trials of merging seem but a pesky gnat compared to the unparalleled rewards. Perhaps at most HEIs, the same is truer than our discipline leads us to expect.

[4] For more exhaustive rationale for mergers, consult Chapter 3, "Academic Literacies as Ecology," for practitioner perspective and Chapter 6, "Value Added," for structural perspective.

Figure 1

Comparing the cost of writing center autonomy with the benefits of merging

Cost of Autonomy	Benefits of Merging
• Located in a bunker, a windowless space with a narrow door that students were afraid to enter • Stuck in traditional writing center pedagogies with 30-50-minute appointments and no opportunities for groups • Lack advocacy to backfill a 50% increase in student salaries, meaning our program would be 50% smaller • Offer half the number of tutoring positions and a quarter of the consultations • Require tutors to take 5 credit hours of a course that is a thinly veiled, unpaid job requirement (legal, but neither ethical nor equitable in our model) • Miss the invitation to pitch an innovative new venture to the Libraries' faithful and enthusiastic donors.	• Located in huge space equipped with all the latest in flexible affordances (thanks to the Hacherl family, faithful donors to Western Libraries) • Enjoy a wide open, highly prominent location that is a destination for most students • Garner attention as a key player in meeting the University's strategic goals around engaged inclusivity • Offer credit-bearing courses in academic literacies attended by the most vulnerable populations • Reach 31% more students • Offer 40 fully paid student internships for student staff, including paid professional development • Align research, reading, and writing, helping students understand these as one messy scholarly process.