

## CHAPTER 1.

# CENTERING GENAI: LEADING FROM IN-BETWEEN SPACES

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Perhaps more vexing than the pace at which generative AI (GenAI) has evolved is the ever-present challenge for writing centers (WCs) to navigate—and survive—competing institutional priorities. In the face of benign neglect and contradictory institutional practices, writing center professionals (WCPs) confront an important conundrum. On the one hand, we need allies from and tools crowdsourced with other literacy organizations; we need to stand collectively with literature, writing, and language professionals on campus and in the face of industry. On the other hand, we need to hone WC-specific conversations and resources; we need collective representation as WCPs. These needs don't always dovetail in ways that respect the diversity of our spaces, org charts, purposes, and geographic locations.

In this chapter, we narrate how two WCPs have negotiated roles within a global conversation about policy and pedagogy that has grown more urgent since OpenAI and its competitors saturated the market with advanced text generation tools that make Grammarly look like our grandmothers' rotary phones. Drawing upon our participation in intra- and inter-organizational initiatives, we examine the opportunities—admittedly labor-intensive, political, and context-specific—that literacy leaders are pursuing to demonstrate stewardship in a rapidly-changing environment.

As our community knows, the nature of WC work is interstitial. We love the ecological definition of this word because it's so apt. Interstitial organisms live and thrive in gaps—between rocks, corals, and grains of sand. Interstices, whether marine or academic, are rich with opportunity, but they require inhabitants to hone a specialized skill set to survive and thrive. The tools, spaces, and partnerships conducive to faculty work aren't always adequate for our WC roles. WCPs have evolved to operate in those rich spaces between and across classrooms,

centers, and departments; academia, community, and home; globe, region, and locale. We exercise leadership between zooming out to collaborate with others and zooming in to fill gaps with resources more organic to our WC contexts.

By telling our stories, we hope our colleagues will be emboldened to embrace this kairotic moment as an opportunity to lead rather than to retreat. To respond rather than to react. To name what we know in the face of many unknowns. And, perhaps, not only to survive but to thrive in the gaps of current understanding and practice.

## **SARAH'S STORY**

I've identified as a "writing center person" for as long as I've worked in higher education. But like many of us, I fill various other roles in my professional and scholarly life. I therefore started my work in GenAI and literacy education with some of these other identities at the forefront. I was invited to join the Modern Language Association (MLA) and Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Joint Task Force on Writing and AI, not because of my WC role, but because, as the Past Chair of the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA), I was a member of the CCCC's Executive Committee. Moreover, I was my institution's Academic Integrity Officer, allowing me to participate in scholarly conversations around academic integrity.

In those first months on the Joint Task Force (JTF), I sought to implement the advice I give when I teach group dynamics in my professional communications class. To be an effective member of a committee or team, I tell students to look for gaps: "What roles are going unfilled as the group interacts?" This is something many of us do when we represent our colleagues on committees and work teams, whether in our professional organizations, our faculty senates, or our union negotiations. We try to speak up for those whose voices aren't being represented. Similarly, on the JTF, while we certainly were not politicians, there was a clear sense that each of us felt our role was to represent certain interests and constituencies. We represented a number of institution types—Research 1 (R1), two-year, Historically Black College or University (HBCU), selective private—and came from different fields of interest and expertise.

If finding and filling gaps was part of work we were performing, so too was identifying the places and spaces in which we overlapped. With all our differences, the nine members also found many intersections in our work and experience. Having at least one other person at the table whose experience overlapped meant that we could corroborate each other's observations without long explanations. For example, Anna Mills and I represent a community college context, which allowed us to support one another when one of us brought up issues related to

fulfilling an open-access mission. Alex Lockett and I are both WC folks, but like me, she was operating as a “split advocate.” An independent scholar who’d left academia, she was providing essential feedback to the JTF on GenAI and industry. While Alex and I would occasionally discuss how WC work would be impacted by the guidelines and policies our JTF recommended, that part of our identities took a back seat to our primary representation.

As our work gained traction and Working Papers 1 and 2 gained circulation, members increasingly understood that while the JTF was providing much-needed guidance, we needed to address important gaps in representation and expertise. The JTF lacked input from Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), modern languages, and library science. Most importantly for our purposes in this chapter, no one on the JTF served as the designated WC representative. As it became clearer that Working Paper 3 would tackle the enormous issue of critical AI literacies, we knew we needed to invite more voices to the table.

Shortly after attending the 2023 annual conference in Baltimore, I got the okay to invite an International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) officer to contribute to Working Paper 3. Even before the group met on the ground in New York, I immediately felt the difference once Sherry joined our weekly virtual meetings. Someone else was in the room who automatically understood the nuanced implications of our AI literacy work for WC folks. Someone else was willing to speak up or to back me up when I raised questions about WCs. This was (and is) essential when operating in cross-disciplinary organizational leadership. As WCPs, we’re used to having to explain what we do. Until Sherry joined, I had not experienced enough of that overlap on the JTF when it came to my WC identity.

## **STORY OF NEW YORK MEETING: FILLING GAPS AND EMBRACING INTERSTITIAL SPACES**

Although we were very different scholars, the JTF had built a sense of camaraderie that fueled our productivity; we had found ways to give each other space to listen and speak. Our expanded team—which included representatives from organizations like the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the College Language Association (CLA), the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the TESOL International Association, and TYCA—faced essential but complicating factors as we commenced Working Paper 3. With little time to become acquainted, expanded concerns about how different stakeholders could be represented, and an ambitious agenda, we struggled to capture nuance without embracing flat-out contradiction.

During the breaks between meetings in New York, Sherry and I came to the realization that this working paper on AI literacies was going to be helpful to the WC field, but it was not going to be sufficient. The content of the paper was already rather sprawling, and we could no more request special sections for tutors than each of the other special interest groups could. As we contributed to the section on “educator literacies,” Sherry and I inserted reminders that not all educators could control curriculum or policy and articulated that academic freedom means something different for folks who may be categorized as staff rather than faculty—not to mention peer tutors who occupy and work in the gap between students and educators. Even as we worked, we knew more would be needed.

## **SHERRY’S STORY**

To understand why I embraced Sarah’s invitation to be IWCA’s representative on Working Paper 3 well into my much-extended presidency, you must appreciate how my tenure began. Promoted to chief officer in July of 2020, three months into the COVID-19 pandemic and only nine months into what was supposed to be a two-year apprenticeship as vice president, I didn’t yet have my finger on the pulse of the organization. I barely understood my role in planning conferences, or, as it turned out, in unplanning them. While others scouted masks, I negotiated event cancellations, organized webinars, and pored over the organization’s constitution and bylaws. WCPs were struggling to transition online, to negotiate with their administrations, and to advocate for their student workers. Some members crowdsourced a potential position statement on how to respond to mounting crises that included the pandemic, the death of George Floyd at the hands of police, and the growth of Asian hate. I struggled to respond, concerned that IWCA’s messaging reflect the organization’s international scope (the struggles facing members in places like Colombia, for example, were very different from those in the US), respect the diversity of WC contexts, and follow the association’s parliamentary procedures. I deferred to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)’s response to these problems because I was convinced that it did so on behalf of IWCA, one of its assemblies. Although I don’t believe members needed WC-specific statements to address the pandemic and the social inequities augmented by it, there are many other situations in which they do. With that said, members needed more communication from me explaining why the officers didn’t circulate the statement and why we believed the advocacy they sought was already available from a much larger literacy organization with paid, year-round staff.

By October 2023, when I responded to Sarah’s invitation, I understood the culture of IWCA. Moreover, I was convinced that GenAI invited the

kind of organizational response I was not prepared to provide during the pandemic.

## HONING A SPECIALIZED SKILL SET

News of ChatGPT-3's much advanced text generation capabilities became public shortly after IWCA's October 2022 annual conference. Although the CCCC's Annual Convention and the IWCA Collaborative programs for February 2023 were already slated, planners managed to organize a special session, "ChatGPT, Magical Thinking, and the Discourse of Crisis," for a packed room in a Chicago convention center (Byrd). Presenters included Antonio Byrd, now a member of the JTE, and Harry Denny, one of the WC community's most visible and visionary leaders. Their words affirmed my growing belief that the GenAI evolution presented WCs with problems and possibilities unique to our spaces and services. As a WCP and the President of IWCA, I needed to prioritize GenAI.

The learning curve has been slow, shallow, and uncomfortable. Occupying those in-between spaces doesn't come without bruises. I appreciated the difference between machine learning and human intelligence and understood the devastating implications of conflating them for WCs and the writers we serve, but I was blissfully ignorant of all things Large Language Model (LLM). That was about to change. I entreated my computer science colleagues to translate their vast knowledge into tangible nuggets upon which I could build; consumed numerous studies on the intricacies, affordances, and challenges of GenAI; joined John Warner's Master Course on *Teaching Writing in an Artificial Intelligence World*; and negotiated difficult conversations with overwhelmed and sometimes resistant associates.

The process has empowered and humbled me. It has allowed me to forge new alliances and strained existing relationships. I've been reprovved for straying from the "path" to another's "turf" (Woolf), but I've also been invited to new tables. These positive and painful experiences have honed my skills, leading me to refine or change my positions on GenAI policy and pedagogy. My once thin skin, a bit bruised and nicked, has molted. It's mine, but it's also transformed to suit the risk-rich aspects of the spaces I inhabit. Whereas I initially agreed with my institution's decision not to provide policy guidance on GenAI, I now address the confusion and contradiction that grows in its absence. Whereas I once understood but silently disagreed with some colleagues' decision to return to in-class writing sans devices, I now explain how such moves may augment inequities. Whereas I continue to appreciate the numerous challenges presented to WCs by GenAI, I have grown convinced

(and correspondingly vocal) that WCPs not only are well-positioned to shape policy on our campuses—in our centers, classrooms, university senate meetings, and board rooms (Essid; Essid and Cummins) —but also that we don't have the luxury of opting out.

As animated discussions during robust revision sessions and critical reception to Working Paper 3's October 2024 release revealed, some of Sarah's and my colleagues—on the JTF, in WCs, or in the greater literacy community—disagree with this conclusion. I risk alienating readers by arguing that WCPs must hone our own and others' GenAI literacy despite very real concerns about academic freedom, equity and access, the environment, labor, resources, and learning. This language—one characterized by “must,” a modal verb shouting a command—feels foreign in my mouth and prose. I consider retreating to a more polite and agreeable rhetorical space and to my postmodern roots, but I'm reminded that the consequences of not doing the work, of not advocating for our centers and our writers, are just too great. In the face of criticism that by engaging with GenAI we relinquish our power to critique it, acquiesce to its purveyors, and compromise our humanity, I ask: Do scholars have another way to vet, venerate, or veto it? Will ignoring GenAI vanquish it? If we don't participate, who or what will fill the gaps? These questions do not impede vigorous debate about how, when, and whether GenAI is used, but they assume familiarity with its affordances and limitations. For example, we must understand the degree to which it was present in writing tools that preceded ChatGPT, its cousins, and competitors. We also must concede that detection tools and efforts are fraught with pitfalls (Elkhatat et al.; Perkins et al.; Weber-Wulff). As I write, however, I recall a GenAI syllabus statement from a recent academic integrity case that characterizes “any” use of GenAI as academic misconduct and overstates the ability of our institution's detection tool to uncover it.

WCPs must embrace new ways to justify our existence, to make our work meaningful, to make writing understood as the product of human thought, and to distinguish tutoring as a human interaction, a nuanced conversation that cannot be replicated by a machine. We must distinguish writing as a process and a product of human thinking, served by but distinct from the technology that produces it. We must do so in an environment where increasingly sophisticated algorithms run by mega computers can aggregate data from millions of sources in microseconds. And, we must remind ourselves and others that even in the face of an authoritative display, computers cannot (at least for now) filter bias and prioritize quality over quantity. Without an informed user orchestrating an ongoing exchange, GenAI output is simply the product of word patterns that masquerade as thinking in writing.

## LISTEN. LEARN. LEAD.<sup>1</sup>

As we collaborated on Working Paper 3 during those overcast March 2024 days, we began to map the ecological context in which WCPs, tutors, and the writers we serve operate—both in terms of how we are similar to and different from the other literacy-focused colleagues and with regard to our own vastly different centeredness. Much of our early planning was spurred during moments when we experienced a disconnect despite genuine efforts to be more inclusive. We felt this most poignantly while reviewing draft language that addressed most of the audience via the terms “faculty” and “students” rather than by titles that included more of the roles represented by the literacy leaders in the room. This sharpening awareness—as much as the rich discussions about the shared vision and experience of the larger group—encouraged us to resist assumptions about WC roles and contexts when we drafted an invitation for WCPs to join what would become IWCA’s version of the JTF. And before readers infer that the JTF believed the inclusion of new partners in Working Paper 3 would fully satisfy the needs of all constituents, we must note that co-chairs Liz Losh (MLA) and Holly Hassel (CCCC) encouraged us to leverage the relationships we honed during the project and to customize the tools we shared in New York City within our own professional organizations. They even provided us with the names of scholars in our disciplines who had contacted them regarding the urgency of the work. It was in that list that we found our inaugural IWCA task force members.

Shortly after we returned to our respective Midwestern campuses—Sarah to a two-year college in Madison, Wisconsin, and Sherry to a regional public Research 2 (R2) doctoral institution in Southeastern Michigan—we shared our vision with that short but mighty list of WCPs. They generously agreed not only to meet in June and from locations like Dublin and Germany but also amid major career transitions. Although we appreciate the problems of asking for more from already overworked and often under-resourced WCPs, we cannot help but give a shout-out to IWCA AI TF members for their willingness to balance an eclectic and heavy load in under-resourced interstices. Thank you to Genie Giaimo (Hofstra University) for drawing our attention to issues of labor and sustainability in *Unwell Writing Centers*, their award-winning book. Thank you to Joe Essid (University of Richmond) for composing “Writing Centers & the Dark Warehouse,” which we believe is the first peer-reviewed article to discuss GenAI in WC contexts, and for articulating WCPs’ authority to exercise leadership on GenAI. Thank you to Saurabh Anand (University of Georgia), a doctoral student and recipient of the 2023 IWCA Future Leader Award and the

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<sup>1</sup> We borrow this title from a 2-hour webinar hosted on October 29, 2020, by IWCA’s leadership during what would have been its annual conference.

2024 CCCC Scholars for the Dream Award. They have worked steadfastly since July 2024 to provide leadership on GenAI. Thank you also to Nathan Lindberg (Cornell University), who agreed to join the IWCA's AI TF and to spearhead its Research and Reports subcommittee.

To begin phase one of the TF's work, we first sought to identify the breadth of experiences and perspectives in WCs across different Carnegie classifications, missions, regions of the US and the world, student demographics, WCP roles, etc. We bracketed the insights Sarah and Sherry had derived while working with the JTF and the collective knowledge that the TF shared, so we could listen to and learn from a diverse group of WCPs. We drafted and distributed a survey within two weeks of our first meeting. By the time the Research and Reports subcommittee began analyzing the data in January 2025, we'd received over 200 responses, representing 35 states, 17 countries, and almost every institution type and student demographic, albeit disproportionately reflecting the experience of faculty WCPs who operate in U.S. doctoral-intensive public institutions. Findings revealed challenges that included fears about reduced WC usage and gaps in training, but many respondents saw the evolution of GenAI as an opportunity, albeit a labor-intensive one, for WCs to redefine their purpose and to shape policy (Lindberg et al.).

In addition to a strong rate of response on the survey, we have been heartened by an outpouring of volunteers, including the generous folks who participated in our follow-up focus groups during October of 2024. Since then, 28 WCPs from a cross section of WCs now serve on TF subcommittees dedicated to professional development, advocacy, and research. Many of them have carefully articulated how their specific contexts and roles are essential to IWCA's GenAI literacy effort and how their expertise and experiences might help shape a global conversation about GenAI in and beyond the WCs. They have been eager to discuss the many ways in which the pitfalls and promise of GenAI will enhance or exacerbate existing trends. Moreover, we are pleased to report that our efforts to replicate the JTF's Experiments Archive for WCs have been rewarded with workshops, assignments, help guides, and tutoring scenarios. Our community is so generous with its innovations.

One of the most valuable lessons we've learned since forming the IWCA AI TF is that participants become leaders. The people who responded to our surveys, who agreed to participate in our focus groups, who reached out with questions, many are now members of the TF subcommittees. Repeatedly, we heard in our focus group discussions that hardly anyone began this work feeling they had enough expertise to lead. Yet, when they saw a need on their campuses, they stepped forward to begin doing that vital AI literacy work. They stayed open and curious and humble. These campus leaders are now becoming national leaders who are helping to shape practice for WCPs all over the world.

As we lead from these in-between spaces, we also recognize that even as we take steps forward, the landscape continues to shift around us. After the publication of Working Paper 3, MLA and CCCC sunsetted the JTF in early 2025, and each organization launched its own separate AI-related initiatives aimed at the specific interests and needs of the two organizations. Sarah now serves on both the CCCC Special Committee on AI and Writing and the MLA Task Force on AI Initiatives, and by maintaining these connections, the IWCA AI Task Force will continue its own work informed by the direction(s) these sibling organizations are taking, finding and filling gaps in scope and guidance that WCPs will need.

By laboring within the interstices of an academic ecology, we've learned that the rocks must form before we can comprehend what will (and won't) develop within the in-between spaces between conversations, organizations, and partnerships. The IWCA AI TF will continue its work providing policy guidance, training resources, and research for the global WC community. Through collaboration and coordination with other literacy professionals from within the interstices between center, institutions, and disciplines, we can introduce writers to new ideas, encourage them to develop the grit that will overcome inertia and gridlock, build their self-efficacy, and help them to grow a time-tested toolbox of reflection.

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