Creating Functional Social Media Practices in the Writing Center

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One challenge of running a writing center's social media account is aligning content with the center's mission, values, and goals, the latter of which can change frequently. The COVID-19 pandemic led many writing centers to reconsider the purpose of social media–whether it's to connect writing center employees to one another or help writing centers stay connected to their campus communities (Hull and Pettit; May, "Staying Networked"). At the East Central Writing Centers Association conference in 2022, our consultant, Zoe Kelley, presented on the ways our social media priorities changed during the pandemic to focus on providing visibility to consultant work, reminding writers of services, presenting consultants as dynamic people, and dispelling myths about the writing center. Once our consultants returned to in-person work, however, these social media goals shifted again. We began focusing on building and defining community and creating consistent Instagram post designs. We incorporated a variety of media, including videos, photos, and graphics to enhance our visibility, showcase consultant experiences, and demystify the writing process (Kelley). To look more closely at our social media practice, we conducted an audit of our Instagram account to track what kind of content was effective and how this content aligned with the center's needs and goals. In this article, we share our writing center's experience developing new strategies for maintaining and sustaining our social media accounts after conducting this social media audit. We hope our strategies can help other writing centers think strategically about their social media practices.

In our center, developing and implementing a social media checklist after our audit helped us gain a holistic understanding of our account as well as what kinds of posts led to the most engagement. We analyzed how we were communicating our content via text, images, and graphics. We also assessed our posts' engagement levels and accessibility practices. Ultimately, our audit aimed to address the following questions:

- What could we learn from our past social media histories so that we could adapt our practices to better fit our needs?
- How could we ensure that, in the future, our social media presence aligned with our center's values, regardless of who would be running our accounts?

In this article, we outline how we conducted our audit, share patterns we noticed, and provide a checklist we designed to streamline our principled practices for those posting on our Instagram. We conclude with recommendations for effective social media content creation.

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INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

The Howe Writing Center (HWC) social media accounts, most notably our Instagram (@HWCMiami), are managed by three main groups: a communications coordinator (a full-time staff member who focuses on the center's communication needs), graduate assistant directors (working 10-20 hours a week on various tasks, including social media and communication), and consultants who are interested in contributing to our social media (approximately 3-4 hours a semester). The authors—PhD students with backgrounds in managing various social media accounts for businesses, nonprofits, professional organizations, and other writing centers—relied on their joint knowledge of social media best practices to investigate, run, and propose practices for our writing center. At different times, both of us–Cam and Destiny–ran social media in the absence of a communications coordinator and with varied interest from consultants. We wanted to create better resources for ourselves and others working on our Instagram account regardless of their background in social media management and content creation. As such, we conducted this audit to help identify and focus our content management to align with our goals based on what we learned about our social media engagement.

The HWC is housed inside the larger Howe Center for Writing Excellence (HCWE), which also houses a nationally renowned Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. At the time, the HWC and the Howe Writing Across the Curriculum (HWAC) program operated under the same social media accounts, though they have distinctly different audiences: the HWC has a primarily student-focused audience, while the HWAC's primary audience is faculty members at Miami. HWC content is managed by the three groups discussed above and posted primarily on Instagram, the platform our university's undergraduates report using most. HWAC content is managed by the communication coordinator and posted on Facebook and LinkedIn. At the time of our audit, we had 31 peer writing consultants (graduate and undergraduate) that served Miami University, a mid-sized, R2 institution in the Midwest.

To analyze our posts, we created a spreadsheet and coded Instagram posts from the summer of 2021 up until the end of the spring semester 2023, totaling 185 posts. We chose this timeframe because it encompassed our institutional knowledge of what staffing and center practices looked like, as Destiny started as a graduate assistant director in December 2020 and helped coordinate the social media team beginning in 2021. During this time, there were shifts in consultant interest in our social media as well as transitions to a new communication coordinator; Destiny or Cam assumed the primary responsibility for organizing, running, and implementing our Instagram.

Overall, we analyzed 185 posts using 12 categories. Most relevant to this article are the following six:

- type of media (text, photo, graphic, video, etc.),
- number of likes and comments,
- if the post met accessibility standards (e.g., captions, alt text),
- the primary audience,
- if the post followed Instagram genre conventions (see Christison; Adegbola et al.),
- the post's purpose.

FINDINGS

Several trends related to post engagement and effectiveness emerged when we conducted our audit. Three factors most impacted the reach and effect of our Instagram posts: 1) clarity of

audience and purpose for cross-center content; 2) adherence to Instagram platform and genre conventions, including accessibility of content; and 3) strategic selection of media type based on audience and purpose. Being mindful of these three factors can improve social media content and practices, boost engagement, and help achieve the goals of engaging with intended audiences.

Cross-Center Content (Consider Audience and Purpose)

During our audit, we analyzed posts based on their intended primary audience. Because we are responsible for the HWC social media content, our goal was to increase engagement with our target population, so we wanted to know how many posts catered to that primary audience of Miami students and how they performed. We measured success by looking at the number of likes per post.

We focused on the audience of our Instagram because it is important to cater to our primary target audience (in this case, students). Being clear and strategic about our target audience can lead to better engagement. Our audit revealed that our 185 posts often had mixed audiences, audiences outside of our primary audience on Instagram, or unclear audiences. As seen in Figure 1, while most of our posts were aimed toward and focused on our primary student audience (59.5%) or a mix of students and faculty (14.6%), many posts were directed at unclear audiences and had unfocused content (11.9%).

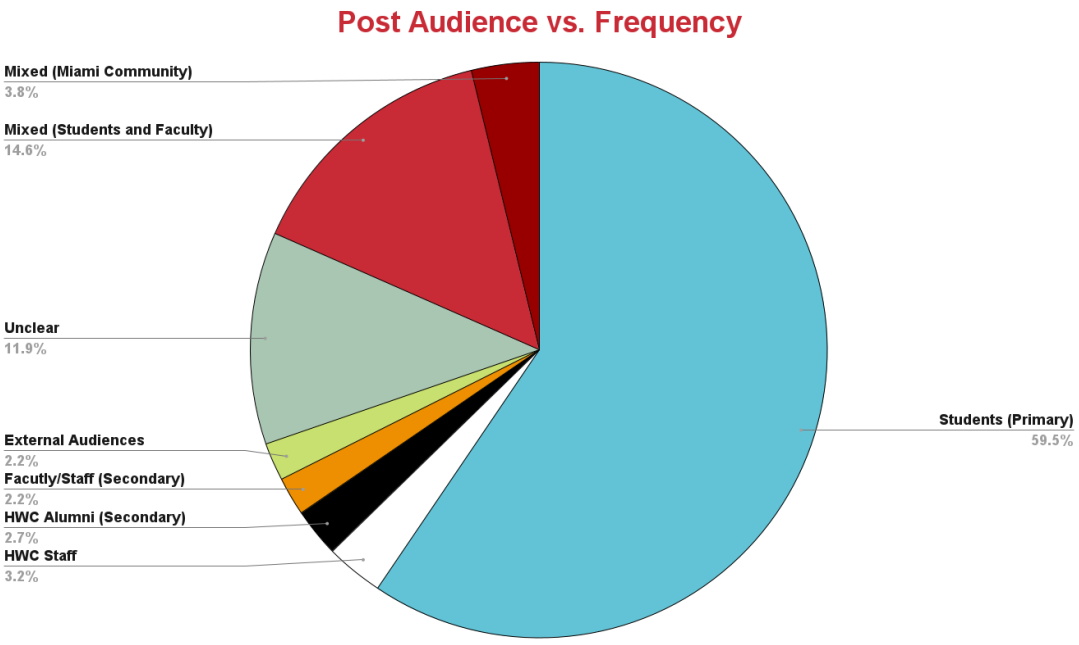

Figure 1: Audience engagement by post.

When conducting our analysis, we found that making audiences clear (e.g., marketing directly to students **or** faculty **or** both) is the best way to navigate the complex waters of cross-center content, as research indicates that brands who understand their audiences clearly and speak directly to those audiences have better success with engagement (Christison; Adegbola et al.). We realized we need to provide better training on developing content for target audiences to those involved in our social media. Our staff needs to understand which platforms target which populations and which strategies reach different populations. We collaborated with our communications coordinator to think through how the HWAC content could reach its audiences

on the Howe Center for Writing Excellence's other social media outlets, like Linkedin and Facebook, while ensuring Instagram focused on our student population. Centers that house a writing center and a WAC program might consider dividing platforms to best serve their particular audiences, and our center found that separating these made them easier to manage.

One of the most impactful findings from our audit was that posts aimed at other audiences performed better (more likes and comments) than content for our student audience (as seen in Figure 2). From this data, we came to understand that we needed to do a better job of creating content for our primary audience so that students engage with our page and continue to be shown our content.

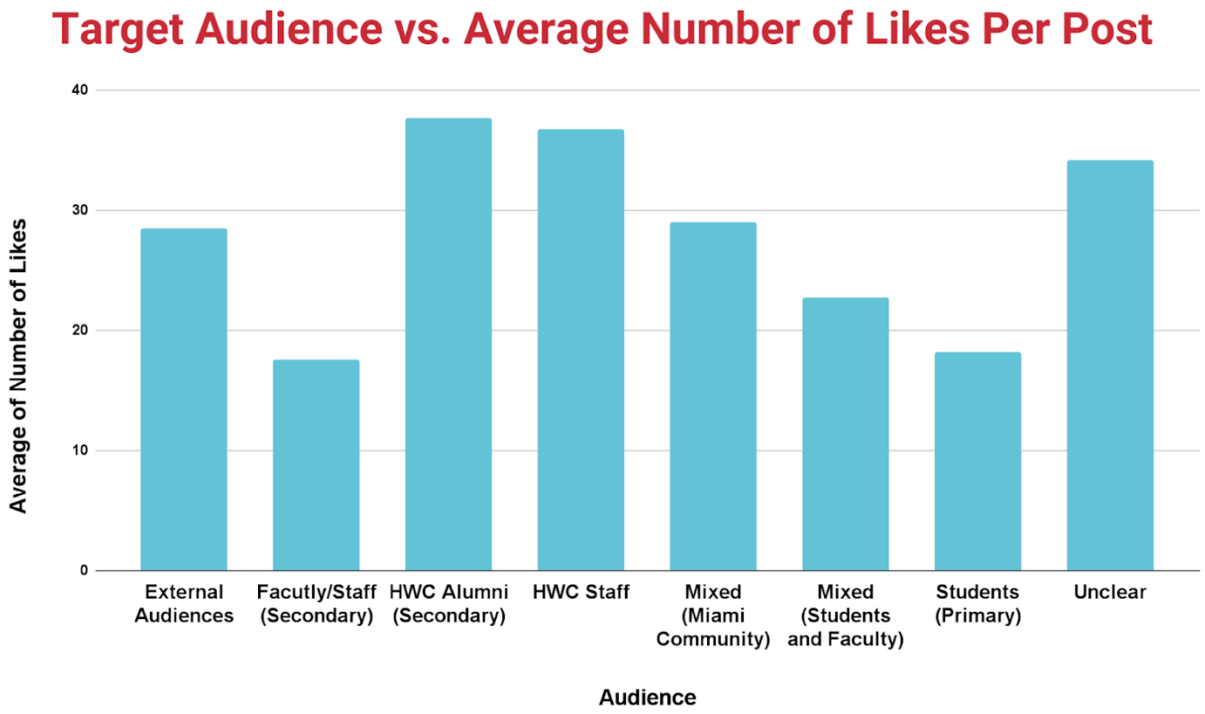

Figure 2: Target audience vs. the average number of likes per post.

Accessibility and Genre Conventions

While analyzing our results and aiming for best social media practices, we also noted through the audit that we sometimes failed to meet accessibility requirements or platform-specific genre conventions. To assess our accessibility, we looked to see if our hashtags were accessible, as capitalizing hashtags makes them more screen-reader-friendly (e.g., #miamiuniversity vs. #MiamiUniversity). We also checked to see if we included alt text on images. As for genre conventions, we analyzed whether posts used links in Instagram captions, as this goes against genre conventions because Instagram doesn't integrate usable hyperlinks in their captions.

Our audit showed that a little less than half of our posts (46.5%) were accessible and met the criteria listed above. It was important that we abide by genre conventions and create accessible content, as we want our posts to reach as many students as possible, and this inspired us to find new ways we might be able to address accessibility in our online presence. Knowing that not everyone will have context for creating accessible digital content, this finding motivated us to

provide resources to everyone on our team to help create better digital writing center content. To do this, we relied on in-platform resources like Instagram's Accessibility Help Center and other resources like Colorado State University's "Tutorials and Best Practices: Steps to Inclusive Content."

Relationship Between Media Type and Audience Engagement

Finally, as seen in Figure 3, we found posts that contained images of people, whether they be consultants, staff, or faculty, had more engagement (likes and comments) than those that had no images or contained more than just images (graphics, videos, etc.).

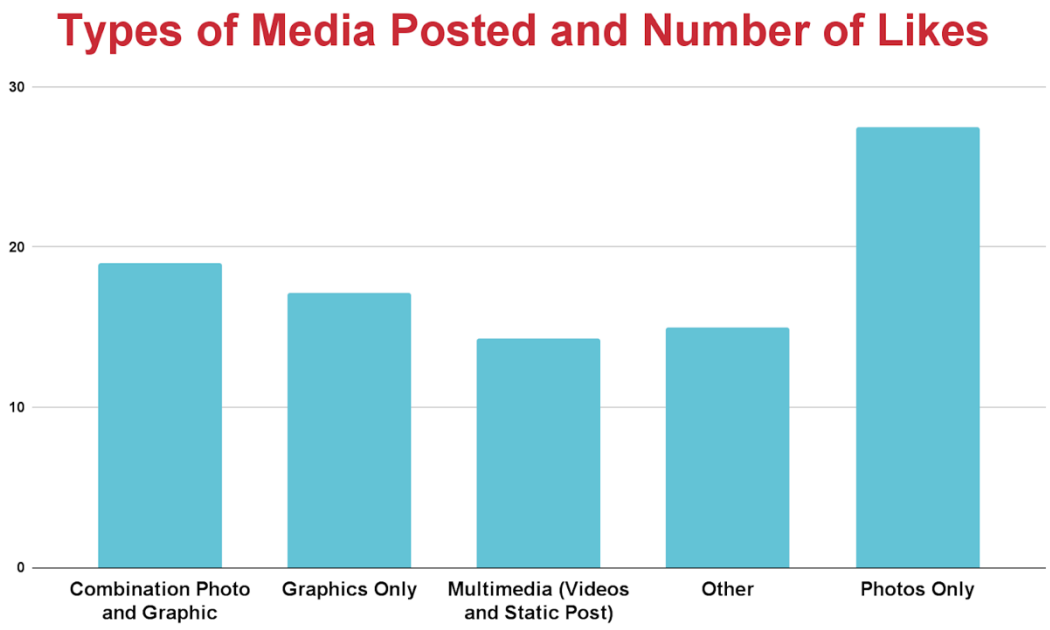

Figure 3: Social media engagement on posts with photos and graphics.

This finding complicates how we might plan posts that provide information for events. Figure 4 provides an example of how we have advertised events in the past. These posts tend to be very text-heavy, which may not be effective. We realized we might benefit from using features like Instagram Stories to advertise recurring events that are more text-heavy, but this also indicates that Instagram might not be the platform to advertise for events that require lots of text.

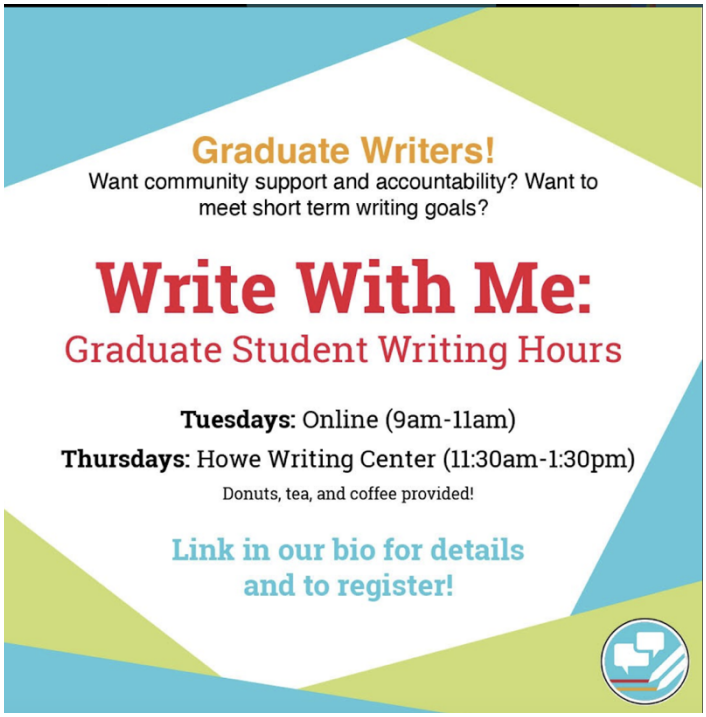

Figure 4: Example of a post that is text-heavy.

While we recognize the importance of communicating using text, our social media audit showed that we generally receive less engagement when posting text-heavy or graphic-based posts. Previously, we had posted text-heavy template-style graphics that we reused and posted multiple times by simply swapping out the text. As a result of comparing the findings of our audit with social media best practices, we want to diversify the types of posts we create to include both posts that have text and posts that are more image-based. However, as visible in Figure 3, posts with a combination of graphics and photos have the second-highest rate of engagement, although engagement is still not as high as posts that are only photos.

While we believe in creating and posting a wide variety of content, we know that the simplest posts featuring consultants typically receive more engagement (e.g., photos of consultants at a writing center conference or a writing center event). Our goal is to try to make creating content easier for those responsible for social media while also acknowledging that the more engagement we get from posts that are primarily photos with people, the more likely it is that our other posts will reach their intended audience.

IMPLEMENTING OUR FINDINGS AND CREATING OUR SOCIAL MEDIA CHECKLIST

Given our social media management and the findings outlined above, we wanted to make sure that regardless of who was creating and posting content on our Instagram page, the content was standardized, accessible, and reflective of the goals of our center. Built from our audit, the checklist below helped us streamline posting content on Instagram:

- Post is void of URL or QR code in image
- Caption is void of URL (on Instagram)
- Interactive media (URL, etc.) is posted in Linktree
- Photo permissions are secured

- Photo and/or graphic is of good, professional quality (i.e., they are not blurry, there are no typos, and things are easy to read)
- Post is geared towards the university student community (primary target audience)
- Post tags relevant departments and programs
- Post includes accessible hashtags (each word is capitalized, such as #NationalPoetryMonth)
- Post provides alt text for any images or graphics (e.g. a brief description of the image in a way someone could understand the image if they could not see it)

Using this checklist has helped us create accessible content that our primary audience finds appealing. This content acknowledges genre conventions and limitations of the platform and features media that drives engagement. We suggest adapting the checklist to align with your writing center's goals, audiences, platforms, and principles. We hope this checklist can be a tool for other writing centers to ease the process of posting content in a rhetorically informed way, as it has for us.

The first three checklist items all deal with Instagram genre conventions. Because Instagram is typically used via mobile app, it is important that we consider user experience for links on the platform. Our center uses links to facilitate sign-ups for events or direct students to sign up for appointments, so it is important we integrate these links into our social media use in a way that is effective and usable. Because Instagram cannot currently hyperlink on a post or in a post caption, the most user-friendly way to link our audience to a website is to use the link-in-bio method (applications like Linktree), wherein we point our audience members to our profile bio to get them to go to the webpage we reference.

The fourth checklist item centers our personal and center-held beliefs in prioritizing privacy and the safety of our consultants. Our center's policy ensures we do not reveal the last names of our consultants to protect their privacy and to create boundaries between the consultant and the writer (so the writer doesn't try to contact them about consulting outside the center). Though we often like to celebrate our consultants and the work they do outside the center, we want to ensure we do not violate their privacy. We also try to communicate with consultants when we'd like to post photos of them on our accounts and ask permission when taking more candid photos of consultants and other Howe Center for Writing Excellence affiliates at events.

The fifth checklist item aims to help maintain our professional brand image and make sure that all content we create represents our work as a center. It is important that we create content that people find visually appealing and want to engage with.

The sixth and seventh checklist items are a reminder to focus our content on our primary target audience in terms of content and style as well as connecting with other departments who circulate our posts and help us better engage our primary audiences. Finally, the last two checklist items are geared toward creating accessible content so we can reach more of our campus and writing center communities.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing that social media can serve as an entry point for our larger campus community and that our digital presences are an extension of our centers, we aim to continue to discover ways to make maintaining social media more sustainable for already-over-extended writing center administrators. We acknowledge that labor constraints often heavily influence whether or not writing centers use social media (May, "Social Media and the Writing Center"; May, "On

Networking the Writing Center"), and we hope that this checklist might offer ways to streamline social media content creation and publication, and be used as a tool for creating accessible, genre-adherent content for their centers.

Our findings reflect what we know of best practices in social media content creation (Adegbola et al.; Christison); consequently, we aim to continue to prioritize creating content that our primary audience will engage with while navigating the ideas and interests of those who collaborate on our social media. As a community of people creating the content, we wanted to find ways to make our practices more consistent regardless of who was generating and implementing ideas.

The consultants, administrators, and staff shape our writing center to make it what it is. Our social media accounts operate similarly. For example, both authors deeply care about issues regarding privacy and surveillance, which prompted our checklist items about image consent. We felt the impacts of this checklist in our own work when we were the primary person in charge of creating and distributing social media content in our center. This work is hard labor, but we think it is important labor. Your center might find it pertinent to change aspects of the checklist to make it work for you, and we encourage you to do so, but we hope that it is a helpful tool in making posting on social media more streamlined and manageable for your writing center.

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