Collaborative Approaches to the Digital in English Studies

CHAPTER	4
TITLE	Collaboration and Graduate Student Professionalization in a Digital Humanities Research Center
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OVERVIEW	This chapter presents narratives of graduate student experience, framed by the history, purposes, and collaborative research goals of the Writing in Digital Environments Research Center. The authors argue that these narratives provide English studies professionals with a unique view of how a research center can contribute to graduate student professionalization. The research center model, adapted to fit other contexts, can offer graduate students valuable collaborative learning experiences, especially when students participate in community-driven research projects.
TAGS	center, collaboration, community, composition, development, digital, graduate, infrastructure, professionalization, projects, research, student, writing
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Jeff Grabill is a professor of rhetoric and professional writing and co-director of the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center at Michigan State University. He is interested in the knowledge work of citizens, users, workers, and students within organizational contexts. Grabill has published two books on community literacy and agency and articles in journals like *College Composition and Communication, Technical Communication Quarterly, Computers and Composition,* and *English Education*.

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Collaboration and Graduate Student Professionalization in a Digital Humanities Research Center

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*My own view is that our graduate programs generally don't do enough to professionalize students, in the sense of socializing them into the confusing and intimidating mysteries about how you get ahead in this busines*s. – Gerald Graff, 2000, p.192

The directors, graduate assistants, senior researchers, and affiliates of Michigan State University's Writing in Digital Environments Research Center (WIDE) work on a diverse range of collaborative, externally funded projects, ranging from grant projects funded by entities such as the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute for Museum and Library Studies to contract work for units and organizations both inside and outside of the university. In this chapter, we explore how the work of a digital humanities research center relates to graduate student professionalization, addressing questions such as

- What does a research center add to the total offerings of a graduate program?
- What do graduate students learn from being a part of or leading a research team?
- How might research centers like WIDE prepare graduate students for various professional roles?
- What can graduate students learn about their professional lives as academics—and how can they develop professional identities and capacities—from the work possible in a research center?

Additionally, while issues of graduate student professionalization in rhetoric and composition studies have been addressed in terms of writing centers and teaching assistants (Hattenhauer, 1982; Hoberk, 2002; Horner, 2000; Miller, 1997; North, 1984), none of these scholars have examined the multifaceted role of research centers, largely, we suspect, because there have been so few

research centers in rhetoric and composition and relatively few in the humanities. Our approach will center on narratives of graduate student experience, framed by the history, purposes, and collaborative research goals of the WIDE Research Center. We argue that these narratives provide English studies professionals with a unique view of how a research center can contribute to graduate student professionalization. The research center model, adapted to fit other contexts, can offer graduate students valuable collaborative learning experiences, especially when students participate in community-driven research projects.

While for some collaboration may simply mean team members working together, in a digital writing research center like WIDE, collaboration is woven together with community engagement and outreach in essential ways. We think that the narratives we present in this chapter are indicative of an increasing trend toward collaboration and infrastructure development in the digital humanities (see for example the global collaboration that is part of our recently funded NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant work: [Archive 2.0: Imagining The Michigan State University Israelite Samaritan Scroll Collection as the Foundation for a Thriving Social Network](#)). We argue that these collaborative community-outreach experiences all share a common thread: the cultivation of long-term, intensive working relationships and concern for shared infrastructure development and management. In light of the sort of knowledge work students will perform after graduation, it is increasingly important for rhetoric and composition and digital humanities graduate programs to provide students with opportunities to engage in collaborative endeavors and to develop experience in project management and infrastructure development.

THE WRITING IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS (WIDE) RESEARCH CENTER

The WIDE Research Center is rooted in the larger discipline of rhetoric and composition. It investigates how digital technologies change the processes, products, and contexts for writing, particularly in organizational and collaborative composing contexts. As an organization, it works to support research on digital writing and writing-intensive knowledge work in a range of community and organizational settings and with attention to issues of culture (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. WIDE Web site.

WIDE partners with business, industry, government, education, and community organizations to identify projects of mutual interest and concern. The center is affiliated with but not governed by any one academic department; supportive of academic programs but not embedded in any graduate or undergraduate program; and most importantly, flexible, fast, and entrepreneurial in operation. WIDE pursues grant-funded research in collaboration with colleagues across campus, seeks research contracts and entrepreneurial opportunities, contributes significantly to scholarly literature in various fields, and supports undergraduate- and graduate-student research. Therefore, WIDE's relationship with its local partners—departments, programs, majors, and the like—makes it unique within the field of rhetoric and composition and within the humanities more generally.

WIDE's role is to move faster than programs and departments are capable of moving, take risks that faculty members operating individually cannot easily take, and create spaces within the academy and within departments and programs for new forms of inquiry, learning, and professionalization. Conceptually, the center has taken up the problem of how to study writing given new and changing digital and networked information technology tools and environments. Fundamental to our approach is the development of information and software tools as a research deliverable. This development work is conceptual because it is a function of (and

feeds into) our theory-building work. It is relevant to this chapter as well because development activity is central to graduate student experiences with the center. We see the development of software, therefore, as a way to test our developing theories of writing, as well as a way to address the needs we see emerging from our collaborative research efforts.

We orient to writing in particular ways as well. We study writing as a verb, which means that we are interested in the *activity* of writing. Studying writing as an activity entails asking how we can best do it and how we can help others to do it better. We understand the activity of writing to be carried by a broad semiotic (multiple media), and we understand the activity of writing to be epistemologically productive—that is, we situate ourselves within a rhetorical tradition that understands writers as producers of new knowledge. We are interested, in other words, in what writing does, not in what it means, and in the social and organizational functions and impacts of writing, not in the meaning and interpretation of the texts themselves.

This contextual information provides a brief overview of WIDE's unique structure and mission; additional information can be found on [WIDE's "About" page](#). Now we will shift our focus to how the center functions as a space for a certain kind of graduate student professionalization. We argue that the research center provides a distinctive set of professionalization experiences for graduate students. From the establishment of content management systems for university-community collaboration (Kendall) to the acquisition of independent servers (Jim), these professional experiences share common elements: collaboration and attention to infrastructure and space.

BUILDING COLLABORATION: PROFESSIONALIZATION IN EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

Kendall Leon

My tenure at WIDE officially began in spring 2005 when I worked as an hourly research assistant on the [Teachers for a New Era](#) information modeling project, a research initiative of WIDE's that studied the writing practices of teachers and teacher educators in order to build writing platforms to support such work. I eventually became the WIDE graduate research assistant in the summer of 2006. After my research assistantship ended the following year, I continued to work on an hourly basis as a graduate assistant with WIDE, developing and delivering community media workshops to nonprofit organizations up until spring 2009. At that point, my dissertation research and writing took me into a different

area of inquiry: a historiographic project that investigates the rhetorical strategies of a Chicana feminist organization.

To most, the connection between my research on Chicana rhetoric and my work at the WIDE Research Center may seem tenuous. There is, however, a common binding thread that exists at the less visible level of *practice*. From observing and participating in day-to-day interactions among the people I encountered while working at the research center, I learned the practice of community building. For me, the most profound take-away from my WIDE experience was not explicitly taught; instead, it was modeled by the co-directors in their interactions with our collaborators from the university and the local community. In order to effectively and responsibly develop sustainable research projects, WIDE always started with and focused on the people involved. The work of any project, then, included not only surveying relevant literature or developing technology but also participating in the meetings, phone calls, and face-to-face conversations that helped these projects come to fruition. This knowledge has shaped my own practices as a scholar.

It was, in fact, my interest in the practice of building communities that led me to become a WIDE research assistant in the first place. In spring 2006, I took a course called [Community Literacies](#), which Jeff Grabill co-taught with Ellen Cushman. After the course, knowing that I desired practical research experience in communities and technologies, Grabill invited me to assist with a research initiative that WIDE was undertaking: the Capital Area Community Information initiative (CACI). WIDE had been tasked with the redesign of a community Web site called CACVoices (see Figure 2 below). The purpose of CACVoices was to serve as a community portal of sorts, where community members could access information about and for the greater Lansing area, including health statistics and programs, neighborhood information, and community events. The site also functioned as a Web hosting space for community organizations, most of which lacked either the technical expertise or money to run their own sites. The initial home page and site design were fairly clunky and jumbled, and as a result the Web site was not user friendly. The site design also allowed for little visitor interaction aside from the few organizational representatives who knew how to work on their sites. Part of the vision of the redesign was to support the work of community organizations and to allow for some visitor interactivity: registered members would be able to post comments, contribute to forums on community issues, and add event items.
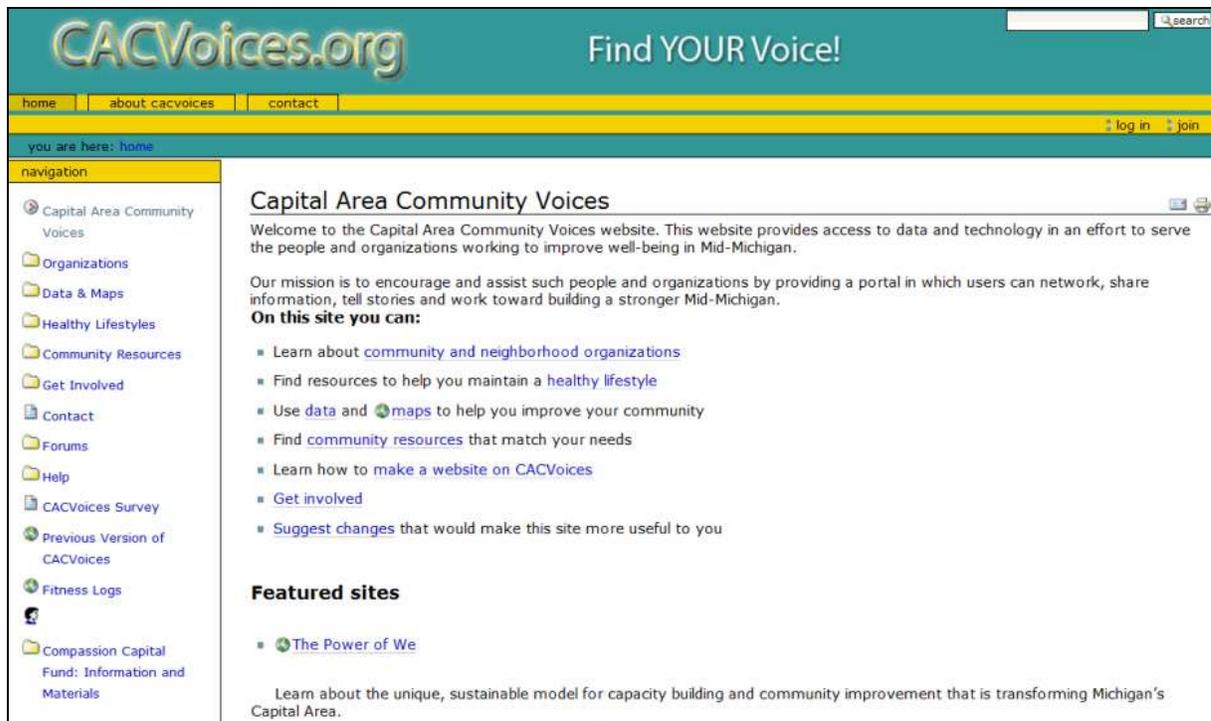
 Figure 2. Redesigned CACVoices Web site.

The site's first iteration was hosted and maintained by a staff member at the Ingham County Health Department. The administrative responsibilities for maintaining the site, running usability testing, and implementing a redesign were too big for one individual to handle, which is where WIDE came in. As a first step, WIDE conducted a study that investigated what the work of community organizations actually looks like. Specifically, three researchers conducted a summer-long qualitative study of two community-based organizations in Lansing, Michigan, charting their writing projects, infrastructure, and technology. I joined the WIDE team through this research experience. Subsequently, I was hired as the part-time research assistant for the 2006-2007 academic year and as an hourly employee for 2007-2008.

At times, my job at WIDE was frustrating. Some of what I encountered was completely foreign to me, and I felt like I had taken a fast-moving jump into technological literacy. I also felt as though I was unable to contribute to the center's technological knowledge, and, at the end of the experience, I cannot say that I consider myself a technology expert. What I did learn, and what I will focus on for the remainder of my section, are the ways in which research centers like WIDE give graduate students opportunities for professionalization that have less to do with technology than with building relationships through teaching and collaboration. Although I will focus on my experience working on the community

media project, I had ample opportunities to work on other collaborative projects with other students and faculty, including one project that entailed developing a digital electronic resource hub for K-12 teachers. I also co-authored several collaborative documents including grant proposals, an article, and a technical specification document. Finally, along with other graduate and undergraduate WIDE project team members, I presented at four national conferences.

To return to the CACVoices project, one of WIDE's explicit goals for the CACVoices redesign was to make more visible the relationship between the CACVoices site/project and the [Capital Area Community Media Center](#) (CACMC). This in part stemmed from a recognition on the part of a few of CACMC board members that the CACVoices site needed to be seen as a community effort and not as a project supported by institutions like the County Health Department and/or the university. As part of my WIDE research assistantship, I became increasingly involved with the CACMC.

On behalf of the CACMC, another WIDE project I participated in was to coordinate and facilitate free community media workshops throughout the greater Lansing area. In general, these workshops focused on developing the technological capacities of community members and nonprofit organizations and included working with digital imaging software, content management systems, blogs, and [vox pop](#) radio broadcasts. To do so required planning the curriculum and managing the publicity for these workshops. It also entailed producing writing associated with forming the organization and creating its public face. Much of this latter work—the writing of the CACMC—necessitated intensive distributive work. The distributive work involved facilitators, board members, community locales where the workshops took place, and, through WIDE, several undergraduate research assistants and myself.

While working on these interrelated projects, I became especially interested in the relationships that comprised these activities. Working closely with Grabill, I noticed that many of the community members involved were ones with whom he had spent years fostering relationships prior to the start of any of these projects. When examined longitudinally, the CACMC and CACVoices projects actually began years ago, when the co-directors developed relationships with the community partners. These relationships were vital to the research center as a whole. As a research assistant, I saw the co-directors work hard to build and keep these connections. They made careful and considerate decisions about what would seem like mundane details: where to hold meetings, how the meetings should be run, which students should work on projects. And they shared resources with their partners in a variety of ways. For example, as the

research assistant, I was asked to provide free Web site work to a local non-profit consortium on behalf of WIDE. The consortium was not directly related to the CACMC, but several of the people and the organizations involved in the consortium could be linked in some way to the CACMC. I also helped draft grant proposals for a local women's center and volunteered at a farmer's market and a neighborhood tour for an area neighborhood organization.

What I learned about these relationship-building practices of sharing resources and of doing unacademic work like setting up tables or grabbing drinks is that they actually play an integral role in research projects. Forming relationships takes a significant amount of time and effort and requires the closest care. This invisible work actually builds and maintains research projects and communities, but it is oftentimes left out of the research project descriptions we read. During my tenure working with WIDE, in particular with the CACMC project, I learned that even though the emphasis may be on technologies and digital writing, the true work of such a center is building the infrastructure to enable this work—and this includes, more often than not, the people involved. More so than any other professional behavior, the importance of people—of maintaining relationships, of treating people and the places and things that they value professionally and respectfully—was consistently modeled to me by the WIDE co-directors. I am not just talking about the kind of respect and reciprocity that is debated in many community-based research articles; I am referring to the everyday interactions that help establish sustainable relationships of care and trust. As graduate students, we are often not privy to the small, incremental steps it takes to be good scholars, teachers, and administrators.

ENVISIONING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE THROUGH COLLABORATION

Martine Courant Rife

I completed my Ph.D. in December 2008 after working at WIDE as a graduate research assistant for about two years. I am now a tenured writing professor at Lansing Community College (LCC) located about three miles away from the Michigan State University (MSU) campus. At LCC I coordinate technical and business writing and teach those same classes, plus courses in the first-year-writing sequence. I am working on three books about issues of composition and copyright, and I am working on a number of other research and writing projects all connected in some way to my dissertation as developed during my employment at WIDE.

I developed my dissertation project while working on a WIDE-supported research project examining the intersection of composition and copyright (see Rife & Hart-Davidson, 2006). This dissertation project turned out to be the foundation for my career's scholarly trajectory. During my time at WIDE, I worked collaboratively with staff and students, participated in the administration of the center, and organized several events for the center. I worked on research projects such as a content audit and analysis of the Web site for the National Council of Teachers of English, and I played a key role in writing a comprehensive recommendation report on the results of that research. I also worked on a study based in social psychology literature that examined how public writing versus private writing impacts one's perception of one's self. During my time at WIDE, I worked on several grant proposals as well, including participation in managing the complex internal and external workflows of high-stakes proposing. Part of my job included developing an awareness of budget and other infrastructural concerns that impact the center's survival. Preparing quarterly and annual administrative reports for the vice provost also gave me increased awareness of infrastructural issues (DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, 2005).

I was able to observe research-in-action and saw the results from one of the center's research projects: Visualizing Composition, led by Bill Hart-Davidson, Jeff Grabill, and Julie Lindquist (see Hart-Davidson, Grabill, & Lindquist, 2010). In the project, research participants kept diaries as they completed class assignments. Their work was then transposed into a software application where one could literally see each writing event play out. I was also able to observe the composing process as I learned to use Morae, a screen capturing software, and thereby saw computer-mediated writing processes in action.

Like working in a writing center, when working in a research center one gets to "understand the importance of prioritizing tasks" (Clark, 1988, p. 348). I learned to self-prioritize multiple tasks I was working on simultaneously. For example, when the WIDE Research Center's first conference on digital knowledge was taking place, a major report authored by the center was due. At the same time, I was asked to work on future projects. Meanwhile, student workers had to be organized for the conference, along with program packets, last minute food arrangements, and transportation to and from the airport for conference presenters. I had to work hard to learn to prioritize my work on several parallel projects, alongside my own coursework.

Working at the research center also allowed me to work directly with outside clients with much more control over who I worked with and what that work constituted than I had experienced in service-learning coursework. I had ample

opportunity to develop civic values, improve learning, and become a self-motivated learner and worker (Matthew & Zimmerman, 1999, p. 385). When I drafted reports and press releases for the center, I understood my audience included not only those in composition studies but also community members and individuals within the MSU community who had no background or training in rhetoric and writing. As I worked at the center, I became adept at sensing where attention was needed, and I had the freedom to work on projects I felt would most benefit the center and promote its mission. Because I quickly realized that the center's success would speak to the more general success of research in writing and composition studies, I felt a deep sense of responsibility to engage in activities that would facilitate the center's success.

The ability to see the infrastructure that supports the teaching of writing through programs, institutional entities, offices of deans and vice provosts, and university relations or "creative marketing" and its control over university-generated press releases was one of the most invaluable aspects of my position at the research center. One of my duties when I began at WIDE was to promote the center's work and make the center visible both within and beyond the MSU community. I learned, however, that the institutional identity is carefully controlled, and approved channels were already in place that filtered and reviewed press releases. I learned to navigate this system carefully, and I admittedly experienced frustration when the dissemination of information was slowed and even sometimes quashed because of institutional policies or selection processes.

Because WIDE is positioned in the humanities, in MSU's [College of Arts and Letters](#) (CAL), a number of paradigms were continually challenged by WIDE's business-like mode of operation. WIDE had outside "clients" and received payment from them. Such payments had to go into university-related accounts and be administered within pre-existing infrastructures. WIDE also generated a continual and substantial amount of grant proposals—a new challenge for CAL, which did not have a research budget expert or an expert on forthcoming grant opportunities as did social-science-associated university enterprises. All of this behind-the-scenes work had to be completed by the co-directors and staff, which was not necessarily the best use of their time. I was able to see, however, how institutions can be changed from the inside out as I watched and participated in the making of a new space in CAL where grant proposals could be processed in MSU's existing system.

The key lesson I learned from working at WIDE has to do with institutional change. I think that institutional change is usually very difficult and never achieved in a straightforward fashion. I think back all the time to the kinds of

barriers faced by those at the WIDE Research Center as they moved forward in their mission. Some of their achievements seemed, at the time, small and insignificant, like gaining a single additional office area. Now that I am in the position to create institutional change in a different setting, however, I can see just how challenging and complicated even the smallest change is. I remember events from working there all the time and draw on those experiences as I try to move forward at my current institution.

COLLABORATION, USABILITY, AND USEFULNESS

Amy Diehl

I completed my master's degree in digital rhetoric and professional writing while spending two years as a research assistant for the WIDE Research Center. I currently work as the Web content manager for Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, where I oversee all content on the [Hampshire Web site](#) and associated Web sites. In my duties I work as part usability specialist, information architect, content editor, content management system coach, and Web designer. Much of what I learned from my time at WIDE has deeply influenced my success at my current institution.

I worked on a number of complex projects during my two years at the center. The primary project, Capital Area Community Information (CACI), was a research project studying and redesigning a community resource portal and Web hosting site for community organizations (see [Kendall's narrative](#)). The site originated as a collaboration in 2000 between the City of Lansing and the Ingham County Health Department for the purpose of creating Web resources to inform residents about issues vital to community well being. The goal of this effort was to increase the use of data and information in decision making by residents. The belief was that a writing space where community groups and non-profits could also post their own information would further achieve the goals of facilitating community growth and well being. I worked through WIDE to facilitate a three-year research study of (1) how community organizations and community members use information technologies to do knowledge work, and (2) how CACVoices as an information technology can be made both more usable and useful to the communities it serves. I participated in two formal usability evaluations, led the redesign of the CACVoices Web site based on the findings of both usability evaluations, and conducted field work at two community nonprofits to research how these organizations conduct writing and communication work and how information technologies are utilized.

Because I worked so closely with the community members involved in using the CACVoices Web site, I felt a true responsibility and need to work ethically and fairly to ensure that the redesign addressed their needs and was in fact more useful and usable. Because I worked on the project for almost two years, I felt a deep sense of the importance of the work both locally, for those community members, and more globally, with regard to the lessons the team learned about the complexity of designing information technology for diverse community groups in order to promote well being.

I also worked on a geospatial mapping project that was launched in response to a need by these same organizations and citizens regarding the usability of current geo-spatial mapping programs. Grassroots is an asset-based mapping tool designed with the express purpose of creating an information technology that creates complex maps for use in community projects and with a target audience of non-expert users (Diehl, Grabill, Hart-Davidson, & Iyer, 2008). Through my work on this project, I was given the opportunity to learn about and theorize research in ways that might otherwise have remained invisible to me. By talking with other research assistants, as well as the co-directors, I was able to collaborate on research articles, initiate and facilitate projects, and receive invaluable feedback, reassurance, and support from those much more experienced in the business of research than I was.

Finally, I served as a board member of the [Capital Area Community Media Center](#) (CACMC), which was also mentioned in Kendall's narrative. The CACMC is a formation of community members in the Lansing Tri-County area as well as Michigan State University faculty and students who are working to "create democracy through media" by forming a regional nonprofit whose mission is to support the media creation of community members and community nonprofits.

In my work with community groups, I also had the opportunity to work with students outside of the institution. I supervised several undergraduates who were assisting with the editing and interface design of the CACVoices Web site. By supervising a collaborative writing project with these students, I was able to both achieve the goals of the project and mentor the students as they found themselves facing the complications of real-world work: deadlines, collaborative differences, troubleshooting, and the balance between theory and reality.

How do these experiences compare with what an English studies graduate student might encounter in the more traditional professionalization context of a writing center? One of the benefits of working at a writing center is to observe and thus reflect on the composing process—to see real "writers in action and to

gain insight into how writing actually occurs" (Clark, 1988, p. 347). At the research center, we were able to observe writing in wholly unique ways and "in the wild." In my WIDE-related work at the [Usability Center](#), for example, I was able to observe and research how real users interact and write with information technologies while they perform typical tasks. And my observation research for the CACVoices project exposed me to collaborative writing—such as monthly or annual reports, grants, and newsletters—and a composing process beyond the academic context. The writing processes I observed in my community-based research most closely resembled the very types of writing work I was also being asked to do within the research center, such as collaboratively written usability reports, requirement documents, development blogs, grants, and research articles.

The key lessons I took away from WIDE were related to issues of usability and usefulness. For a content management system to work, for example, it must be usable to the content creators, so they can in fact do the very writing work they have been tasked to do. A primary function of my job is meeting with content creators to assist them in their own writing work and adapting the technology and workflows to better serve their individual needs. The Web site itself also must be usable, and we have begun iterative usability testing to ensure that the end-users also find the Web site meets their expectations. How to make technologies useful is also a primary take-away from my time at WIDE. Useful content, like the mapping tool I worked on at WIDE, must also be born from the end-users' goals. Listening to the users' suggestions and studying what they most often ask of admissions counselors or what they most often enter into the search box have helped in revamping the Hampshire Web site to offer a better experience to the user.

COLLABORATION AND THE NEED FOR DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Jim Ridolfo

I started working at the WIDE Research Center in the fall of 2003, the first semester of my graduate studies in Rhetoric and Writing at MSU. WIDE had just received startup funding from the MSU Foundation, and so, economically speaking, the center began to exist within the College of Arts and Letters. WIDE existed in 2003 as a university account, two co-directors, one IT staff member (me), and one administrative support person; without physical space the center could not begin to grow and live up to its potential. Without physical space, the center lacked the ability to provide any infrastructure and support for the kind of

large-scale, sustained, collaborative digital research projects we wanted to tackle. This became known as "our space problem."

For my part, the directors wanted me to create server infrastructure local to MSU where we could control our own domain name services, utilize static IP addressing, provide a range of customized development environments for our digital research projects, and offer a wide range services for teachers and students at the departmental level such as listservs, blogs, wikis, MySQL access, FTP space, and CGI/PHP-capable Web space. I was tasked with providing support to our unit that went far beyond the level of support available from the college and university IT infrastructure. Having had several years of prior experience working with servers, this task didn't pose specific challenges for me in terms of server technology. For me, the real challenge was the lack of a permanent space to store the servers. We had no space.

In 2003 I approached the chair of the Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures department, and I asked him for any closet space he could spare. He was able to provide, for an undetermined amount of time, a windowless closet with a working Ethernet drop, and I spent the next two days sweeping up the peeling paint chips, cleaning out several hundred pounds of Americana, 16mm tape reels, arcane audio/visual equipment, history text books from the 1970s, a framed copy of the Bill of Rights, and other remnants of a department. I transformed two audio-visual carts into a mobile server room on wheels. Heavy uninterruptable power supplies (UPSes) went on the bottom shelf next to oversized CRT monitors for diagnostics; refurbished Sun Sparc and PC servers salvaged from the scrap metal pile at the university surplus store went on the middle and top shelves. When the space transformation was complete, we had a clean, functional server room on wheels, and as it turned out, those wheels proved invaluable.

The following summer the storage closet I spent two days cleaning out was re-assigned to an adjunct faculty member, and so the year of musical chairs with servers began. On several occasions, I would, at 2:00 a.m., move the servers to a new location: sometimes the office of a senior faculty member on sabbatical, once another utility closet. MSU's network service provided me with twenty-four static IP addresses so I could move the machines anywhere in the building without needing to get MSU's central IT staff to reroute the network path. Shortly after I moved the machines, the new neighbors would complain about the sound of a "bee nest" in the hall, a complaint that earned our mobile server-room-on-wheels a title that stuck: "The Hive."

After two years administering The Hive's servers-on-wheels, the university finally provided WIDE with a more permanent address. Suddenly we had the offices, meeting space, and storage space necessary to help sustain the kind of long-term collaborative research WIDE sought to accomplish. But there was just one major missing component. There was still no room suitable for our servers. The only candidate we had lacked any external windows and vents. Without modifications, the room was an oven for computers, cooking them to a slow death. I looked into modifying the existing space, such as cutting a hole in the door or installing a vent system, and an official from the MSU Office of Physical Plant informed me that any structural modifications we did would be in violation of fire code. To solve this problem Physical Plant wanted WIDE to spend at least $40,000.00 to upgrade the A/C capability for the entire floor. In other words, to solve our problem, they wanted us to pay to upgrade the antiquated cooling system for the entire building. So for the next four years, from 2005 to 2009, the server room continued to be a semi-official entity. I snaked an A/C tube out into the hall to cool the room down, and every year and a half a Physical Plant official would tell me that we'd need to find a permanent solution to the cooling problem. Or, in other words, they'd tell us that we'd need to eventually pay for a building upgrade.

One might ask at this point, why do the servers need to be local to the university network? Can't they be collocated off site? Technologically speaking, the services our servers provide did not need to be a hundred percent local. However, there is a strong argument to be made that the kind of development work we were doing necessitated the servers being local. This is true, but economically and rhetorically speaking the server room is even more valuable as an institutional argument. From 2003 to 2005, the mobile server room argued that the research center desperately needed a more permanent physical space of its own. The hum of The Hive reminded the department chair that WIDE needed its own space. Because the servers were on the university network, we were able to create over twelve *.wide.msu.edu domain and hostnames such as, http:///www.wide.msu.edu, http://kairos.wide.msu.edu, and http://dev.wide.msu.edu.

The result of this dance between the physical and the virtual is that over the course of six years our mobile server room was visible to administrators as a physical space, the migrating server room in four different places, and simultaneously as a series of university-identifiable virtual places. In addition, a research center's control over its own virtual space necessitates that its IT staff engage in IT conversations at a much higher level in the university. Rather than working with the one college-level IT staff member, the research center, from the

beginning, began to engage with the top-level IT staff in the university. We regularly had discussions with them about IP blocks, domains, security issues, and hosting issues. As a result, by 2009 we became the first research center on campus to collocate our machines in the brand new university hosting facility. We no longer needed to have our own server room because the university finally began to provide a facility that met our needs. But, by that time, we had already firmly established our physical and digital reputation on campus. The server room no longer made a necessary institutional argument.

As a graduate student in rhetoric and composition, what I took away from this experience was a greater appreciation for the design and establishment of institutional space, how that space is acquired, and the complex dialectics of building a physical space for the digital age. As a rhetoric and composition scholar, I see this point as essential not only to my own professionalization but also for the field. I learned that there are complex formulas for acquiring a space in which temporary spaces can be leveraged to make institutional arguments, and I learned how virtual spaces can help scaffold toward more permanent physical spaces. But this can't be done alone. Indeed, extensive communication and collaboration among stakeholders is required in order to build such a new infrastructure. This is a type of work that differs from traditional labor in the humanities, but it is essential in order to establish new research models in our field. Furthermore these concerns for new forms of research and infrastructure extend beyond their immediate sphere to questions of how to better prepare graduates in English studies to think about the kind of collaboration needed to create the optimal digital infrastructures for teaching, learning, learner support (e.g., writing centers), and program administration.

UNDERSTANDING GRADUATE PROFESSIONALIZATION AS MOMENTS OF COLLABORATION: THE WHEN OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Doug Walls

I began the second year of my Ph.D. program by applying for a general graduate research assistantship at WIDE. I knew that, as an RA, I would help the center on one or two specific research projects that were already going on and, perhaps, be a part of the development of new research project start up and design. As a researcher, I am interested in how "loose" organizations and networked individuals articulate, assemble, and evaluate what counts as "work." WIDE's interest in supporting writing in loose organizations of people, as opposed to large bureaucratic organizations, is what motivated me to apply for the research assistantship. Both WIDE and I are interested in identifying the best

way to integrate infrastructure, in both the technological sense (tools) and in terms of the aligning of relationships (social/people), in order to accomplish tasks. The project I want to discuss here was a comparative study of research centers focused on writing studies, including WIDE, that was part of an external review of the center.[1,2]

I gained access through a variety of informal and formal channels to data on how different research centers operate. Frequently, I would have had no access to these accounts without the technological and social access that WIDE provided. I was particularly fascinated by accounts of failures and struggles. Some of the accounts I was given were official; most were not. In the aggregate, the accounts seemed on a surface level to be contradictory. On the one hand, I saw research centers that did well because of their support of individual researchers and separate, autonomous projects; on the other hand, I saw research centers that had failed because of their support of individual researchers and separate, autonomous projects. After conducting my research, I still was not sure what made for a successful research center, but I did know one thing: we were doing something different at WIDE.

My knowledge of WIDE's method of operation and the center's own growing pains (see [Jim Ridolfo's narrative](#)) informs my perspective on my research findings. How could some research centers do well supporting individualized/separate projects and some research centers fail at supporting individualized/separate projects? In my mind, success or failure depends on what other organizational, technological, and social infrastructures are in place to sustain research activity. What I understand about how a research center functions is that its goal must be to build the infrastructure of research. How a research center, as an institutional body/location, is organized is not as important as the *when* of how a research center is organized and created. Research centers are not so much organizational units as they are systems of activity that have to be organized in particular ways (by people, IT infrastructures, deans, etc.) at particular moments (cocktail parties, conferences, budget meetings, NEH grant announcements). Understanding those elements, the *when* of a research center, is understanding the infrastructure of a research center. You might hear the echo of Kendall Leon's narrative here when I say that by *infrastructure* I do not mean only technological tools but also organizational and cultural systems of building, maintaining, and repairing (sustainable) relationships among people that

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[1] This project was a continuation of the same task the research assistant before me, Kendall Leon, to whom I am indebted, began.
[2] Many of the centers I learned about are units that help individual primary investigators obtain funding for their projects.

allow coordinated activity to occur. In my experience, there is no way to understand the importance of the technological infrastructure as separate from the cultural/social infrastructure. One needs to drive and support the other.

In the case of a software development project I worked on for WIDE, through the course of the project I had to develop the infrastructure to tackle the rich, complicated, and distributed work at key moments. My experience has been that complex and distributed research activity, and the centers that cultivate such activity, must constantly build, maintain, and repair infrastructures, both material (space, computers, economic resources) and social (relationships among people), be that through organizational structuring, data and technological tools, or personal and professional activity at the right time. Additionally, I have learned that building such infrastructure is rhetorically complex, takes a great deal of time, and must evolve over time. I am not sure I would have developed this understanding of how or when research centers work without WIDE.

When I came to WIDE, I was not new at working collaboratively on large-scale research projects, but those projects had been supported by organizational structuring of social elements and resources in ways that I am not sure I understood fully. Frankly, I didn't need to understand them. They worked, so why look under the hood? Those other projects taught me about the importance of personal and research skills but not about building the infrastructure that supports that work the way WIDE did. This knowledge has already proven useful to me in my career, and I am glad to have it.

PROFESSIONALIZATION IN PARTS: COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH CENTER ACTIVITIES AS PROFESSIONALIZING MATERIAL

Stacey Pigg

My work in the WIDE Research Center took place over the course of my graduate work at MSU, where I recently earned a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Writing. Like most of my co-authors, I did a lot of different things while working in the center. In this narrative, I will focus on the ways in which the diverse context for work in a research center not only prepares graduate students to collaborate with various institutional and community stakeholders but also enables them to participate in different kinds of scholarly and intellectual activity. I will briefly explain how varied my own responsibilities were, and I will reflect briefly on the ways in which graduate students, through this exposure, become agents who can choose to value and assemble these activities into what we in the center

often thought of as a "modular professionalization," in which they choose how to value, reuse, and build on the multiple experiences and activities.

When I wrote this narrative I was still at WIDE, and I was working on two computers. On the WIDE desktop computer, I was running [NVivo](#) qualitative text-analysis software to complete inter-rater reliability checks for part of the [Take Two project](#), which is funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Take Two is a two-part research project designed to study the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on museum practice, and I collaborated with a research team on the part of this project that analyzes discourse created on the [Science Buzz blog](#) maintained by the Science Museum of Minnesota. In that moment, working on the project meant transferring coded data from an Excel spreadsheet, where our research team had found it most simple to complete and store analytical coding while away from the office, and into the "number crunching" software that is housed in the WIDE office. At the same time, I was on my personal laptop, toggling between revising this piece of writing about research activity and double checking the coding on the desktop computer against the personal files of coding stored on my own computer. This multitasking was typical; completing any given task in my work at WIDE usually meant coordinating multiple activities using a diverse set of tools and resources.

Now that I've established that my work for WIDE often entailed multitasking, let me back up to show how my activity with the research center likewise involved multiple concurrent projects, goals, activities, and purposes. My RA position with the Take Two project was not the first job I had done with WIDE, but it was the one that I contributed to for the longest. Before and while working on Take Two, I conducted interviews with high school science teachers across Michigan as part of a contextual inquiry project to help design a Web 2.0 tool that would enable geographically distributed educators to share ideas, lesson plans, or just conversations; I taught in an after-school community Digital Media Arts program for middle schoolers; and I helped design the curriculum for MSU's first hybrid writing class focused on digital writing and social networks.

I've moved through a snapshot of work and a brief overview of other projects I was a part of at WIDE in order to describe something about the center: The nature of work in a digital humanities research center like WIDE is complex, collaborative, and distributed—interpersonally, cognitively, geographically, disciplinarily, and in terms of tasks. The context for work in WIDE is not singular; it does not take place only in academic settings, use a single methodological approach, involve only certain types of people, or participate in one single set of disciplinary norms. Using my work with Take Two as an example, on a typical

day I might have met my project partner, Katie, in a coffee shop to compare analytical coding for blog threads; another day I might have worked from home on my laptop compiling what I discovered about museum learning facilitation into a literature review; the next, I might have found myself on campus chasing down a signature from a dean to complete a grant proposal. Similarly, the stack of books on my desk for Take Two ranged from theories of collaborative learning from the field of education to focused studies of museum practice to methodological overviews from composition studies.

Participating in work at a center that brings together such a multiplicity of people, interests, and activities has had some specific benefits. First, it helped me think about research and teaching situations rhetorically and contextually. For me, this means that I think about developing approaches to teaching, research, and reporting research on a case-by-case basis, trying to make them responsive to the particular people who will benefit from them in the context of their everyday lives. This often means reading and contributing to discussions outside my field, through scholarship as well as practitioner and community conversations. Further, seeing and taking part in a number of collaborative research projects rather than focusing solely on my dissertation research helped me understand how different kinds of research and teaching projects morph and change shape and purpose over time. Before my experience at WIDE, when I read research reports in journal articles I tended to think of research projects as neatly bound and simple: an individual researcher notices a problem, thinks up a methodology, carries it out, writes it up, and voilà. Following multiple projects through different stages of their development and implementation gave me a richer sense of how research and teaching must be dynamic and malleable in response to institutional, intellectual, and collaborative constraints.

Overall, research center activities provide material for professionalization, as graduate students have the unique opportunity to seek out and participate in the particular activities that are most useful to their own development and to choose the extent of their own participation in terms of time and intellectual investment. In contrast to a situation in which all graduate student participants begin as the same kind of novices and are initiated into becoming the same kind of professional experts, I would suggest that the professionalization that happens at WIDE is much more diverse and flexible. Graduate students choose their individual levels of participation in collaborative work and tailor what they do to their own developing needs and interests as they change over time. Graduate professionalization through WIDE is less a linear movement along a single, pre-determined trajectory than it is a modular, contextualized, and dynamic set of activities that graduate students can use toward their own professional ends.

CONCLUSION: COLLABORATION, RESEARCH CENTERS, AND GRADUATE STUDENT PROFESSIONALIZATION

In "'Tales of Neglect and Sadism': Disciplinarity and the Figuring of the Graduate Student in Composition," Marcy Taylor and Jennifer Holberg (1999) critique Darryl Hattenhauer's 1982 *CCC*'s article that figured the teaching assistant/graduate student as an "apprentice." Tracing the often self-constructed master narratives of graduate students as "'drudges,' 'slaves,' 'adolescents,' 'schizophrenics,' and 'lab rats'" from 1950 onward (p. 608), Taylor and Holberg argue that the metaphor of graduate student as apprentice emphasizes the need for graduate student "training" and creates an irony: "The irony for the field of composition . . . is that by emphasizing the need for training as a means toward professionalization and improved status, we continue to exploit a view of graduate assistants as subordinate" (p. 614). They state that the field of composition has made a small move toward a "brighter tomorrow" (p. 622) since graduate students are increasingly authoring their own tales (as we do in this article). But, according to their research, there is still room for improvement, as advanced graduate students continued to express "disillusionment, concern, and ignorance regarding 'the broader professional realm of rhetoric and composition . . . professional development issues, job market difficulties, or the transition from graduate school into the professoriate'" (Miller qtd. in Taylor & Holberg, 1999, p. 623). Over ten years later, issues raised by Taylor and Holberg remain relevant and unresolved, but a center like WIDE offers a response to the problems that they pose.

Crisco, Gallagher, Minter, Stahlnecker, and Talbird (2003) also critique the view of graduate students as "apprentices" (p. 359). They argue instead that approaches to graduate student professionalization should recognize students as "teachers and scholars interested in studying the contexts that shape our collective work" (p. 360). Crisco and co-authors offer an experience in a class where they "examined various institutional structures and arrangements" as a move toward the ideal professionalization of which they speak (p. 363). We propose the digital humanities research center model of WIDE as an answer to Crisco and co-authors (2003) and Taylor and Holberg (1999).

We argue that the digital humanities writing research center, a relatively new and unique institutional entity, is important for the field of rhetoric and composition studies and for the future of graduate student professionalization within this field. While the field's most typical professionalization activities historically have been situated around the first-year composition classroom, the writing center, assistantships in writing program administration, or research assistantships that

partner one student with one professor, we argue that a digital writing research center offers valuable opportunities for professionalization and for the development of skills that knowledge workers—including scholar-teachers—need in the twenty-first century. While working at WIDE, each one of us has had the opportunity to work collaboratively and serve in leadership roles. We've been able to engage in what Stacey Pigg calls "complex, distributed work" and to develop what Amy Diehl calls a concern for "collaboration, usefulness, and usability" in communities within and outside the university.

Like the parable in which an elephant is described as a very different object depending on which part the narrator is touching, we observe that our narratives do not offer identical perspectives on WIDE. Indeed, each of us has had a very different professionalization experience shaped by our project assignments, the needs of the center at particular moments in time, and our own professional interests. Nonetheless, there are some important commonalities that emerge from our narratives—elements that could serve as starting points for future conversations about digital humanities research and graduate student professionalization.

Infrastructure

The first common element is recognition of the necessity of infrastructure. In Stacey Pigg's, Jim Ridolfo's, Doug Walls's, and Martine Courant Rife's stories, the development of a professional orientation toward infrastructure figures as prominently as it does for Jeff Grabill, co-director of WIDE, in the audio interview below.

> **Interview with WIDE Co-Director Jeffrey Grabill**
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>
> Jim Ridolfo talks with Jeffrey Grabill about WIDE's growth, infrastructure, institutional relationships, and space. (For transcript, see Appendix A.)

We cannot do twenty-first-century digital humanities work without the correct digital infrastructure. What Jim Ridolfo's narrative shows, however, is that infrastructure is not simply machines and technology. As is the case with the center as a whole, the capacity to build infrastructure is as much about people and collaboration as it is about the acquisition of new hardware.

Space

Related to infrastructure concerns are the politics of space (see Martine Courant Rife's, Jim Ridolfo's, Kendall Leon's, and Doug Walls's narratives). As WIDE Co-Directors Jeff Grabill and Bill Hart-Davidson knew—and we learned—space is one of the most contested and valuable aspects of educational institutions. The equation that space equals power is too simplistic, but it is true that without space, it is difficult to centralize work in ways that are essential for programs to thrive. Digital and physical space not only provides a physical sense of community but also helps to aggregate an ensemble of projects (see WIDE's Current Projects) around a common institutional identity. Space is an important base for advancing infrastructure, relationships, and research.

Relationships

A theme running through each of our narratives is the importance of collaborative relationships. This is most visible in the narratives of Kendall Leon, Amy Diehl, and Stacey Pigg, and we argue that they provide an important question mark for the future of the field. Collaborative digital humanities research cannot thrive within the confines of the sixteen-week seminar or traditional (single-author) models of scholarship and research. Stacey, Kendall, and Amy each show how the ability to build and maintain good relationships is essential for collaborative twenty-first-century projects.

Research

Finally, we all learned how to conduct and support collaborative research, especially in technology-mediated or technology-focused contexts and contexts that bring academic researchers into contact with community stakeholders and clients (within and beyond the university). For most English studies graduate students, learning about research happens only in the classroom. When one gets to the dissertation, one has to learn on the job how to do research. Research is messy, and as Jeff and Bill say, always feels as if one is doing it wrong. In the center, we were given lots of opportunities to learn what research feels like, to make mistakes within a supportive group of peers and mentors, and to make significant, meaningful contributions to research projects.

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APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPT OF AUDIO INTERVIEW WITH WIDE CO-DIRECTOR JEFFREY GRABILL

Ridolfo: Do you want to talk a little bit about what the connections are between infrastructure and relationships? How do you see those two things unfolding?

Grabill: Well, let me say this, and I don't know whether this will make any sense, but, and Bill Hart-Davidson and I both told this story a number of times that having a research center on this campus almost instantaneously transformed the relationships we had with other people on campus and made new relationships possible. Here's what I mean by that: once we had a research center and could describe what the research center did in ways which were intelligible to anyone else on this campus, they understood a couple things immediately, A) that writing was a research area, that it wasn't just a pedagogical area, that you could actually research writing and that B) you could actually have a center that did that. And so the fact of the infrastructure as a piece of infrastructure meant that we instantaneously got different reactions from relationships we already had and were able to be part of conversations on campus that would have been unavailable to us or very difficult for us as individual English or writing department faculty members. The other part of that is that is the relationship connectivity and a piece of that is that we could actually leverage infrastructure on grant proposals, so we brought capacity to teams that makes relationships possible. And so those are ways that infrastructure makes relationships possible, I think.

Ridolfo: So do you see this now [November 2009] six years later from the start of the research center [2003] as happening in stages? So do you think there was a first stage where there were certain institutional resources you needed in terms of infrastructure that makes certain relationships possible and then after achieving that sort of milestone you were able to move on to what we might think now of as a next step?

Grabill: Yes. So here's, sort of, so this isn't precisely what you're asking but here's the way it worked at least initially for us. In the first phase of the research center we distributed the infrastructure. So we gave a lot of time and money and expertise away to individuals and small teams and said, go out, do great work, publish it, write grant proposals, and try and build WIDE into your work as best we can help you as you develop that work over the next couple of years.

That turned out to be for the most part to be a failure. Most of the people we gave those resources to didn't deliver at all. But, it was something that we had to do for a number of reasons. And so, we had to do it and we learned a lot from it. But then we pulled the infrastructure back. In a phase two we stopped giving infrastructure out to people and we kept it internal to the center. And then we just invited people to work with us. And so we would say hey, we've got this project and it's great for you, do you want to work with WIDE on this project? You be the lead, we'll support you, but we kept all the infrastructure in house and only spent it fairly frugally as things played out over time.

Ridolfo: Did you see that first round of giving seed money to projects that didn't really have maybe a unilateral focus in terms of the goals of the research center and the directors as doing a sort of work in terms of representing [WIDE] to the university community?

<Recording error>

Grabill: Here's where we pick up. So you asked me about was it necessary to give it away like that?

Ridolfo: Yeah, I asked you basically if putting the seed money out there and putting the WIDE resources out there to collaborate with folks in English and WRAC, Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures [Formerly Department of American Thought and Languages]…

Grabill: Psychology…

Ridolfo: Psychology…

Grabill: Communication Arts and Sciences…

Ridolfo: Communication Arts and Sciences… that did a sort of institutional work in terms of representation that was necessary at that moment.

Grabill: Absolutely. I mean that was explicitly one of the things that went on. One of the arguments that we made to get the Center to begin with was that MSU had tremendous capacity in this area. That it just needed to be aggregated and collected and pointed in particular directions, and that one of the things that a center does is *center* things. And so, yeah one of the things we were able to say was gee look at all of this digital writing and digital rhetoric research that's

now getting done on this campus. And we seeded a lot of activity very early and that activity helped us make institutional arguments. So you look around the Center at all the posters on the walls, almost all of those posters come from that first phase where we distributed infrastructure. And again it wasn't ultimately productive in the ways that we wanted to be productive over time, but it certainly had utility in the immediate phase of the startup.

Ridolfo: So talk a little bit about the second phase. The consolidation of projects and resources, what work did that do then for the Center?

Grabill: Well, we just got better at our jobs. So what happened was about every eighteen months we revisit the Center and sort of retask it. And what we decided to do was when I say pull things in house, what I mean by that is we tightened up our mission and our focus. And we began to only take on projects that were research based, that is weren't principally outreach or principally pedagogical – they could have pedagogical tie-ins and often did but they had to be research. They focus on a key set of issues, so for instance, you know, one of the key focuses of this research center for two years now has been understanding knowledge-work, understanding knowledge-work. Boom. That's a classic example of what we did in those follow up phases is we identified a key concept and we said look, we're going to study this key concept for the next couple of years. And we're going to study it. The Center will study it. We're going to try and find people who are doing that work and try to help them and invite them to collaborate, the Center's going to study it. And on some of those projects Bill Hart-Davidson was the lead, and on some projects I was the lead, and on some projects graduate students were the lead, other faculty members were the lead but it was the Center's work as opposed to Jeff's work supported by the Center. There's a huge difference between those two things.