

A Transformed Writers' Center: Laying the Foundation for a Learning Commons at EWU

Summary

The Eastern Washington University plays a vital role in learning and retention of students. In an effort to assist with the new direction of the university, the Writers Center should be transformed into a Multiliteracy Center that uses cutting edge technology to assist students with writing and other digitally borne or enhanced projects. To facilitate this development the Writers Center should be moved to the library.

Vision: Transforming the Writers' Center into a Multiliteracy Center

The Eastern Washington University Writers' Center currently plays an important role in student success and retention at EWU. However, in order to meet the challenges of a changing society, economy and University the EWU Writers' Center must broaden the services it offers students, faculty and the community. The demands of a 21st century information-based economy and culture require that students receive training in writing *and* learn how to evaluate and create visual, multimedia, and digitally borne texts. The EWU Writers' Center must be transformed into a "Multiliteracy" Center that provides the opportunity for guidance and feedback on a wide range of multi-modal communication skills such as presenting with PowerPoint, website creation, and visual design. This new Multiliteracy Center will be a model for the transformation of other student support services on the EWU campus, and the beginning of a "Student Learning Commons" that meets a wide range of student needs from across the academic disciplines.

The transformed EWU Writers' Center will include space for writing response and also:

- Media production space: where students will create texts like websites and PowerPoint presentation or complete graphic design/ technical writing projects
- Digital collaboration stations: where students will work in teams to complete digitally-based projects and Responders will provide *online* writing response sessions
- Presentation practice space: where students create and give technologically enhanced presentations

The new Multiliteracy Center will be unique in that instruction of both written and visual texts will be based on rhetorical theory.

The move to support these kinds of communicative activities is only just beginning within Writing Centers across the nation. A transformed Writers' Center that supported multiliteracies would be among the very first in the country and one of two at a Regional Comprehensive University. The University now has a unique opportunity to create a center for innovation on campus that is on the cutting edge of teaching and learning in higher education.

Access to a Multiliteracy Center is a question of equality: A transformed Writers' Center will provide resources to students who have been traditionally denied the opportunity to create and learn in a digital environment. In the introduction to "Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers," Harry Denny explains that students who have traditionally been denied access to multimodal document design and digital text production have been less prepared for entry-level work than those who do have that experience. EWU has an opportunity to provide students with the chance to develop proficiency in multimodal communication that they will not receive elsewhere.

Creating a Student Learning Commons

A transformed Writers' Center will serve as the first cornerstone of a Student Learning Commons that supports students in:

- Information Literacy (The JFK Library)
- Quantitative Literacy (The Quantitative Literacy Center)
- Academic Literacies (The Academic Success Center)
- Multi-modal Literacies (The Writers' Center)

Increasingly, Universities are working to provide stronger, coordinated support for student learning by establishing Learning Commons, which co-locate student services in a single space and provide the means for numerous learning centers to collaborate to better promote student success across the range of academic disciplines. Given Eastern's commitment to providing access to a wide range of students, it is particularly important that the University provides a robust and coordinated network of support for *all* students, whatever their academic interest or preparedness. Establishing a

Learning Commons in the JFK Library will ensure that students are provided with the access to the learning centers they need for success at EWU and beyond.

Relocating the Writers' Center

As a central component of its transformation, the Writers' Center should be relocated in the JFK Library. This will allow for a natural synergy between the services offered by the Center and the Library, allowing for close collaboration between Librarians and Writers' Center Responders to better enable students to produce well-researched *and* high quality texts, whatever their academic interest, experience level or major. Relocation in the Library allows us to support students as they work to improve their alphabetic, technological *and* information literacy—all in one location, with expert help and the necessary academic resources nearby at all times.

The transformation and relocation of the Writers' Center not only would serve to help establish a strong pedagogical foundation for establishing EWU Student Learning Commons, it would also serve as model of campus transformation that would Inspire the Future as part of Eastern's New Strategic Plan.

Inspiring the Future and the EWU Writers' Center

The transformation of the EWU Writers' Center into a Student Center that supports a wide range of text production broadens the mission of the center and offers the opportunity to serve students in new and increasingly important ways. The goals of relocating and expanding the Center align with the current draft of Eastern's "Goals and Strategies for the Five Year Strategic Plan."

1) Student Success

Goal: To create an environment where students succeed at their highest level.

The Multiliteracy Center will be instrumental in ensuring that more students are more successful as learners *and* producers of knowledge, and would better support students in the successful completion of a degree in four years. A Writers' Center that supported a wide range of communication forms (beyond print) would help Eastern reach Strategy One in a number of ways:

- Retention

The 2009 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which focused on the use of technology, suggested that the use of technology in learning increases student engagement. A Writers' Center that provided the resources for students to create digital texts and offered quality feedback on those texts could improve student engagement and increase the likelihood that students would seek out support for their writing/communication assignments.

- Workplace Readiness and Success

According to the report "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," produced by the MIT Center for Comparative Media Studies, in the coming years students who cannot communicate in multi-modal fashion will not gain entrance and success in the workplace. It is essential that EWU prepare students for success in a university which will increasingly require multi-modal projects, as well as entrance into an work environment that will require workers to communicate effectively in a wide range of media.

2) Institution of Innovation

Goal: Build an environment that utilizes research to identify, anticipate and respond to community and societal needs.

- A transformed Writers' Center could be a centerpiece in EWU's drive to distinguish itself as an institution of innovation.
- The proposed Multiliteracy Center would include changes made specifically to meet the needs of a developing Virtual University, including a greatly enhanced ability to offer robust online writing support.

3) Reputation

Goal: Improve EWU's reputation by raising the visibility of EWU's high quality academic programs, community engagement and innovation.

- A transformed Writers' Center could gain regional and even national attention as a cutting edge approach to communication instruction and student support.
- Jackie Grutsch McKinney, in "New Media Matters: Tutoring in the Late Age of Print", discusses the fact that most writing, and reading, now occurs on a screen. Therefore, EWU's reputation will be enhanced as students

graduating from EWU enter the workforce with the ability to develop multi-modal documents and understand the complexities of writing in a computer-based environment.

4) Community Engagement

Goal: Strengthen community engagement through active participation of students, staff, and faculty with businesses, organizations, and community groups.

- Opportunities to engage with a wider range of community stakeholders: the Center's ability to engage in service and project-based learning would be greatly enhanced.

Building on the Success of the EWU Writers' Center

The EWU Writers' Center currently has a strong impact on student success and retention. The Center provides support to students working across the curriculum in a variety of ways:

- Works collaboratively with writers in a non-traditional (one-to-one) model that is complimentary to classroom instruction
- Creates an opportunity for writers to have a 50-minute conversation with professional Responder
- Offers online writing response sessions
- Collaborates with faculty
- Pilots a supplemental Writing Lab course that partners direct instruction with response
- Offers specialized writing workshops

Quantitative assessment of Writers' Center data demonstrates that the Center's approach to improving student writing and promoting student success works. In fact, a recent assessment of data from 2008-2009 showed that, on average, students who use the Writers' Center have a statistically significantly higher course grade than the average student in the corresponding course. The findings of this study correspond to other studies by Writing Centers from across the country. Numerous studies suggest that Writing Centers like EWU's current Writers' Center can have a quantifiable effect on the quality of student writing.¹

An expanded and more visible Writers' Center will have an even greater effect on student success at the University and beyond.

¹For more information see "Writing Consultations Can Effect Quantifiable Change: One Institution's Assessment," by Roberta Henson and Sharon Stephenson in *Writing Lab Newsletter* and "Writing Assessment and Writing Center Assessment: Collision, Collusion and Conversation," by Madeleine Piccioto in *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*.