CHAPTER	11
TITLE	Sustaining a Research Center: Building the Research and Outreach Profile for a Writing Program
AUTHOR	James E. Porter
OVERVIEW	The key issue this chapter addresses is how a digital writing initiative can best be sustained. The larger question behind this issue is: What role can a research center play in helping to support and enhance the profile of a writing program? This chapter addresses the sustainability efforts required—for individuals, groups, and institutions—to create an institutional commitment over time. This chapter also addresses the strategies and political mechanisms for sustaining instructional initiatives, curricular initiatives, and research initiatives, focusing specifically on the sustainability of research initiatives.
TAGS	adapt, adjunct, assistantships, autonomy, budget cycle, business plan, center, change, collaborat*, Community Programs, composition, continuous budget, contracts, course buyouts, course release, critique, curricular, digital, ecolog*, economic realities, ethic*, exploit*, external grant, first-year composition, funding agencies, graduate teaching assistants, grant writing, Grassroots, humanistic disciplines, information ecologies, information management plan, infrastructur*, initiative, Ink, institutional, instructional, interdisciplinary, Jim Porter, long-tail economics, Michigan State University, outreach, permanence, planning budget, politic*, priorities, research assistantships, revenue generation, revenue stream, rhetoric, self-sufficiency, soft money, strategies, summer support, survivability, sustain*, technolog*, tenure, the Literacy Resource Exchange, usability research, writing centers, Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE), writing major, writing, writing-across-the-curriculum, writing-in-the-disciplines
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY	James E. Porter is a professor in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University, where he has served as director of the graduate program and as co-director of the WIDE Research Center. Porter's research focuses on digital writing and rhetoric, particularly issues of audience, ethics, invention, methodology, and delivery. He is completing a book titled *The Ethics of Internet Research* (co-authored with Heidi McKee). Effective in Fall 2009, he will be a Professor of English and Interactive Media Studies at Miami University.
COPYRIGHT AND REPRODUCTION	Copyright is held jointly by the Press and the author(s). Ebooks and projects can be displayed or reproduced (with the exception of limited reproduction by indexing and abstracting services) only with prior permission of both parties. Readers may view the projects and download/print a copy of the ebooks found on this site for their personal use or link to this page. Readers may not reproduce this ebook or project or display it on another web site. According to U.S. Copyright law, scholars can use limited samples of the Work for the purpose of analysis, parody, etc. All such reproduction and use should be accompanied by appropriate attribution to both the Author and the Press. Requests for permission to use materials from this ebook or project in other publications will be handled by Utah State University Press on behalf of

Computers and Composition **Digital Press**

AN IMPRINT OF UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Sustaining a Research Center: Building the Research and Outreach Profile for a Writing Program

James E. Porter

The key question I want to address is this: How does one sustain a digital writing initiative? The larger question behind it, though, is this one: What role can a research center play in helping to support and enhance the profile of a writing program? The first question immediately needs to be qualified and parsed in two key ways: (1) "One" is not likely to sustain anything. Sustainability requires a group effort and an institutional commitment over time. "One" can gain a foothold, but in working alone, "one" cannot sustain. (2) "Digital writing initiative" can refer to an instructional and curricular initiative, or to a research initiative. The strategies and political mechanisms for sustaining an instructional and curricular initiative are different, I believe, from those necessary to sustain a research initiative. My focus here is mainly on describing the role of the research initiative, but the research initiative is certainly interrelated with the instructional and curricular. (For other discussions of the sustainability of digital writing initiatives, see Comstock, 2006; DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, 2005; Selfe, 2005.)

The larger context for this discussion pertains to the growth and success of a comprehensive writing program, the five elements of which are typically these:

- a first-year composition program,

- a writing major (often a professional or technical writing major),

- a graduate rhetoric and composition program and/or graduate professional/technical writing program,

- a writing center, and

- a writing-across-the-curriculum or writing-in-the-disciplines emphasis.

What happens when you add a writing research center to the mix? At Michigan State University, we added precisely that element to the usual five. In 2003, the MSU Foundation awarded Jeff Grabill and myself a Strategic Partnership Grant in the amount of $553,000 to create the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center. The purpose of the Center is to promote and support faculty research of online writing. Specifically, our research mission is to investigate "how digital technologies—such as the networked personal computer, the Internet and World Wide Web, and computer-based classrooms and workplaces—change the processes, products, and contexts for writing, particularly in organizational and collaborative composing contexts" (WIDE Research Center, 2006).

My aim in this chapter is twofold: First, I examine how to shape and sustain a digital writing initiative such as the WIDE Research Center; second, I reflect on how the presence of a research center, one devoted to exploring digital writing practices, can help support and promote the overall writing program—and particularly its research and outreach efforts. Mainly I will be telling the story of the WIDE Research Center at Michigan State University (http://www.wide.msu.edu)—or, rather, my version of that story—explaining how WIDE came into existence, how it sustains itself, and how it contributes to MSU's overall writing initiative.

But the story is more than simply a local narrative. The theoretical frame for the story is institutional critique, a rhetorical theory about how to change institutions, particularly how to change existing university structures and disciplinary attitudes to carve out space and secure sufficient, ongoing support for writing programs (see Grabill, Porter, Blythe, & Miles, 2003; Porter, Sullivan, Blythe, Grabill, & Miles, 2000; Sullivan & Porter, 1993). In regards to composition, the chief question institutional critique asks is: "How should we re-design institutional spaces to support and sustain writing instruction on campus?" And so my story is also an argument about the growth and sustainability of the writing program itself, and about the critical role that a research center plays in that effort. I see the research center as a key strategic mechanism for developing the research profile and outreach component of the writing program. Those two capacities are becoming increasingly important, I believe, to the continued development of writing programs and, even, of the field of rhetoric and composition itself.

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY FOR A DIGITAL WRITING INITIATIVE

Sustainability and Survivability

Critical to this discussion is defining sustainability and considering the process for attaining sustainability for a digital writing initiative—or, indeed, for any kind of writing initiative. Environmental notions of sustainability pertain to supporting ecological systems at a level that they can support human use and interaction within those systems. For example, according to the principles of sustainable development, we should not overfish; we should only fish the oceans to an extent where fish are able to reproduce at a level equal to or greater than the level of fish harvesting. We are currently dramatically overfishing our oceans, depleting fish resources at a dangerous level (Montaigne, 2007).

That same sense of reproductive balance or regeneration does not exist, at least not in quite the same way, in academic organizations. In universities we are not developing initiatives within an ecological system or a biological reproductive system—and so our notions of and criteria for sustainability must be fashioned differently, without recourse to reproductive and biological models. Our models are dependent more on variables related to institutional priorities, politics, and human will, whim, and commitment.

Sustainability certainly includes the notion of survivability. Thus, an initiative that is sustainable endures, it lasts, it has continuity. Survivability is the capacity of an organization, program, or group to maintain its operations, its financial base, and its institutional resources, and to develop, change, and adapt those operations to suit changing circumstances over time. However, the term sustainability, particularly as it is used in environmental contexts, is more than mere survivability. Sustainable development means surviving, growing, and changing without depleting resources, without exploiting people or natural resources and without damaging the environment (i.e., the institution). In other words, sustainability adds an ethical component to survivability: it means developing a self-supporting system that grows but that does not waste, deplete, exploit, or result in net loss. According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), sustainable development is

> development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of "needs," in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. (p. 43)

As applied to writing programs, we can distinguish between programs that survive versus those that are sustainable. A program might *survive* by exploiting adjunct faculty at a low rate

of pay without benefits; by tolerating large class sizes; or by relying on extensive and regular use of unpaid graduate student labor. The concept of sustainability, though, applies an additional set of ethical criteria: Sustainable means that your program survives while meeting acceptable standards for class size and treatment of adjunct faculty and of support personnel.

In regards to digital writing initiatives, I see the following criteria as critical to any notion of sustainability:

- the ability to continue functioning effectively and successfully at a desired level of operation and activity and

- the ability to grow, change, and adapt to meet changing needs while not

- depleting resources or oppressing the people involved in the effort (e.g., without relying on free or undersupported faculty and graduate student labor), but while

- prioritizing the needs of those who most need help ("the poor"), and

- protecting fiscal continuity and/or administrative commitment from year to year (nothing is forever, but the funding commitment is ongoing and "expected" rather than ad hoc).

Who are "the poor" in a digital writing initiative? In the context of university-based digital writing initiatives, the poor refers to various groups, including lower-income students who might not have the resources to purchase expensive hardware and software; technical laborers (often students) who provide support for digital writing initiatives (e.g., maintaining networks and servers, creating Web sites); and adjunct and undersupported instructors (often graduate teaching assistants) who teach digital writing courses. A digital writing initiative has the ethical responsibility, for instance, to insure that lower-income students are not disadvantaged in their learning; a digital composition curriculum must provide economic assistance to enable students to participate fully (e.g., subsidizing technology purchases; sponsoring a laptop loan program).

Notice that this definition of sustainability includes a "depletion" variable, just like environmental notions of sustainability: In fashioning our digital writing initiatives, we must not deplete our (human) resources—that is, we must avoid working within a deficit mode of development, particularly in regards to the labor involved. This applies to our own labor and the work of others (e.g., graduate student labor). An initiative based largely on "free" faculty labor or on "free" graduate student assistance (often justified on the basis that it's "good for their professional development") is on ethically shaky grounds. Having said that, I must say that launching a digital writing initiative and gaining a foothold for it in the initial stages almost always requires (in my experience) operating for a while with lack of sufficient support and reward. Getting a digital initiative started often requires the commitment of a technorhetorician pioneer—a faculty member willing to do the very hard work of gaining a foothold for the initiative and carving out a space for such an initiative within the institution. This work is frequently supported by the un- or underpaid efforts of graduate students. I admit that this kind of effort is often necessary to convince the Department of English and/or humanities faculty that such a digital initiative is *necessary*, not optional, for teaching writing effectively in the digital era.

The irony about this is that to achieve a sustainable digital initiative you might have to build it on the backs of oppressed labor—for example the lone technorhetorician faculty member working without course release or administrative compensation (the work thereby threatening her movement toward tenure), and/or the labor of the few graduate students willing to volunteer their time. In a way, this is long-tail economics (Anderson, 2004, 2006): You are willing to invest free labor at the front end because you are committed to the cause and

because, you hope, the effort will result in stronger, more sustained commitment down the road. This is disciplinary courage of the sort that many scholars and teachers in rhetoric and composition (e.g., Janice Lauer at Purdue University; many rhet/comp doctoral students at Purdue University, such as Tharon Howard) have exercised to gain a foothold for a new field in an institution not immediately convinced of its worth. Initial efforts will be un- or underpaid, unrewarded, and unacknowledged—maybe even resisted or detested. But you hope that the effort will result in an institutional conversion that will lead toward positive recognition, appreciation, and monetary support. In my experience, breaking new ground almost always requires this level of commitment, trust, and hope. This stage of gaining a foothold is fraught with peril.

Levels of Support

Table 1 identifies three different levels of support for a digital writing initiative. These levels look like stages of development, and they may indeed work that way, but not necessarily: Not all digital writing initiatives start out at level 1 (happily)—and not all achieve level 3 (unhappily). But the process of securing a sustainable initiative requires working toward a level 3 commitment. At level 3—at least as pertains to a research-extensive university (or, under the old Carnegie Foundation classification, a Research 1 institution)—you are working collaboratively within a team of multiple faculty members; you have dedicated staff and technical support; you have dedicated graduate assistantships; you have control of your own budget and discretionary authority over spending. In other words, you have continuing institutional commitment and fiscal support. No funding lines are ever permanent, but you have a reasonable expectation that the monetary support will continue. However, the technorhetorician starting out at level 1 needs to begin by changing the culture of the institution, seeking out kindred spirits and partners, building a community with graduate students. Hiring beyond the single faculty member to build a cadre of faculty members committed to digital writing is crucial. A key metric of this stage is multiple faculty members teaching and doing research in digital writing. (As of 2008, the WIDE Research Center had two faculty co-directors; the department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures had a total of seven faculty in digital writing.)

Table 1. Levels of support for a digital writing initiative.

LEVEL	AGENTS	GOALS / EXPECTATIONS	LABELING	FUNDING
1	the technorhetorician "pioneer"	• gaining a foothold • establishing a presence and identity	"effort"	• no funding or small ad hoc funds • based primarily on volunteer labor • minimal reward and recognition
2	one or two faculty leaders and a few committed graduate students	• fostering a community; creating a supportive climate • extending reach and impact	"initiative"; "program"	• soft money, but usually available • course release or summer money for coordinator • graduate students on hourly pay
3	multiple faculty directors or principal investigators; multiple graduate students; established technical staff	• sponsoring and supporting research • supporting other programs and faculty (not just itself)	"center"	• autonomous and/or continuous budget • graduate students on full-year research assistantships

Metrics of Success

Here it is necessary to distinguish between instructional and curricular sustainability, and research sustainability, because the metrics for success are quite different. The sign of success for an instructional or curricular initiative is that the initiative disappears—that is, it becomes so embedded in the institutional funding structure that it is no longer considered "special" or "extra." We know that support for digital writing instruction is "sustained" when support for it becomes transparent, unexceptional, normal—for instance, when upgrades for hardware, software, furniture, space allocation, and space redesign are built into a regular budget cycle. It is important to build budgetary permanence and budgetary autonomy into an initiative's operation. Of course, permanence and autonomy are relative terms. There is no such thing as a permanent or completely autonomous budget in academia. However, what you do not want is the need to secure approval year-after-year for new monies. Life on the edge is anxiety producing, not to mention exhausting. It is dangerous for money to be in the same pot competing with different priorities—for example, merged with the department's literary journal budget or faculty travel money. Your money should be earmarked for the digital writing initiative. Control of that money should be independent, even if access to it requires approval (as it always does) by an upper administrator and even if that money is merged into some other funds.

Sustainability for a research initiative is quite different. By its very nature, a research initiative has to reinvent itself constantly. It can never get comfortable; it must always be pushing the envelope and morphing into new configurations. By definition, a research center must keep moving; it must remain on the cutting edge; it must maintain high visibility; and it must attend constantly to its revenue stream.

DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING THE WIDE RESEARCH CENTER AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The idea of the WIDE Research Center did not hatch so much as evolve. In Spring 2001, when I was negotiating for my position as Director of Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University, I was engaged in a four-way negotiation with the Chair of the Department, the Associate Dean of the College of Arts & Letters, and with the Provost's Office. The discussions focused on the level of support needed to create a truly excellent comprehensive writing program at Michigan State University, mainly centering on the resources necessary to start a new graduate program. (The University already had an established first-year composition program and an excellent Writing Center, but it did not have a graduate program in rhetoric and composition.)

A key component of those negotiations was my insistence on hiring additional faculty in the area of digital and professional writing. My past experiences at other universities had convinced me that *the* critical component of achieving academic program sustainability is faculty lines—dedicated tenure-stream commitments to an area of research. A tenure-line faculty appointment is the longest and strongest form of institutional commitment possible at any university. Aside from securing that level of long-term institutional commitment, to succeed in meeting its goals, any writing program initiative just needs *help*—more people to do the work involved. The University agreed with this priority; between 2002 and 2006, we were approved to hire an additional three faculty, including one senior hire whose primary area of research expertise was digital writing. These three new hires joined four faculty members already working primarily in this area to create a cadre of seven tenure-stream faculty members working primarily or significantly in the area of digital writing. Two of those three hires—Jeff Grabill and Bill Hart-Davidson—eventually became co-directors of the WIDE Research Center, along with myself.

What was explicit in those early negotiations in Spring 2001 was the idea of a dedicated technical laboratory that would be a place for faculty and graduate students to work together on issues of research and teaching. What was also explicit was that digital writing would be a significant emphasis within the new program, both at the undergraduate and graduate level. The University committed itself to achieving these goals. By 2002 we had developed a BA in Professional Writing, an MA in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing, and a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing with a concentration in digital rhetoric. Also by 2002, the idea of a research center had taken a clear shape. Jeff Grabill arrived at MSU as a new senior faculty member in Fall 2002, and one of the first things he and I did was apply for funding to support a research center. We started with the normal and customary internal avenues for securing startup money. In early Fall 2002 we applied for an incubator grant of $75,000 to establish what we then called the Digital Writing and Reading Research Center. This first effort was unsuccessful; in fact, our proposal was not even approved within our College because our plan was not considered significantly "humanities-based."

Perhaps it is a mistake to say that our first effort was unsuccessful—it was, in fact, wildly successful, just not in the way we expected. Our proposal attracted the attention of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, who encouraged us to think along different funding lines. In Spring 2003, Jeff and I refashioned our original proposal and applied for a Strategic Partnership Grant (SPG) from the MSU Foundation. We wrote a 1-page concept statement proposing to create the Writing, Information, Design in E-Space (WIDE) Research Center"). We requested $553,000 for 3 years of startup funding—that amount being a relatively low figure for the MSU Foundation, which was accustomed to awarding grants of more than one million dollars for science and technology initiatives. In June 2003 we were invited to present our proposal to the Board of Trustees of the MSU Foundation, a group comprised mainly of business leaders, not academics. The Trustees immediately saw value in a project that would, as they saw it, help assist business communication. They approved our proposal—the first humanities-oriented research center ever funded by the MSU Foundation—and in Fall 2003, the WIDE Center was officially launched. In terms of the categories in Table 1, Jeff and I started the initiative at level 2 and were successful in moving it to level 3.

Professional Writing Program at MSU
https://wrac.msu.edu/professional-public-writing/

Rhetoric & Writing Program at MSU
https://wrac.msu.edu

Strategic Partnership Grant (SPG) Program at MSU
https://www.msufoundation.org/strategic-partnership-grants

MSU Foundation
http://www.msufoundation.msu.edu/

Toward Self-sufficiency

It sounds easy when explained in two paragraphs, but securing this funding required a year of intense discussions, and it required the collaborative effort of a large group of faculty working to realize the concept. Our SPG proposal listed numerous strategic faculty partners inside and outside the Department of Writing, including Janet Swenson, Ellen Cushman, and Dànielle DeVoss, and including faculty in other areas: Johel Grant-Brown (Integrative Studies), Matt Koehler (Learning, Technology & Culture), Punya Mishra (Learning, Technology & Culture), Ernest Morrell (Teacher Education), Mark Wilson (Urban Planning), and Brian Winn (Telecommunications, Information Systems, and Media). These faculty helped us with the conception of the Center and committed time, energy, and intellectual effort to helping

formulate a successful initiative. Furthermore, to secure SPG funding, it was necessary to demonstrate that our research inquiries had broad application and deployed multidisciplinary methodologies. We had much help from committed upper administrators, particularly from our Dean, Patrick McConeghy (College of Arts & Letters) and Cordell Overby (Office of Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies), who were both keenly committed to seeing the Center succeed.

Several notable things happened in WIDE's first year of existence (2003–2004). First, the name changed. The acronym made sense to people, but not what it stood for. People assumed that WIDE meant Writing in Digital Environments, and at some point Jeff and I just decided "okay, that's what WIDE means." Second, at first we did not have a physical location for the Center—and so a significant portion of our time and energy was spent arguing for physical space, which we secured in Fall 2004. (Securing permanent dedicated space, like securing faculty lines, is also a significant metric for long-term sustainability. As argued by Porter et al., 2000, space *matters.*) The WIDE Center now has a suite of four offices, a conference room, a server room, and a collaborative work lab. Third, for Fall of 2004, we were able to hire Bill Hart-Davidson, who joined us immediately as the third co-director of the Center and has contributed innovative thinking and invaluable leadership to the effort.

In that first year or two, we spent a considerable amount of time on administrative work (in addition to launching and sponsoring faculty research projects). We needed to clarify our research identity and mission, our priorities and our procedures; we had to plot a trajectory for our research and develop a plan for sustainability. We had to produce documents that none of us had never written before—including a planning budget and a business plan outlining a strategy for securing revenue. We had a generous chunk of startup money, but we also knew that for the Center to survive beyond 5 years, we needed to plot a course to self-sufficiency. That was the primary focus of our planning budget and our business plan, and is still a major focus of concern. (I revised this chapter at the end of year 5 of the WIDE Center, a critical stage of sustainability. We had sufficient revenue remaining from our startup funds and from our current contracts and grants to carry us through this year at our current level of operation. However, we were fast approaching the critical sustainability juncture—year 6, to begin summer 2008, at which point the SPG funding would dry up and we would need to be generating 100% of our own operating revenue. To sustain our current level of research activity, our infrastructure, our technical and secretarial support, etc., requires an annual budget of $100,000–150,000.)

The typical SPG grant, which provides 3 years of funding for research centers, is based on a start-up model for science and technology projects that assumes that 3 years is adequate time for a research center to become self-sufficient—that is, to secure adequate external grants to support ongoing projects. In our case, however, we knew from the beginning that we had to apply a different model—because we were operating within a disciplinary terrain (rhetoric and composition, professional/technical writing) and doing a kind of research ("digital writing") still relatively unknown at the university and totally unfamiliar to most funding agencies. Which foundations and granting agencies support research focused principally on composition or on the study of writing? Not very many, at least not explicitly. (NCTE and STC do provide some small research grants. Educational agencies provide support for writing research, but typically for K–12 applications.) We knew early on that our start-up phase would be slower, because we were in the position of having to gain a funding foothold—that is, from the standpoint of a research center competing for external funding, we were in a sense back at level 1, trying to establish a basic research identity and appreciation for the kind of research we were doing. Thus, we developed a 5-year sustainability plan rather than a 3-year plan, and we budgeted our operations accordingly.

Funding Sources and Research Activities

We expected that it would be difficult for the WIDE Research Center to secure large external grants exclusively on its own, and we have found that to be the case. However, three other forms of funding have proven to be promising: smaller external contracts awarded exclusively to WIDE; internal contracts awarded exclusively to WIDE; and larger external grants involving partnering with other units, disciplines, and centers on the MSU campus. We have been successful in all three categories. In 2005–2006, we secured approximately $355,000 in funding: approximately $11,000 from external contracts exclusive to WIDE, $55,000 in internal contracts exclusive to WIDE, and $289,000 in grants cooperative with other units. (A note regarding grants cooperative with other units: Not all that money comes directly to WIDE— only percentages of it, depending on our role in the project.)

An internal contract refers to work we do for a campus unit at MSU, and we have done research for both academic and nonacademic units on campus. For instance, we have contracted projects with both the Office of Affirmative Action and with the Academic Advising Office to help them update and develop the information on their Web sites. WIDE's focus on these projects was not simply doing a Web site makeover (a type of project that we don't do), but rather *conducting research* on the *information needs* of the units. That is, we (1) conducted research into the work practices and communication patterns of each office, starting with observations of their writing practices; and (2) developed an information model for each office. An information model is a plan for developing information resources (like a Web site, but not limited to that) to help an office accomplish their work. Such a plan includes not only a model for design of an information resource (e.g., the information architecture for a Web site), but perhaps more importantly, a plan for development and maintenance of resources—something like a composing process plan and an information management plan.

Through doing this work over the past several years, we have settled into a clear research niche (not our only research identity, but an important one): We study workplace communication practices (e.g., how people access and distribute information within and outside the organization; how they collaborate on documents), and we design information models that will help them do that work more efficiently, productively, and successfully. If we think about this work using vocabulary from the field of rhetoric and composition, what we are doing is audience analysis and composing process research: assessing user needs (writers and readers) and studying writing and reading practices. But the work is more than that and different from that, too; if we couch this work in the vocabulary of human–computer interaction studies, we are studying social information networks, or what Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day (1999) called information ecologies: "local habitations with recognizable participants and practices…. composed of people, practices, values, and technology" (p. 185, p. 211).

We are also studying interaction. As Bruno Latour (2005) reminded us, social networks are never static; they are moving targets consisting of an assemblage of actions occurring in time. In many respects, our main methodological focus is tracking activity rather than objects or people. (For a discussion of the complexity of interaction, see Latour, 2005, pp. 199–204). And, finally, to the extent that we are studying users and use practices, our work overlaps with usability research. Thus, we are studying composition practices to be sure, but with a focus on the social and collaborative networks supporting those practices (moreso than the composing practices of the individual writer); on writing as a type of work activity; and on the ways that participants interact in order to do writing work. This is a type of research that no other field at the university does quite so well; no other discipline pays quite so much attention to audience and user issues as does rhetoric and composition. No other field focuses quite so thoroughly on studying writing processes and interactions.

In addition to studying writing practices and the social interactions that make up such practices, we also create online writing tools. In a sense, we are involved in the development of cyberinfrastructure (American Council of Learned Societies, 2007)—the development of

specialized digital tools that allow professionals to do their work more productively. Three such tools developed through WIDE projects are:

Figure 1. Grassroots
Grassroots is a map-creation tool for communities that allows individuals and organizations (which use maps often) to map community assets and other issues of interest in communities;
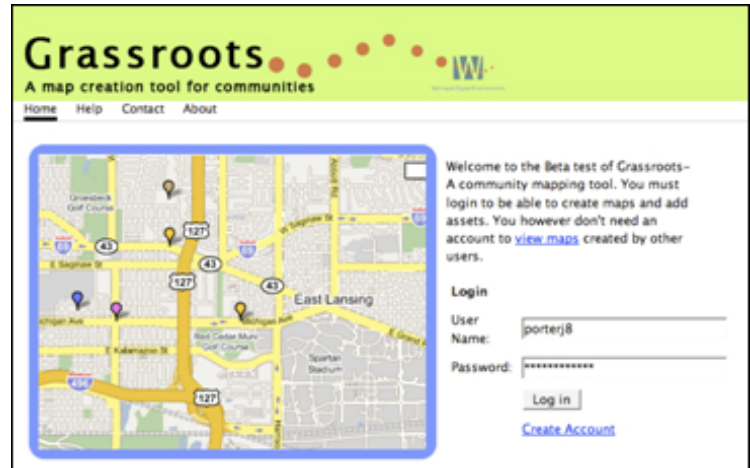

Figure 2. Ink
Ink is a simulated multiplayer game environment for promoting writing and community; and

Figure 3. Literacy Resource Exchange
http://tne.wide.msu.edu/.
LRE is a social-networking Web site that helps instructors and students in the Teacher Education program at MSU exchange resources related to teacher training.

Grassroots and the Literacy Resource Exchange are tools derived from our research on the information ecologies of the two groups. Both are new tools that did not formerly exist but that are needed to support the particular writing and work practices of the group. The Grassroots tool represents one of WIDE's community outreach efforts: We see it as part of our mission to help communities with their writing practices. (Grassroots is an outcome of the Capital Area Community Information Project, a 3-year outreach project led by Jeff Grabill.) The Literacy Resource Exchange was one outcome from an internal contract from the College of Education

(who subcontracted the project to us using funds they received from an external Carnegie Foundation grant). As we built these tools, we were also simultaneously engaged in the process of studying the use of these tools, and then making revisions in the tools and adding new capacities based on user feedback.

Achieving Sustainability

Thus, our chief work as a research center is to observe, study, and assess the writing and communication practices of groups, offices, organizations, communities, and businesses; to recommend information models for assisting those practices; and, at times, to develop new tools to support those practices. One beneficial outcome of this work is that the partners we are working with now understand— in a way that they didn't before—what research in rhetoric and composition *does*, how our particular research perspectives and methodologies can be practically useful, and how they can help almost any organization in assessing and improving its writing and communication practices. Because we know how to study composing practices, and because we understand how rhetoric theory is useful, we contribute value. We offer a fundable service—to local communities, to business and industry, to the university itself.

At the end of our fifth year of existence (spring semester 2008, when I finish drafting this chapter), the WIDE Center is still in its early stages of achieving sustainability. We are still in the process of explaining ourselves, articulating what our research does, and showing how it adds value. In a sense, we are taking rhetoric and composition research on the road—through our various projects and internal contracts—and trying to demonstrate its importance and value outside the narrow realm of composition instruction. This effort takes time; with each new project we make progress and win converts. But meanwhile, our productivity as a research center is being evaluated by the metric applied to science and technology research centers: external funding. According to the research office that evaluates our productivity, external grants count the most. That has long been the principal evaluative metric for science and technology, but, we are discovering, it is fast becoming the key criterion even for humanities research.

The WIDE Center has been successful in achieving external funding when we have partnered with other disciplines and centers—but less successful when going it alone, because our field is still in the early stages of establishing the value of its research. The university at large and funding agencies in general do not yet fully recognize the value of research in rhetoric and composition, or in digital writing. What we have to do more aggressively—"we" meaning locally the WIDE Center but generally the entire field of rhetoric and composition—is take our research on the road and show its practical application across almost any discipline or organization and work to secure the financial support necessary to sustain that work over time.

THE RESEARCH CENTER, THE WRITING PROGRAM, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

I want to move from the story of the WIDE Research Center—a fascinating story to be sure— to consider some broader questions about the relationship between the research center and the overall writing program, and between the research center and the field of rhetoric and composition.

First, some economic background. If you teach at a public, state-supported university, then you well know that we are in an era of declining tax-based support for higher education in the United States. Many public universities are no longer so much "state-supported" as "state-assisted"—and moving rapidly toward merely "state-affiliated." (In 2004–2005, state

appropriations provided 21.7% of the total revenue for Michigan State University, which is almost equal to the 21.1% provided by student tuition.) Even though state funding for higher education has, in general, increased *in total* in recent years, the increases *in percentage* are not meeting the inflationary costs of higher education. In Michigan, the problem is due in large part to the rising cost of employee health benefits rather than to increased instructional costs.

Within this grim economic climate, one that shows no prospect of reversing, writing program administrators need to explore new sources of funding, new ways to sustain programs at a level of excellence and to also pursue new initiatives, particularly the all-important move toward digital writing instruction. It is dangerously naïve to think that we can continue to rely on the kindness of upper administrators or the continuing flow of the general fund. The tap is slowing, and is about to be shut off, particularly in regard to support for graduate education, and so we need to start thinking seriously about revenue generation. Writing programs at public universities must wrestle with supporting themselves—and, in particular, supporting the increasing need for technologically enhanced writing classrooms and for digital initiatives that are, increasingly, a *sine qua non* for writing instruction in the 21st century (WIDE Research Center Collective, 2005).

Graduate Student Support in the Research Center

Humanities departments (like English) and rhetoric and composition programs typically provide support to graduate programs through graduate teaching assistantships (TAships), which are most often used to staff first-year composition and other lower-level course offerings, and through support of the graduate director (e.g., course release, administrative stipend, staff support). Departments seldom provide support for graduate student *research*. A graduate school might provide support for graduate student research in the form of, for example, fellowships and dissertation completion grants (as does Michigan State University), but in my experience those forms of support are limited, going to a relatively small number of the more highly recruited graduate students. Such awards almost always support the graduate student's individual work rather than collaborative or client-based work. Faculty members who secure grants will sometimes offer support for a graduate student research assistantship (RAship)—and in such cases the graduate student would be helping with a research project. But, in my experience, those opportunities are also relatively rare in the humanities, and they are typically focused on individual research projects. In fact, most available funding for humanities-oriented scholarship, for both faculty and graduate students, supports *individual* work in specific (and often esoteric) areas of inquiry. Such funding is highly valued in the humanities, but in my view that value is overrated: It supports individuals while contributing very little, if anything, to program development. Often it has the effect of isolating graduate student fellows and removing their work from invaluable collaborative and programmatic interaction.

The sciences, engineering, medicine, and technology-oriented fields operate according to a different model of graduate student support, one based more on RAships than on TAships, and one based more on large-scale, grant-funded collaborative research projects in which a graduate student is working on a team to assist a particular faculty member with their work or working as part of a research center involving a number of faculty investigators and graduate research assistants. I see evidence of a trend in the direction of RAships in the humanities— that is, an expectation that graduate programs should fund their graduate students on RAships supported by faculty grants rather than on TAships supported by the general fund. (As I understand it, that is what happened with the doctoral program in Communication and Rhetoric at Rensselaer Polytechnic University.) If this trend becomes widespread, then the research center has a potentially critical role to play in providing support for funding graduate students. The model that relies on using first-year composition courses to fund teaching

assistant lines for English and/or rhetoric and composition graduate students may not be sufficient alone as a model for sustaining a graduate program.

Roles and Research Opportunities

Of course, no writing research center could hope to provide more than a small percentage of the funds needed to cover the operating costs of a major writing program, particularly its two most expensive components: typically, the first-year composition program and the graduate rhetoric and composition program. At the WIDE Center we have to sustain *ourselves*, making sure the Center survives. However, we don't see ourselves as an isolated entity competing for resources. Rather we see ourselves as a part of a coordinated and cooperative ecological system, consisting of the all the elements of the writing program and focused on promoting effective writing and communication skills across the University. Thus, we are also keenly committed to helping the overall writing program in several strategically important ways, the value of which should not be underestimated.

First, the most important role of the research center might be in providing research opportunities for graduate students. These research opportunities help graduate students learn the methodological pragmatics of composition research, teach them how to apply for grants, and help them generate professional publications and presentations, thus enhancing their professional development. At any given time in the past several years, the WIDE Research Center has been supporting the work of 6–10 graduate students, most of whom are working for us on an hourly basis for various research project teams. Some are conducting empirical research inquiries (e.g., conducting interviews, doing usability work); others are engaged in network support, technology development, or Web design on various project teams. Unlike most of the projects students do in their academic coursework and for their theses and dissertations, this work is highly collaborative, involving teams of 3–6 faculty and graduate students, and often working with faculty in other disciplines or with clients across the campus or outside of it. For instance, the project team that developed and tested the Literacy Resource Exchange included seven team members: two faculty members, three doctoral students in the Rhetoric & Writing PhD program, one student from the MA program in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing, and one senior undergraduate major in Professional Writing. The students learned, simultaneously, the pragmatics of how to design and conduct a study, how to collect and analyze data, how to develop online tools to support writing practices, how to conduct usability testing, how to work with clients, how to structure and design Web-based applications, and how to write client-directed reports as well as to produce professional posters, presentations, and articles.

Second, the research center supports the undergraduate program as well—chiefly by providing internship opportunities (usually paid internships) for students. The WIDE Center employs numerous undergraduate Professional Writing majors on an hourly basis to work on project teams, and it also provides internships (and helps find internships) for Professional Writing majors looking to develop practical experience.

Third, the research center does provide funding—and even when not large often strategically important and timely funding—in the form of extra support for faculty travel and supplies (e.g., computer hardware); research assistantships for graduate students; hourly contract work for graduate students and undergraduates; summer support and course buyouts for faculty; summer and supplemental work for graduate students; assistance with grant writing; work space; infrastructural support for digital writing initiatives (e.g., server space), etc. When a center secures a large external grant, a component of that grant can be allocated to fund graduate RAship lines.

Fourth, the research center can provide the research complement to an instructional initiative. The WIDE Center does research and supports research pertaining to the design of computer-intensive writing classrooms, and this research emphasis has the potential to secure grant support and institutional research support for such endeavors. And, finally, the research center serves an important ambassadorial function, representing the research identity of the writing program across campus, both to upper administrators and faculty in other disciplines.

<div align="center">

Outreach and the Research Center

</div>

The research center does much more than simply support faculty research projects. Research in the WIDE Center means much more than simply developing empirical projects and generating journal articles; it also refers to client-based contract work, to the design of products and tools to aid digital composing, and to promoting the importance of writing across the University by showing its relevance to numerous interdisciplinary research activities. Along with the Writing Center, the WIDE Research Center functions in many ways as the chief outreach component for the academic writing programs on campus (e.g., the first-year composition program, the professional writing undergraduate major, and the graduate rhetoric and composition program), reaching out through its research projects to business and industry, to government and local community action groups, and to researchers in other fields. This outreach activity has created a valuable intellectual churn, to be sure, but it is also generating revenue.

Figure 4 is a visual rendering of the six elements of the writing program mapped on a grid identifying each element's primary focus of work activity, and perhaps their chief source of funding as well: departmental/disciplinary, university/multidisciplinary, outreach (defined as work outside the university and outside disciplinary boundaries). Figure 1 maps the traditional academic structure that is still dominant now—that is, of writing program units as or in a department alongside some of the newer institutional structures (e.g., a writing center) whose locus of activity is primarily outside the department, serving as a linkage point between the academic programs and other extra-departmental groups. A key component of this model—and, I would argue, a key value that we must embrace—is *outreach*. I view the research center (and also potentially the writing center) as an institutional mechanism for developing the outreach component of any writing program. That outreach capacity is the chief asset writing programs need to develop to institutionally sustain themselves.

Figure 4. Components of the writing program and the locus of their missions.
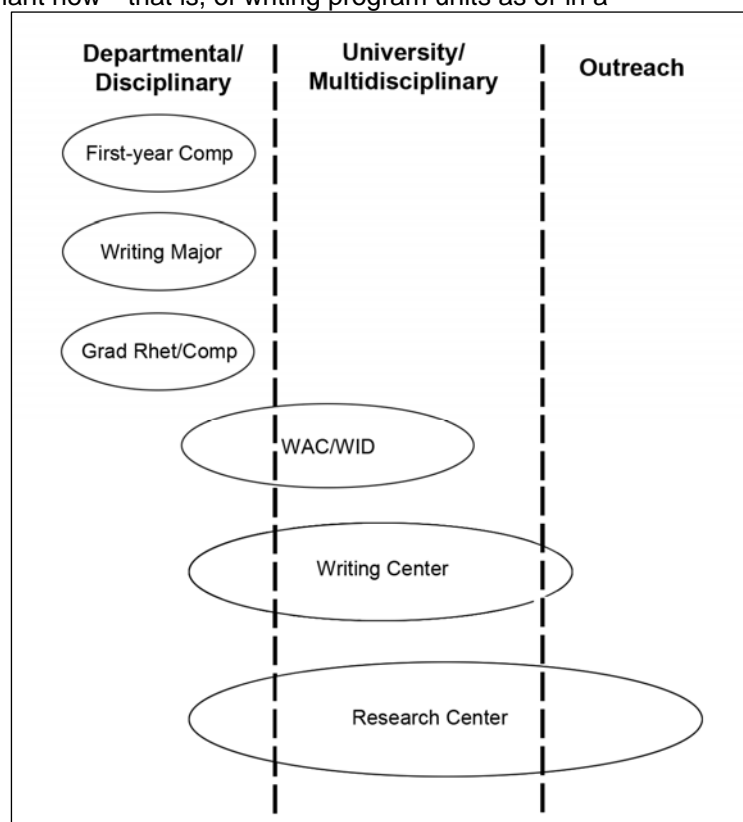
Some elements of the writing program are funded within the department and their primary mission is disciplinary: They are focused on teaching writing skills or on teaching students to be professionals (professional writers, professional teachers). Some elements of the writing program—particularly the writing center and the writing-across-the-curriculum or writing-in-the-disciplines program—reach outside departmental and disciplinary boundaries to engage the university, to provide support services, or to design curricula for other programs and disciplines. Some writing centers also serve an outreach function—for example, if they provide tutoring services outside the university or if, like the MSU Writing Center, they provide support for K–12 teachers in the region. However, the primary mission of most writing centers is to serve the university at large. The primary focus of a research center, though, is to serve as a bridge across all three missions—to advance disciplinary knowledge for sure, but also to engage other disciplinary approaches to solve problems and meet needs outside the university. The research center should have a much stronger outreach mission than any other component of the writing program. It should serve as the component of the writing program most focused on connecting disciplinary thinking with the practical needs of business, industry, government, and community, but least wedded to disciplinary constraints.

Changing Circumstances and Opportunities for Growth

The writing program and the field of rhetoric and composition at large need to address the sustainability criterion that pertains to change: the ability to grow, change, and adapt to meet changing needs. This requires us to analyze deeply the ways in which he writing program and the field are going to adapt to meet changing circumstances—particularly the changing economic climate at the university; the changing metrics for evaluating faculty research and programmatic success; and the changing notions of writing, which is increasingly Internet-based digital writing.

I see the emphasis on professional writing and on digital writing as critical to the long-term survival and sustainability of the writing program and to the field of rhetoric and composition itself. Technical and business communication, and computers and composition are areas that represent the future of the field. Ironically, these are the aspects of the field that rhetoric and composition treats as peripheral. Witness how, every year, the Conference on College Composition and Communication has fewer and fewer panels and presentations focused on business and technical communication or focused on empirical research. And where is *communication* at the Conference on College Composition and *Communication*? Very few from the field of communication studies are to be found there. To establish its research foothold, rhetoric and composition has allied itself with the humanities and particularly with traditional humanistic forms of scholarship, where we have won the field some status and some (begrudging) acknowledgement that historical and theoretical scholarship in rhetoric counts, and that it is a legitimate form of humanistic scholarship. But what about composition research that is empirical, observational, and person-based, of the sort that the WIDE Center emphasizes? Although that research tends to be more valued across the university, it is less valued by the humanities, by English departments, and, at times, even by writing programs. People who wish to pursue fundable digital writing research thus run some risk of having their research misunderstood and underacknowledged to the extent that it does not meet Department of English and/or humanities criteria for excellence in research. I see it as absolutely necessary for writing programs to support and develop empirical research, professional and technical writing, and digital writing and literacy as key parts of their identity, and to ensure that research in such areas is fully recognized and supported.

My main recommendation for any writing program is to develop strategies and to design institutional structures aimed at making writing research more widely visible and at "getting outside" disciplinary thinking and departmental borders. It is important to move outside our typical academic comfort zones (e.g., the English Department, the writing program, rhetoric and composition, the humanities), which are largely departmental and disciplinary ones, and to engage a broader range of academic disciplines as well organizations and communities outside the university. Of course writing programs have often done this in regards to instruction, tutoring, pedagogy, and curriculum—for example, the writing center provides services to the entire university; WAC/WID programs help strengthen writing instruction within specifics fields; service learning programs tutoring in the community. But writing programs have much less frequently done this, in a collective way, with their *research*.

Gaining a research foothold requires, first, assessing your current situation in terms of level of support (see Table 1). If you are at level 1, most of all you need more faculty help. If you are at level 2, you need to organize and deploy available resources, particularly faculty expertise, to secure startup resources. Many universities offer internal grants to assist startup. WIDE was not successful with this approach, chiefly due to resistance within our own college. However, a productive starting point for the WIDE Center has been internal contracts (as discussed above). Look for ways that your research expertise in digital writing and literacy can contribute directly to the university. This could involve building a Web site, testing the usability of a Web site, providing workshops for teachers, developing informational or promotional materials, or studying a particular group of users (e.g., how students use library resources) to determine their needs and patterns of interaction. Sometimes this work requires technology expertise, but not always. (For instance, the first stage for our Literacy Resource Exchange project was conducting fairly traditional person-based research: analyzing audiences and collecting information about participants through observation and interviews. In the first stage we were studying an information ecology, not creating a Web tool.) Contract your services in exchange for a course release or summer stipend, for graduate student support, or for technology purchases. Be careful not to add more work than is compensated by the project. If you get on the slippery slope of doing too much work for too little return, then you will soon exhaust yourself and your productivity will suffer; you will lose rather than gain research traction. Doing one small project well, and gaining credibility through that project, can lead to more and larger projects. WIDE's initial contract to develop the Literacy Resource Exchange for the College of Education was a small internal contract ($12,500) to do one fairly well-defined task. Doing that task well led us to receive two subsequent contracts, each one of them entailing a larger scope (and more funding).

The most immediately available client for writing research could be in the building next door to you, but of course contract work can be done outside the university as well as in it. Richard Selfe (2005) called such work "the entrepreneurial model," and he described several universities that do this kind of work, including Clemson University and the University of Utah. The Professional Communication program at Clemson University deploys its expertise "to work on Web development and information design projects with clients from local businesses and other academic units within the university" (Selfe, 2005, p. 112). The Writing Program at the University of Utah has developed an ongoing partnership with the library. Libraries are particularly promising partners for rhetoric and composition researchers. Faculty and graduate students in writing can assist a library in a number of ways, including helping design and give presentations, studying user habits related to use of digital technology (e.g., how students do online searches), and performing usability tests on library materials. The research skills taught and valued within composition and technical communication can provide useful help to nonacademic university units such as the library, academic advising offices, and computing services.

Early in the process of establishing a digital writing research initiative, it is sometimes necessary to operate at a deficit—doing a project for little (or no) immediate reward—in the interests of gaining credibility and gaining the foothold to get the initiative noticed. It is fine to do that for a short period of time (1 or 2 years?), but if it becomes a permanent state, then the initiative is not sustainable, and you could risk damage to yourself. One way to minimize damage is to make sure that contract work has a research component to it—that is, that it addresses real research questions, that it generates findings, and that it results in professional presentations and publications. Rhetoric and composition teachers often work in a realm in which the categories of teaching, research, and service tend to blur, but there are practical reasons to make sure that your research work is distinctly visible as such. Digital compositionists expend significant effort on developing computer classrooms, mentoring teachers, providing training sessions, and ramping up new computer-based curricula. To the extent that this work is recognized, it is treated under the categories of teaching and service. It is, in my experience, seldom acknowledged as research—unless the work results in a publication. So, if the contract work you are doing is simply running workshops or making Web sites or doing Web design makeovers for campus units, then you may be performing a valuable service, but—in the eyes of the university at large—you are not doing research. You are engaged in a service activity that takes you away from, rather than contributes to, your research work. Doing such work can also have an unintended negative consequence: feeding the misperception that the field of writing is an instructional and service field only, without a distinctive research identity.

In the case of the Literacy Resource Exchange project, we designed a tool to help teacher educators share resources more productively, but we also conducted research throughout the project—at the front end, by conducting observational research aimed at determining how teachers collaborate to share resources, and, at the back end, by doing usability testing to determine the effectiveness of the Literacy Resource Exchange and to observe how teachers work collaboratively. The project has resulted in several presentations for the faculty and graduate students involved, with several papers currently in progress. Our research findings are related to how professionals use online tools and to how professionals interact with each other to do their work; the findings also explore how a social networking Web site could be designed to facilitate teacher training. The next stage of developing this project is to take it outside the university—to apply for an external grant, using our research findings to date as evidence of our expertise in the area. Thus, we built this project incrementally: starting with a small internal contract, leading to larger internal contracts, and moving toward a large external grant project.

CONCLUSION

Every English Department I've ever been in has the same standing joke for use in times of financial crisis: "We'll hold a bake sale!" Funny, but also revelatory. Underneath the joke is a sad reality—faculty have trouble imagining how their expertise could have economic value outside the classroom. Rather than fall prey to bake sale despair, we need to think creatively about how to deploy our expertise in ways valued at the university and in our communities.

The economy of the university—particularly of the state-supported university—is changing rapidly, as are the metrics for evaluating faculty research and the mechanisms for supporting graduate education. We are now in an era in which the key metric for evaluating faculty research, even in fields like rhetoric and composition, is becoming less the number and quality of refereed publications (the old model of faculty productivity) and more the number and amount of external grants funded (the new model of faculty productivity). We are entering an era in which graduate programs, even programs like rhetoric/composition, may increasingly be expected to fund graduate students from external grants (RAships) rather than instructional monies (TAships). We are entering an era in which doing good work—tenurable and

promotable work—within disciplinary boundaries and according to disciplinary criteria may matter less than working across disciplinary boundaries and deploying multidisciplinary thinking to solve real-world problems. Writing programs need to adjust to thrive in the face of these changing circumstances, and the field of rhetoric and composition needs to adapt to assure its continued progress.

To do so, we must develop the research identity of the field—and develop it in ways that demonstrate its practical relevance and value to other disciplines, to business and industry, and to local communities. The field of rhetoric and composition has thus far largely secured its identity and value to the university through pedagogical and curricular work, through a commitment to the teaching of writing—and that effort has been quite successful. But for the field to sustain itself in the next decade will require a shift in our thinking and a redirection of our energies: To sustain ourselves, we must develop a stronger identity and presence as a research field—we need to reach out with our research. Professional writing in digital environments is one key area of development where our research can have significant impact.

A research center focused on digital writing and literacy can play a significant role in helping to strengthen not only the writing program but the field of rhetoric and composition generally. Although it not so much the center as the *research* that really counts, one of the key principles of institutional critique is that space matters. In the prestige competition at the university, if you don't have a clearly visible research center—a definable space, external grant support, and a clear impact on disciplinary knowledge (via refereed publications)—your field of research is not seen as significant. As a field, we need to demonstrate to the university that our research matters, that it has immediate and practical application, that it is fundable, and that it offers clear benefits to our clients and partners and to the communities in which we live. Admittedly, there are a number of different ways that we can do this, but what I am suggesting here is that the research center is the best institutional mechanism for addressing that mission and achieving that goal.

REFERENCES

American Council of Learned Societies. (2006, December). *Our cultural commonwealth: The report of the American Council of Learned Societies' Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for Humanities and Social Sciences.* Retrieved July 20, 2007, from http://www.acls.org/cyberinfrastructure/index.htm

Anderson, Chris. (2004). The long tail. *Wired, 12* (10). Accessed July 21, 2007, from http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html

Anderson, Chris. (2006). *The long tail: Why the future of business is selling less of more.* New York: Hyperion.

Comstock, Michelle. (2006). Writing programs as distributed networks: A materialist approach to university–community digital media literacy. *Community Literacy Journal, 1*(1), 45–66.

DeVoss, Dànielle Nicole; Cushman, Ellen; & Grabill, Jeffrey T. (2005). Infrastructure and composing: The *when* of new-media writing. *College Composition and Communication, 57*, 14–44.

Grabill, Jeffrey; Porter, James E.; Blythe, Stuart; & Miles, Libby. (2003). Institutional critique revisited. *Works & Days, 41/42*, 218–237.

Latour, Bruno. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor–network theory.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Montaigne, Fen. (2007, April). Still waters: The global fish crisis. *National Geographic, 211*(4), 32 –69.

Nardi, Bonnie A., & O'Day, Vicki L. (1999). *Information ecologies: Using technology with heart.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Porter, James E.; Sullivan, Patricia; Blythe, Stuart; Grabill, Jeffrey T.; & Miles, Libby. (2000). Institutional critique: A rhetorical methodology for change. *College Composition and Communication*, *51*, 610–642.

Selfe, Richard J. (2005). *Sustainable computer environments: Cultures of support in English Studies and Language Arts.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Sullivan, Patricia, & Porter, James E. (1993). Remapping curricular geography: Professional writing and/in English. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *7*, 389–422.

The WIDE Research Center Collective [DeVoss, Dànielle; Cushman, Ellen; Hart-Davidson, Bill; Grabill, Jeff; & Porter, James E.]. (2005). Why teach digital writing? *Kairos, 10*(1). Retrieved June 12, 2007, from http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/10.1/binder2.html?coverweb/wide/index.html

The WIDE Research Center. (2006, December). *The WIDE Research Center @ MSU: Its mission, its work, its goals.* Accessed June 20, 2007, from http://www.wide.msu.edu/

World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our common future: The World Commission on Environment and Development.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.