

Teachers in the (Writing) Center

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Complex questions [. . .] can most effectively be undertaken by collaborative work among two or more people who possess the needed range of interests and expertise. (Damrosch 192)

The call for cross-disciplinary collaboration to address pressing issues within the modern American university has become increasingly forceful. Often, however, the difficulties inherent in creating such collegial teamwork in the face of Balkanized departments and multiple disincentives for collaboration can defeat even the most well-intentioned efforts. As David Damrosch points out in *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*, both the insular departmental structures and the historical bias against collaborative scholarly work can make such collaboration difficult: “the basic responsibility for our difficulties in communication lies with the institutional structures within which we work, and with the organizational culture that our institutions foster” (9).

But avenues for team effort within institutional structures can and are created, and writing programs often serve as a locus for both faculty collaboration and faculty/student dialogue, understanding that “the struggle of writing, linked as it is to the struggle of thinking and to the growth of a person’s intellectual powers, awakens students to the real nature of learning” (Bean xiii). As many of our colleagues have demonstrated (Fulwiler and Young; Miraglia and McLeod; Walvoord; Kinkead and Harris), the collaboration which marks a successful writing program begins by identifying and developing those strategies which will be most effective within our own university culture.

To enhance cross-disciplinary commitment to its “complex question” of developing student writers, the Saginaw Valley State University writing program (based in the writing center) in the fall of 1997

developed a program called “Teachers in the Center,” in which faculty from various departments volunteer their time (generally 2 hours per week) to be trained in writing center strategies, work alongside our undergraduate peer tutors, and provide their unique disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives to our work with student writers. Faculty members from accounting, biology, chemistry, computer science, education, English, nursing, political science, and psychology have participated, most for several semesters.

A 1998 WPA research grant provided resources to assess the impact of this program on nine participating faculty from five different departments; informal assessment has continued since then. We conducted our grant research via questionnaires, interviews, and faculty journals, based on five research questions:

1. How have faculty adapted and applied their disciplinary conventions when working with students from other disciplines?
2. How does tutoring impact faculty understanding of writing processes and strategies for coaching student writers?
3. How does the tutoring experience impact faculty teaching? Faculty/student interactions outside of the Writing Center?
4. How does the tutoring experience impact the work of faculty within their departments?
5. How does the tutoring experience impact faculty perception of their role within the university at large?

This article describes the development of the program, reports the results of our study on the impact of the program through the voices of three program participants, and discusses what we have learned from this collaboration.

Development of the Program

Eric Gardner, English/Humanities (former Writing Center Coordinator and co-developer of the program): Like many programs, this one started with not only that magical list of what we wanted to do, but also a list of what we knew we *didn't* want to do. We knew that we wanted a program that generated faculty/student dialogue on issues of communication across the curriculum, that helped faculty better understand and implement successful strategies for working with student writers, and that could grow and produce growth for

all participants. And, of course, we wanted to complement rather than complicate the center of our writing center: our superb staff of undergraduate tutors.

Setting up the program presented a series of fascinating puzzles; in working through these puzzles, we consciously started small, tailored the program specifically to our university (including close examination of the faculty association contract), and created opportunities for continuous dialogue. At the outset, we identified five sets of questions and then worked to create a program that would answer those questions.

First, questions of compensation. We didn't want to burden already overworked faculty, but also didn't want to lobby for—or create a program—that would offer reduced teaching loads for participants; our lives were complicated enough already. Still, we didn't want to reduce participation to a (however valuable) “service activity”; we've always seen writing center work as a nexus of teaching, service, and scholarship. But calling it “teaching” would open another problem: we didn't want to open the door for seeing faculty participants as substitutes or replacements for our paid undergraduate tutors—especially given the propensity of some universities to put underpaid adjunct faculty in this role. To address these issues, we made the program totally voluntary and encouraged faculty members to put in (only) about two hours per week. We wrote glowing letters and gave even more glowing oral praise to key administrators who emphasized the multi-faceted professional development intrinsic in participation. We submitted a research grant to the WPA, including faculty members as co-investigators.

Second, questions of turf. Our writing center has the good fortune of being a free-standing unit. The coordinator is a faculty member who receives half of his/her load for writing center work, and we rotate this role among faculty from different disciplines; the writing program director reports directly to the vice-president of academic affairs. Thus we've always worked for a multi-level and truly multi-disciplinary writing center and actively sought out faculty from a wide range of disciplines. We also leaned heavily toward junior faculty—with the hopes of encouraging a cross-disciplinary sense of university community and continuous professional growth. We invited, cajoled, nudged, and got very, very lucky.

Third, questions of role-definition. We didn't want students flocking to faculty participants with the perception that they would get better tutoring. Initially, some of us thought that we might, in essence, have to “hide” faculty a bit. However, because a large number of our students are “non-traditional” in terms of age, we didn't have to work too hard to de-emphasize visual differences; we simply asked that faculty members

go by their first names (in person and on our photo board). We also took steps throughout the process to encourage faculty and student tutors to work and talk together—in part because we didn't want our peer tutors to be intimidated. Resolving all of this was a lesson for us—because it demanded no resolution. Not only were our faculty participants immediately impressed—and even occasionally amazed—by our peer tutors, but they recognized that these folks knew something about teaching. And our student tutors—ever savvy—recognized that they had something to teach faculty—as well as much they could learn from faculty. That easy symbiosis wasn't lost on students who came to the writing center. If they knew which tutors were faculty and which were students, they said nothing (either orally or in written anonymous evaluations) and varied their patterns little if at all.

Fourth, questions of training and integration. We didn't want to differentiate much between the kinds of training we offered student tutors and what we would offer to faculty members. As with our student tutors, we wanted to encourage a wide range of tutoring styles (while consistently practicing the same basic policies and guidelines) and to set terms for debate and discussion of tutoring issues. Our approach to tutor-training is four-pronged. First, new tutors attend a seminar-style training (at least a day long, using readings from the field, etc.). After that training, they spend the first few weeks of a semester observing experienced student tutors conduct sessions, while reading, questioning, and discussing situations and practices. They then spend the next few weeks tutoring with an experienced tutor as a partner or observer. And finally, throughout their time with us, they receive a number of opportunities for further development.

We asked faculty to go through a similar training: a three-hour seminar including tutoring principles, strategies, and procedures such as record-keeping, as well as simulated tutorials, followed by a period of observing, partnering, and on-going discussion with us before soloing. (As an important aside, this process, in which student tutors participated actively in every facet, also allowed faculty and students to interact a great deal—beginning with the student tutors in the positions of experts.)

Fifth, questions of expertise. Let's face it: content-area faculty are used to being viewed as experts on their subjects. At times, that expertise can cause folks to see only one right way of doing things. Bluntly, we didn't want that kind of expertise—especially given how hard we've worked to create a multidisciplinary, multi-task writing center. More importantly, we have always wanted students to be experts on their own writing—to, in the perhaps now cliched language, own

their documents. The faculty persona often makes it easy for students to surrender their work. Thus, we heavily discouraged faculty participants from using their tutoring time as extended office hours and from tutoring their current students. We encouraged faculty participants, like student tutors, to take whoever was next in the ever-forming queue—and this naturally led to them seeing students from a range of backgrounds and disciplines.

We believe we successfully avoided pitfalls—and established a program which continues to benefit everyone who participates.

Impact of the Program

Deborah Huntley, Chemistry:

The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking.

—Einstein

Anyone who teaches writing would probably recognize that the word *science* could be replaced with the word *writing* in this quotation with no loss of validity. The processes of learning science and learning writing are really quite similar because at their cores both involve the process of learning to *think* analytically, abstractly, and logically. Through my work at the writing center, I have become more aware of the relationships between thinking, learning, problem-solving, and writing, and, as a result, have modified my approach to both classroom teaching and to student assignments.

My initial interest in being a mentor in the writing center stemmed from my conviction that effective communication is essential to good science. Having spent fourteen years as a research chemist at a federal research laboratory, I realized that even the most elegant and sophisticated experiments were not of much use to the scientific community until the results were published. Writing a good scientific paper requires very well-developed communication skills, since there is no room for ambiguity. I assumed, as the first science professor to join the Teachers in the Center program, that I would be asked to work with students on technical writing assignments.

This assumption was my first mistake. In fact, it was two years before I happened to work with a student on a science paper. Instead, I worked on lesson plans, business proposals, essays about history, literature, economics—all very interesting topics, but certainly not in my major area of expertise. While I enjoyed the work and even learned a few things, I initially was not convinced that my own teaching practices

would be significantly affected. I was also concerned that my lack of expertise in these areas would render my tutoring ineffective. It didn't take long to realize that, despite my lack of detailed knowledge in certain areas, I could provide significant input into student writing. Also, I eventually began to see essential parallels between writing and problem-solving as tools of learning that have been directly relevant to me as a chemistry professor.

In my chemistry classes, I focus heavily on problem-solving. A typical test or assignment might include a few "conceptual" questions requiring short essay answers, but the bulk of the work is using concepts to solve problems. Usually, this requires the student not only to have certain specific knowledge, but to be able to extend and integrate that knowledge in a new context. Although problem-solving in chemistry may appear very different from an essay in the humanities, in some ways they are remarkably similar. As an example, consider the following two test questions:

1. What is the expectation value, $\langle r \rangle$, for an electron in a hydrogen atom in its ground state? Calculate the most probable value, r^* , for the same system. Compare these values and comment on the significance of each. Why do we need two ways of describing r ?
2. Consider ways in which three of the following authors reconsider the basic tenets of Transcendentalism: Fuller, Douglass, Whitman, Dickinson, Alcott, Jewett. Note that your consideration should set out the basic conception of Transcendentalism and speak to some of the contexts surrounding the writers you examine.

These two questions seem very different. Indeed, their answers will look very different. The first requires the tools of integral calculus and to the uninitiated eye will look, as one of my students aptly described it, like "the Greek alphabet meets the Cuisinart." The second question, of course, uses the tools of language, and with any luck at all, will resemble any text with sentences, paragraphs, and even a thesis statement. Yet, despite these surface differences, these questions have many common features.

Both questions begin with concrete answers. The first question asks for a couple of numbers: $\langle r \rangle$ and r^* . The second question asks the students to set out the basic tenets of Transcendentalism. However, both questions move beyond the concrete. Each ends by asking the students to make comparisons involving some similarities and some fairly subtle

differences. To fully answer either of these questions, students are required to think analytically, abstractly and logically. Students must integrate prior knowledge and form new ideas.

In answering these questions, the writing and the calculus are the tools, not the problem itself. The process of learning is much the same across disciplinary boundaries. Good writing assignments teach students thinking skills as well as writing skills, just as well-written chemistry questions teach students problem-solving skills as well as mathematical skills. The goal of writing is not to produce words on a page, but to reach some deeper understanding. Similarly, the goal of problem sets is not to obtain a few numbers, but to understand something deeper about the physical world. In both cases, the processes are the tools of deeper learning.

While working in the writing center, I have plenty of opportunity to observe how students approach writing assignments. In my office hours and review sessions, I have opportunities to see how students approach problem sets. The parallel is again remarkable. Inexperienced writing students often expect to write their papers starting with the first sentence and ending with the last period. They do not expect their thinking to be modified by their writing; they expect writing to be as linear as reading. Chemistry students expect the same thing. They think that their solutions to a problem should be as linear as the ones in the “solutions manuals” or those I present in class as examples. A frequent complaint is, “I don’t know where to begin!” Student writers and problem solvers don’t often see the process of exploration that experienced writers and scientists go through. They don’t see all the chicken scratching, crumpled papers, false starts, and wrong turns that occur in any challenging endeavor.

Writing assignments and problem-solving go hand-in-hand as the tools of active learning, and both can be used effectively in my science classes. A major part of my job as a teacher is to structure assignments and classes to help students learn to find their ways through the complex and sometimes frustrating process of learning new material. A benefit of the writing center collaboration is that I have the chance to see well designed assignments and rubrics developed by my faculty colleagues, which I shamelessly and routinely borrow. I also see the less well-designed assignments and witness the consequent frustration, which has also helped me as a new instructor. Hopefully, my assignments have improved so that they really do achieve the goals of the course. I have also become more aware of the importance of providing early feedback so the students don’t get lost in the rubble of early mistakes.

As a science teacher, I struggle with evaluation of student writing; I find it difficult to strike an appropriate balance between scientific correctness, logical thinking, and the writing itself. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them. The difficulty in evaluation has taught me to develop more specific rubrics, which makes evaluation easier for me and provides useful information for the students.

As a participant in the Teachers in the Center program, I have learned a great deal about students' thinking processes as well as both a broader and a deeper understanding of how people learn. I view tutoring (in writing or in chemistry) as the opportunity to see the student's perspective and then to try to illuminate the subject from a different angle so that the student can see and understand a bit more. As a participant in the Teachers in the Center project, working with a broad cross-section of students, observing how students learn has improved my teaching practices.

Andrew Swihart, Psychology: Although I am, by training, a psychologist, with extensive experience in academic writing within my professional domain, the writing style/format issues familiar to psychologists have not been terribly relevant to my work in the writing center. Most frequently, I find myself addressing quality and clarity of student thought. Hence, accurate comprehension of primary source material, generation of a personally true intellectual response to the ideas and issues presented in the source material, logic of argumentation in the student response, sequencing of ideas for persuasive writing, and clarity of prose are the issues I address most frequently in my role as a tutor.

Tutoring in the writing center has reinforced my suspicion that many students flounder when writing because they haven't comprehended the material they are addressing, nor have they made a real intellectual effort to formulate a reasoned response to the material at hand. They often appear to assume they can crank out a completed "final draft" at first sitting, with only minor proofing for typos. In brief, many students appear to believe they can do academic writing without having to do thinking (as if writing were an academic task or chore analogous to doing laundry or mowing the yard, just something to "get done" so you can move on to the fun stuff). They do not appear to view writing as a *process* through which they a) identify what they do and do not understand about the material at hand; b) actually *modify their ideas and conclusions* as they attempt to put thought into prose; c) *gain*

novel insights into material merely by trying to write about it; and d) must *revise and redraft* their ideas until they achieve a sense of logic, coherence and closure.

And, thinking about this for a moment, why shouldn't it be this way? Many students may never have been asked to take genuine intellectual or emotional ownership of their writing or ideas before; consequently, they view scholarly writing as a process divorced from anything relevant to what they might personally think or feel about themselves or the world. With this in mind, it seems self-evident why I spend most of my tutoring time getting students to tell me aloud (not write) about the ideas they are addressing, questioning them about *why* they want to write what they write, and only then focusing on how they have organized their thoughts in prose. In our conversations, students teach me where they are struggling in their learning.

My tutoring experience has caused me to modify my teaching significantly. I now use in-class, brief writing exercises as a way of helping students identify for themselves whether they do/do not fully comprehend the concepts I am presenting. I also use short out-of-class writing assignments as a way of getting students to grapple with psychological constructs and theories. I have become less enamored of the traditional "term paper" as a teaching/learning device, and tend to reserve extended writing assignments (i.e., 10+ page papers) for my upper-level students. Also, I tend to spend less time actually grading these assignments; just getting the students to put forth genuine effort in completing the task achieves my teaching purpose. Finally, I have become acutely aware of the need to be detailed, clear and specific in the instructions for my assignments. Being in the writing center has afforded me the opportunity to see numerous assignments from other faculty; I now understand better that what may seem transparently self-evident to me may be utterly amorphous to others. I now have a better understanding that many students don't write poorly simply due to laziness or lack of investment. Rather, many of them simply have no idea what this process is all about; it's my job to teach them. Consequently, I spend a little less class time trying to teach psychology per se and more time trying to teach thinking, using writing as a vehicle to do such. And in my department, I find myself advocating for more writing by our students, and more rigor in our demands of them.

Tutoring has reaffirmed my core belief that I am, first, a member of a liberal arts faculty and, secondarily, an expert in psychological science. If I merely spent my time in my own psychology laboratory, with only psychology majors as my students, consorting only with other psychology department colleagues, my experience of our university

would be much the poorer. I hold dear the notion that I am here to educate these students as thinkers, to facilitate their personal and intellectual growth in the broadest sense, to help them discover how wonderful and full the world can be if only they will engage it openly and with thought. It just happens that psychology is the vehicle I employ in this effort. Consequently, I have always viewed my academic role as residing at the university, not department, level (not always the best way to make allies of your departmental colleagues). My involvement with the university's students through the medium of the Writing Center has only served to strengthen this notion. My allegiance is to my students' growth and to the university as the catalyst for such, not solely or even primarily to my discipline or department.

Gary M. Lange, Biology: When asked to be a Teacher in the Center at our university writing center, my immediate thought was to say "Ok! I will give it a try and see how I fit into the scheme of things." But almost as immediately my inner voice also chastised me and questioned, "How can I be an effective mentor or guide for students when I struggle so very much with my own writing?" It was with these diametrically opposed thoughts that I began my work in the writing center. As a biologist, my training in teaching has been focused on creative ways to deliver content-rich information about a specific discipline to students. I knew that writing and mentoring of writing were very different beasts altogether, and initially it was my plan to find a narrow niche where I could fit in. I presumed I would focus on guiding writers in their efforts to follow the rigid, highly structured, dry, but logically laid out papers describing science that I am accustomed to writing myself. I imagined myself focusing on the tenets of the scientific method, and felt comforted in thinking that my efforts would likely help others find the beauty and benefits of compressing text into simple, concise, and logical phrases. This comforting thought proved to be a false—but useful—security blanket for me to hold onto as I began my work in the Center.

Even though I, like other Teachers in the Center, did spend a considerable amount of time being prepared as writer mentors—each of us worked collaboratively with experienced writing tutors before venturing out on our own in the writing center—the first several students I mentored "solo" still elicited the white-knuckled stress response in me. A majority of my earliest work ended up in assisting ESL writers, who wanted my critique of their work to point out grammatical errors. This proved a fortuitous starting point for me; these wishes were the easiest and most congruent ways I could help while staying in my "comfort

zone.” However, as I was presented time and time again with this same task, I began to more fully embrace the “bigger picture agenda” of the writing center, namely to guide writers collaboratively, even (gasp!) writers outside of my discipline, in efforts to help their writing become more effective.

Typically, ESL students’ previous efforts in learning the English language have been structured toward successful completion of the extensive battalion of language proficiency examinations required before they leave their native country. While these students often have a good grasp of grammatical principles and a reasonable grasp of syntax, they often find it difficult to interpret the nuances and colloquial phrases inherent in many of their writing assignments at the university. Working with ESL students has been very rewarding for me because our relationship ends up being mutually beneficial— I help them to more fully understand and achieve the goals of their writing assignments and they in turn help me to see again the vibrancy and artistry in writing as communication that is often overlooked when speaking with only native speakers.

What I came to understand from both native speakers and ESL writers is that our primary role in the writing center (and arguably I have concluded, also in our guidance of writers of any discipline) is to help our writers find and define the intended audience for their work—as interdisciplinary an audience as possible. In doing so, I was able to again see a facet of writing as education I had long ago misplaced in my mind: the instructor needs always to perceive his/her audience (the students in a class) as interdisciplinary.

As I became more aware of misconceptions that could easily develop from ambiguous assignments, I reassessed the writing assignments I gave my students. This in turn led to rather profound shifts in several of my courses. The tradition in a discipline such as Biology has been the fact-filled lecturer, orating his or her knowledge before a large hall filled with students. While this method has a time and place, there is room for so much more. A series of meaningful transformations took place in my own courses as a result of being part of the Teachers in the Center program:

1. The development of broad-based, open-ended writing assignments in introductory courses such as General Biology. In this course, I now include a series of writing exercises to help students see the variety of methods of writing; e.g., I have students write both a traditional scientific review and an expository essay based on observations made at a local zoological park.

2. The incorporation of a series of writing assignments in my anatomy and physiology course to help students bridge the chasm between scientific knowledge and daily life (one particularly well-received assignment gives students a “patient” with a particular affliction; the writer must explain both scientifically and in common language the patient’s prognosis).
3. A revamping of my efforts in my upper division courses (Endocrinology, Ethology, Neurobiology, and Comparative Physiology) away from traditional lecture. Instead, I have focused on training students in the practice of a specific discipline in ways similar to what a practicing scientist does in the laboratory or field (students actively conduct library research, write to colleagues, produce literature critiques, and develop and design experiments, all with an emphasis on effective communication).
4. Development of the annual Department of Biology Poster Session event. This event replicates the feel and look of a scientific conference. Students conduct and report on research projects in poster format to a university-wide audience of other students, faculty, and administration. Additionally, guest speakers invited to this event give students a true taste of what they can expect in a scientific conference if they pursue graduate or professional school.

My participation has also had the unexpected benefit of rejuvenating me, by helping me to step outside the rigors of my discipline and again view our role as educators in a far broader sense. Finally, my work in the writing center has helped me to see new ways to help my science students see how essential good writing practice is for all of us.

What We Have Learned

Teachers know when their approach is working: the performance of their students improves. (Bean 265)

How do we know whether our collaboration is “working”? What can compositionists learn from such a program?

Certainly there are potential pitfalls in any such program. With four years of history behind us, we have seen that some faculty cannot easily move from the writing practices embedded in their disciplines to the very different types of writing students may bring in for review. Others find the time commitment difficult to sustain over an entire semester or longer. A few, finding themselves lacking the vocabulary or methods to

identify the problems in a student's work or provide new strategies for the writer, decide this work is not for them. In those instances, we thank them for their participation and recruit anew.

Overall, however, our research indicates that when faculty members work in a writing center, significant changes occur in their individual teaching practices; they develop expertise and cultivate best practices in a number of ways.

First, faculty develop greater awareness of the issues facing student writers, becoming more empathetic and more understanding of the struggles student writers face. As faculty become more aware of the parallel processes of thinking, learning, and writing (not taught in most PhD programs), they focus more on improving students' thought and revising processes (rather than merely evaluating a written product or justifying a grade) and are better able to anticipate potential misunderstandings or areas which require clarification. This change in attitude generates more reflection on their own classroom practices and a greater willingness to approach problems in student writing analytically rather than judgmentally. Reminded of their own struggles to become proficient writers, faculty become more likely to see problems in student work as a reflection of learning that needs to occur, rather than as evidence of student laziness or irresponsibility (and are more likely to address student errors as thinking variants rather than as "irritants").

Second, *every* participating faculty member has redesigned course assignments to make them more effective (i.e., more likely to generate the kind of learning the assignments were designed to accomplish). Teachers in the Center have also learned to articulate the traits characteristic of effective student writing in all disciplines, and use those traits to develop and improve strategies and rubrics for feedback and assessment (as the three reflections above illustrate). Faculty now also see their assignments in the larger context of the university and are able to help students see parallels and differences in the writing of varied disciplines.

Faculty further discover that addressing the issues of non-native speakers of English may require strategies and methods very different from those used with native speakers. They are less likely to look for "quick fixes," and become more aware that errors in language may not accurately reflect the complexity of a student's thinking or understanding of course content.

Finally, participating faculty have often been surprised by how much they enjoyed their work in the writing center. When they began, most saw their work as a service to the university; after awhile, however,

many observe that they have gained more than they have given. As they experience the satisfaction of working one-on-one with students who are at a “teachable moment,” they become eager to share their success stories. As a corollary, tutoring faculty have also provided validation of the writing center’s mission. As student and faculty tutors discuss strategies and concerns, hierarchy dissolves into a communal space where each is invested in the success of others.

Equally significant shifts occur as participating faculty change the way they see their role within the University and become stakeholders in the development of student writers. As they understand more fully the need for *all* faculty to be committed to developing student writing proficiency, they now consider it “irresponsible” to defer such duties to any single department. The poster session which originated with the biology department, for example, has become an annual cross-disciplinary campus event, with multiple departments displaying conference-quality poster presentations.

And as faculty become more open to the varied tasks and purposes for writing in other disciplines and enthusiastic about contributing to the work of “an intellectual community” with a vision larger than that of their own department, the ongoing conversations, new insights, and larger vision go with them into new roles: department chair, grant development teams, leaders in a new General Education curriculum.

The WPA research grant provided a lens for us to examine our program of cross-disciplinary faculty collaboration in a Writing Center and motivated us to continue the program. In addition to this article (hardly the usual audience for a former research chemist, psychologist, or biologist), it has generated three presentations at conferences which these faculty would otherwise not have attended: the 20th Annual Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching, the East Central Writing Centers Association Conference, and the first Lilly-North Conference. The network of participants has become a continuing source of mutual encouragement for innovative teaching. Thus we believe that the Teachers in the Center program has not only greatly enhanced our work with students; we see growing evidence that this collaboration has also begun to re-shape our institution’s organizational culture, providing a means for disciplinary constructs and language to give way to a search for over-arching principles. We offer it as a collaborative model adaptable to other universities and campus cultures.

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