

Internal Outsourcing of Academic Support: The Lessons of Supervised Study

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Writing Program Administrators are well aware of a continuing challenge to their work—the nearly universal reliance on graduate student and part-time, contingent labor to do the bulk of the teaching of first-year composition. In trying to cope in the role of “boss compositionists” overseeing the “comp droids” (J. Harris 43), WPAs must try to strike an impossible balance between ensuring quality writing instruction while having to “make do” with a shrinking pile of resources. No wonder, then, that one critical area of writing instruction—support for student writers in terms of writing centers and other forms of out-of-class teaching—is easily overlooked when it comes time to dish out the prized but diminishing resources. “Sure, we have a writing center,” the WPA tells colleagues, “and it’s amazing how much it does, given how strapped for resources we are.”

In this light, I wonder how most WPAs would react to the following scenario: Your dean says, “We’re trying to reduce redundant services, so the Learning Center will now provide tutoring in writing. That means we’ll have to close the Writing Center. However, you’ll get to keep that money in your budget.” Hmm. Seems like an attractive proposal in many ways: your resources aren’t cut, your college’s students will continue to receive writing support, and your dean’s decision is far better than outsourcing tutoring in writing to one of the many for-profit providers dangling “cost efficiencies” before axe-wielding, budget-chopping administrators (DeCiccio 1). Thus, you’ll get to do some “internal outsourcing” and turn instructional support over to a player who’s often ready to meet this need (and who has long met a student-support need)—the campus learning center or academic resource center.

Such a move, I argue here, would be a mistake. While learning centers offer important services to students, their struggle for status, resources, and institutional leverage are challenges that Writing Program and Writing Cen-

ter Administrators work hard to overcome. WPAs—and increasingly writing center directors—often represent a model for situating administrative and pedagogical expertise fully within the academic heart of our institutions. In contrast, learning centers are often aligned with student services or student affairs, and their directors often have no faculty status and consequently lack direct access to the committee and governance structures that faculty control, particularly in terms of curriculum. Their resulting alignments can create far less influence on students, on faculty, and on administration.

In this article, I trace the roots of these contrasting alignments through an account of the movement toward “supervised study,” a popular approach of the late 1920s and early 1930s to individualize instruction as educational enrollments bulged. Supervised study represents the historical precedent for the work of contemporary writing centers and learning centers; however, the differences in institutional positioning of writing and learning centers stem from their relative success in resisting some of the more disturbing assumptions about teaching and learning that mark supervised study. Still, a writing center and writing program’s influence on our institutions is often tenuous, a situation made more so by the pressure to lower costs. Supervised study is a face of academic support that thrives just down the hall or a few buildings over, a parallel world that might easily become the dominant approach as resources dwindle and administrators troll for efficiencies.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE 1930S

Supervised study blossomed in the 1930s, when attending college was no longer solely the provenance of those students historian Laurence Veysey describes as “a parade of Anglo-Saxon names and pale, freshly scrubbed faces” (271). From the turn of the century to 1930, while the American population grew by 75 percent, enrollments in higher education increased by 400 percent (Levine 68), and these students, often children of the immigrants who had come to America at the turn of the twentieth century, were far more diverse and more variously prepared than previous generations. As Winfield Rogers of Cleveland College noted about freshman English in 1939, “One class may have an age variation of from eighteen to eighty, [with] variations in social background running the gamut from a red cap to the president’s wife” (397).

The lecture and recitation that had dominated schooling at all levels up to this point—described in 1915 by Frederic Burk as “the smug impertinence of an ancient, persistent, and preposterous pedantry” (1)—were no longer adequate for students with such varied preparations for academic rigor. Individual methods of instruction responded to individual needs, breaking the “Lock-Step” of mass instruction (Burk 1). Every teacher could

supervise students’ learning in close ways, could act, in the words of Preston Search, as “one who knows how to keep out of the way, and yet is ever present to inspire and to direct” (9). Many plans of individualized instruction for K–12 classrooms were developed at this time, often named for the city of origin: the Batavia Plan, the Winnetka Technique, the Dalton Plan (Stephens 22–36). One of the more popular plans was a program of supervised study, first offered in 1917 by Alfred Hall-Quest, then a professor of educational psychology at the University of Virginia. Supervised study operated on a simple premise: In the face of increasing urbanization of American society, one could not assume that students would have the time, guidance, and support to be able to study at home. The problem, in the words of Hall-Quest, was that

[t]he family, with its variability in size, lack of room, and diversified industrial and social activities, offers little or no opportunity for the efficient guidance or supervision of the child’s study habits during its school years. If assistance is offered, it is strained, nervous, often inaccurate. (*Supervised Study* 11)

When students’ home lives were no longer the dependable and stable situation of earlier generations of students, it became the school’s role to provide the necessary order and instruction. In Hall-Quest’s view, however, schools were failing to provide for these needs:

In studying, there is perhaps more waste of time and more waste of nervous energy than in any other department of educational life[. . .]. Mass teaching, hurried assignments, indiscriminate marking, together with the expectation that studying is a self-evident process, have wrought grave injustice to the pupils and have delayed a finer efficiency of school product (*Supervised Study* 18).

As a result, studying itself—the very practice of learning in every discipline and classroom, from English and history to math and science—needed significant reform or supervision. According to Charles Handschin of Miami University of Ohio, in the supervised study approach, “the teacher gives his [or her] time to each student in turn or to such as are particularly in need of help, aiding them by suggestion, etc., or by mapping out work for those who have completed the assignment” (159).

The popularity of supervised study as an alternative to lecture and recitation was immense. In 1917, Hall-Quest noted that supervised study was not found in the “educational literature of five years ago” (*Supervised Study* 16), yet by 1930 George Mining’s review of the literature on the topic yielded 257 sources (63–79). Viola Bower’s 1933 thesis on supervised study culled

293 sources that had been published by 1932 (59–104). The time was ripe for supervised study as the solution to a problem familiar to today's WPA: too many students, too few resources, and too little results.

SUPERVISED STUDY AND LABORATORY METHODS OF WRITING

Composition as a subject for supervised study was part of a larger movement at the end of the nineteenth century that positioned itself against the teaching of writing as the memorization of abstract rules; instead, students would learn to write with frequent practice and instructor feedback (Kitzhaber 220). Hall-Quest's 1917 description of "supervising the study of English composition" sounds remarkably contemporary:

Composition work is much like modeling in clay. There must be the raw material, properly mixed, deposited on the board, roughly pinched, pounded, and thumbed here and there before the finer work begins. First knowledge; then careful selection of topics of individual interest, the rough sketching of the first draft; and then frequent revision, improvement, and finally achievement. (*Supervised Study* 251)

In the scheme of supervised study, then, writing was a task for students to complete in classrooms that were "chiefly a laboratory or a workshop" (Hall-Quest, "Editor's Introduction" xii). Indeed, "laboratory methods" in the teaching of English were often classified as one form of supervised study (Mining 15), and the idea of teaching writing as a "laboratory subject" forms the basis for much of the work done in contemporary writing centers (Carino 105), as well as in composition classrooms with their reliance on teacher-student conferencing and peer feedback. The challenge for schools, whether pre- or postsecondary, was to create environments most conducive to such teaching.

This challenge, of course, has always been the rub. Individual methods of teaching are a tremendous drain on available resources. As educational researcher Benjamin Bloom offered more than twenty years ago, "an important task of research and instruction is to seek ways of accomplishing [the effects of tutoring] under more practical and realistic conditions than the one-to-one tutoring, which is too costly for most societies to bear on a large scale" (4). Writing centers have achieved a certain amount of cost-effectiveness by relying on peer tutors, a byproduct of which is the creation of a core undergraduate community of committed writers and writing teachers (Wingate 9–10). In the struggle to choose between available resources, institutional commitment, and student need, writing centers have long shown

the ability "to do more with less," which, ironically, can result in the kind of low profile that makes shifting writing center services over to the learning center an easy decision.

SUPERVISED STUDY AND THE LEARNING CENTER

The supervised study movement is not only a key historical precedent for the development of the contemporary writing center—and for encouraging the teaching practices common in composition classrooms—it can also be seen as the precursor to many of the activities grouped in current learning centers, such as tutoring in math, science, or study skills. Gwyn Enright and Gene Kerstiens trace the history of the college learning center to the development of "study techniques guides" in the early twentieth century, which, in their words, "supported the sentiment that potentially good students could be salvaged if they knew how to study" (2). The connection between learning centers and supporting students' studying can also be found in the use of the label "study skills centers" to describe many learning centers created in the early 1970s as the open-admissions movement brought large numbers of students to college campuses (Enright and Kerstiens 9).

Another historical root for the learning center is the work done largely by campus libraries in the early 1970s. The concept was to make resources available for students, and a 1973 survey showed that three out of four colleges had "integrated their libraries and learning resources" (Burlingame, Fields, and Schulzetenberg 26). While the development of study guides and the availability of other learning resources (whether print, audio, video or computer-based) seem to imply a certain storehouse metaphor—as opposed to offering students the type of instruction central to supervised study—learning centers have long tried to link the availability of these resources and student instruction. As one contemporary learning center's mission describes, "Come to study; stay to learn" (National College Learning Center Association, par. 20). A more complete connection between learning centers and supervised study is in the definition Dwight Allen supplied more than 30 years ago:

The *resource center* is an integral part of the instructional program. It is a site for personal, individual study. It is a center for supervised practice and remediation. It equalizes study conditions and reduces mislearning. (29)

While Allen's use of the term *remediation* would be contested by both writing centers and learning centers—as I describe next—his definition bears striking resemblance to what Alfred Hall-Quest offered in 1917: "[Supervised study] is that plan of school procedure whereby each pupil [. . .] is instructed and directed in the methods of studying and thinking"

(*Supervised Study 29*). These locations for learning were a clear contrast to the mass instruction/lecture methods that persisted in most classrooms. For whom the learning center would “equalize study conditions” and higher education’s conflicted attitudes toward underprepared students were elements that would threaten the sunny embrace of supervised study and its contemporary variants.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

As I have described, the family tree of academic support contains a single trunk that grew from the seed of the supervised study movement, subsequently branching into learning centers and writing centers. The attributes shared by both types of centers are many: a belief in the superiority of individual instruction, an often uneasy relationship to the institution itself, and a history grounded in higher education’s unease—if not distaste—for dealing with students who are underprepared for the necessities of academic challenges.

It is the differences between contemporary writing centers and learning centers that intrigue me, particularly in terms of their directors’ relative status within their institutions. Writing center directors have long worked to raise their professional status (see the commentaries of Olson and Ashton-Jones; Simpson; Healy; Lerner “Confessions”), but no parallel theme runs through the learning center literature. This contrast becomes clear in the results of two national surveys conducted in academic year 2000–2001, one by The Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) and the other by the National College Learning Centers Association (NCLCA). As shown in Table 1, the directors of writing centers tend to hold higher academic degrees and are more likely to occupy faculty positions than do their learning-center counterparts, and these differences hold across similar sorts of institutions.

Table 1.

Comparison of Writing Center and Learning Center Director Responses to Surveys by WCRP and NCLCA in 2000–2001

Institutions Responding	Writing Centers (184 responses)	Learning Centers (144 responses)
Four-year institutions	80%	71%
Two-year institutions	16%	24%

Director’s Highest Degree	Writing Centers (184 responses)	Learning Centers (144 responses)
Doctorate/ABD	52%	26%
Masters	45%	67%
BA/BS	1.6%	5%
Nature of the Director’s Appointment		
Professional staff	33%	49%
Full-time faculty	63% ¹	24%

¹ Faculty category was separated into tenured (29%), untenured tenure-track (13%), and untenurable full-time faculty (21%). Sources: *The Writing Centers Research Project*; National College Learning Center Association.

In making these comparisons, I do not intend to claim that the work of learning centers isn’t, hasn’t been, or won’t continue to be vital to any institution. Learning centers often house efforts such as supplemental instruction, learning-disabled student services, and federally funded TRIO and Educational Opportunity Programs. However, this association with traditionally underserved students and the federal programs targeted at that population aligns learning centers squarely with remedial instruction. Higher education’s need to remediate underprepared students has always been a source of contention, a reminder that “standards” are threatened and that degraded standards quickly become a challenge to the meritocratic beliefs that shaped colleges in their earliest forms. Writing centers have long resisted being tied solely to remedial instruction, arguing that all writers need writing tutors (M. Harris 27), given the idea of a writing process built on frequent practice and meaningful feedback. An exclusive relationship to remediation potentially results in the characterization of writing centers as, in the words of Stephen North, “some sort of skills center, a fix-it shop” (435) with its college patrons having a “limited conception of what such places can do” (436). Writing centers want far more central role, a place that functions as “the centers of consciousness about writing on campuses” (North 446). A strong association with remedial instruction has not proven to be the most constructive path to that place.

Learning centers have likewise resisted the remedial label, at least according to Enright and Kerstiens, who assert that for learning centers “by 1950 the term *remedial* had fallen from grace” (5). Nevertheless, fifteen of the twenty-five articles listed on the National Association of Developmental Educators’ website as “Resources for Political Discussions” use the word “remedial” in

their titles (<http://www.nade.net>). By the end of their article, Enright and Kerstien's assert that "[l]earning centers are assuming a leadership role in staff development, assisting faculty and staff to improve instruction and more effectively serve *students who have learning problems*" (emphasis added; 17). Such problems abound, for in his historical sketch of the field, Norman Stahl aligns learning assistance with developmental education (and offers "basic composition instruction" as a "subfield") (3), largely precluding the idea that such work is central to an institution's purpose.

Such differences between writing centers and learning centers are perhaps a measure of how well writing centers and writing programs have acted against the assumptions central to supervised study and how intently learning centers continue to be defined by them. One key assumption has to do with attempts at individualizing instruction. In the educational climate of the 1920s and 1930s, determining students' individual needs led rapidly to a barrage of testing instruments and the subsequent labeling, sorting, and segregating of students of varied abilities. The intent of this "efficiency movement," as described by Arthur Applebee, was that "[b]y using the tests to form groups of 'similar' students, the school would be able to provide instruction geared more closely to their particular abilities. And this—as English teachers and their more scientific colleagues all recognized—would be more efficient" (82). Efficiency, however, also meant the segregation of students with similar abilities, at least based on the results of their tests. At the high-school level, this segregation was the system of tracking that led—and continues to lead—in the words of educational researcher Jeanne Oakes, to "structured inequality" (2–9). In higher education, tracking is most clearly seen in the many levels of composition that students might place into, the basic writing net that captures the underprepared before they are deemed worthy of more advanced practice.

While composition continues to make progress in overcoming the legacies of tracking—particularly through approaches such as allowing students to opt for "directed self-placement" in composition classes (Royer and Gilles)—learning centers and their student affairs patrons have not been so successful. It is not uncommon for learning centers to align themselves with the testing and sorting that leads to "structured inequality." For example, the University of Central Florida Callarman Center for Academic Excellence consists of the Student Academic Resource Center and the University Testing Center. The mission of the latter is

to assist UCF students and the surrounding community is [sic] assessing their knowledge, skills, and abilities as they relate to higher and continuing education by providing a variety of local and national testing opportunities. This is accomplished

through the use of written and computer-adapted assessment testing instruments. (Student Academic Resource Center, par. 2)

Indeed, embracing the "opportunity" to be aligned with standardized testing is one of the key contrasts between learning centers and writing programs. On the learning assistance listserv, LRNASST-L, discussions of computer-based writing placement instruments such as WritePlacer or ePlacer rarely question the validity of such measures, while similar discussions on WPA-L are sure to generate screenfulls of ire against the enterprise of testing and sorting. For example, when a someone recently asked on LRNASST-L poster asked about the use of WritePlacer, she wasn't asking looking for a critique of the exam's validity; instead, she had an operational question about scoring cutoffs:

We adopted WritePlacer with electronic scoring this past August. If anyone else is using it, could you share with me/us what cutoffs you use to mark the boundary of developmental writing versus the first college-level writing course? If you use any other placement criteria in conjunction, such as a sentence skills score, that would be very helpful information, too. (Pratt)

I don't mean to imply that the learning-center world's acceptance of standardized testing as part of its mission is the result of ignorance or malevolence. Instead, it's a question of resources and of grabbing whatever handholds of power might seem available. Consider, for instance, this note from a school of education department heads meeting at Arkansas Tech University: "Testing and Learning Center has announced that they are short on support staff. Therefore, they cannot offer assistance in learning and will only be providing testing services" (School of Education n.p.). When funding of TRIO and other federal programs becomes increasingly threatened (Selingo 1), turning a testing and learning center into a testing center, a truncated version of its former self, is sure to be one way people adopt to stay in business.

Different attitudes towards testing lead to another point of divergence between writing centers and learning centers: each field's approach toward accreditation. Writing center directors have considered the idea of having their professional organization, the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), certify member centers, but after often-contentious debate, the idea was scrapped (Davis). Fear of a one-size-fits-all mandate and concerns over costs and logistics moved the accreditation discussion to an alternative plan—to advocate successfully for the Council of Writing Program Administrators to place in its Consultant-Evaluator Service those WPAs

with noted expertise and experience with writing centers. Aligning itself with a natural ally seemed far more strategic for the IWCA than to wade into the very murky waters of policing its members. Learning centers, on the other hand, have embraced the idea of accreditation quite fully. Two professional bodies offer accreditation for learning centers: the National Tutoring Association “certifies” individual tutors (www.ntatutor.org), while the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA; www.crla.net) certifies tutoring programs. The CRLA notes in its guidelines that “certificates help set up a standard for the minimum skills and training a tutor needs to be successful” (College Reading and Learning Association 1). Just as testing is one broad—and highly contested—way to screen for abilities and achievement, certification fulfills a similar function. It assumes great variability in the quality of learning center work and offers a hierarchical way for learning centers and their staffs to find validation in what they do, validation that is perhaps more difficult to find in a learning centers’ relationship to its host institution.

While testing and placement form one disturbing legacy of supervised study, another evolved easily from its original premise. It is clear, the thinking goes, that if we are going to make instruction individual but do not have a private tutor for each student, then perhaps we should give students worksheets to keep them busy. Indeed, at all instructional levels, one teacher working with one student usually means that fourteen, or twenty-four, or thirty-four other students are likely filling out worksheets while waiting their turns for individualized instruction. Worksheets—perhaps the true wood product of our family tree—have long been tied to both writing and learning centers (Lerner, “Drill Pads” 122–123). In its 1976 report, the NCTE-sponsored Committee on Learning Skills Centers offered a dire picture of the test-sort-assign worksheet-retest cycle:

In the worst sense, “individualized instruction” can mean segregating students by standardized tests—which may or may not be realistically diagnostic; issuing to students sets of routine exercises—written, taped, filmed, or occasionally computerized—which students are required to complete on their own; and measuring success by scores students achieve on another standardized test. (1–2)

This all-too-familiar picture is easily embraced by administrators bent on efficiency and cost savings, but heavily resisted by those of us working to help students to learn, working, that is, not merely to contain them. Still, a reliance on worksheets, on instruction that is easily monitored and relatively inexpensive, that allows each student to progress at his or her own pace, branches naturally off of supervised study: After all, some students

need more supervision than others—some get worksheets and others get academic challenges—some get containment and others get opportunities. Our educational systems have always featured unequal treatment. That, after all, is why learning and writing centers were created in the first place. Funding and organization are premised on the idea that some students need academic support more than others. Ironically, then, growing demand for academic support services—if academic support is really to mean more than remediation for the least prepared—puts exactly the kind of strain on a writing program administrator’s budget that makes the shifting of services to the learning center seem so attractive.

THE FUTURE OF SUPERVISED STUDY

Lest my central claim—that WPAs will find increasing pressure to off-load writing support to their campuses’ learning centers—seems Chicken Little-ish, consider the pitch that for-profit providers might make to your dean or provost at the next AAHE meeting. Huntington Learning Centers, for example, offers the following enticement on its Web site:

As the oldest national provider of supplemental education, we’ve established our success by responding to the urgent national need for supplemental education services. According to *Newsweek*, “Huntington [is] working to make remedial instruction a commodity as ubiquitous and accessible as frozen yogurt.” (Franchise Update, par. 3)

Like any good capitalist, Huntington attempts to fill a market niche, an attractive alternative to meet the demand for learning support without anyone on campus getting his or her hands dirty. In the face of “remedial instruction as a commodity,” the services of the learning center might certainly seem the lesser of two evils. Such a move might even seem like the cost of doing business in the economic climate that Downing, Hulbert and Mathieu describe:

As spending has been redirected or cut from state and land-grant university budgets, academics compete more vehemently for scarce resources, research grants, and government support, even as they claim intellectual autonomy. But autonomy can be illusory. The cost-cutting that follows conservative political agendas leads to retrenchment or freezing of positions, programs, and sometimes even departments. (3–4)

Pitting writing programs and centers against learning centers would not be in anyone’s interest, despite the long-standing division between academic and student affairs (Banta and Kuh 40). Outsourcing academic support to a

for-profit provider will never allow for those students most in need of such support to be more than tangential to the institution. Such moves are a contemporary version of Yale University's creation of an "Awkward Squad" in the late 1920s, to which "freshmen who are considered deficient in writing are assigned" (Noyes 678). This description might seem an anachronism of earlier times, but while our contemporary language is more positive, our treatment of underprepared student writers can often be just as punitive. Bringing all writers into the center of an institution's efforts to understand and improve its teaching and learning practices is an admirable goal for any WPA. Outsourcing academic support—whether on- or off-campus—precludes any hope of attaining that goal.

If academic support should not be locally outsourced to the learning center and not be externally outsourced to for-profit providers, just what should that support look like and where should it occur? One increasingly popular strategy is to create centers for teaching and learning, administrative units that manage faculty development, academic support, and institutional assessment—a potentially cost-saving streamlining of a variety of essential activities. These centers' several functions are situated within the teaching and research roles of the faculty (Haviland, Fye, and Colby 88–89). When the directors of such entities are tenure-track faculty, the message across the campus is that the institution sees teaching and learning in all settings as central to the faculty's work and not as activities to be outsourced or marginalized. It is easy to imagine WPA activities as part of—or closely aligned with—such centers, reinforcing the importance of writing across the institution.

In Alfred Hall-Quest's words, "The best of plans must fail unless they are directed by persons who have enthusiastic faith in their ultimate success" (*Supervised Study* 392). Certainly, we feel this way about our writing centers and writing programs. What the history of supervised study tells me is that enthusiasm is only one element in the success of our work. Effective institutional alignment, sound assumptions about teaching and learning, and practices consistent with our values are all essential to negotiating the conflicts that supervised study has left for us.

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