Letters from Two Chairs

Letter from the Departing Chair

In the past three months, I have moved out of the MWCA region and stepped down as chair of the MWCA Executive Board. Not surprisingly, I now find myself missing both the region and the organization tremendously. The southern Appalachians are beautiful in the fall, but I’m now homesick for the wide open spaces and big sky of the Midwest and High Plains. I miss tornado sirens in summer and winter storm warnings at Christmas. I miss cresting a rise in the highway and spotting a butte or sandhill twenty miles in the distance. I miss the great rivers and the brilliant sunsets and the endless fields of corn, sunflowers, and sorghum.

Mostly, though, I miss my colleagues. For four years in the Black Hills, I was hundreds of miles from the nearest writing center, and MWCA provided a community that nourished me personally and professionally. At conferences in Kansas City and Rapid City, on cross-country calls with other Board members, and in many online discussions, this community kept me engaged and active when I might have otherwise drifted away. I’m eternally grateful to the many MWCA members who helped me close these vast distances.

Though I now live far from the MWCA region, I still appreciate the camaraderie I experienced on the Plains. MWCA is an incredibly strong and diverse organization, and I look forward to honoring this community by maintaining my membership and the connections I have developed. These connections overcame geographical isolation once before, and I’m sure they will bridge the distance again.

♦ Deaver Traywick

Letter from the New Chair

I’m writing with a fond and sad goodbye to Deaver, and with an equally warm hello to my MWCA colleagues, old and new. At our annual open meeting in Baltimore, we elected four new board members: Lori Baker (Southwest Minnesota State University), Helena Hall (Loras College), William Provost (Northern Michigan University), and Jasmine Kar Tang (University of Minnesota—Twin Cities).

One reason we were able to welcome so many new board members this year is that our region has seen many colleagues depart for other opportunities. In addition to Deaver’s new job in North Carolina, the south has claimed our newest board member, Kathi Griffin, who herself was filling out the remainder of Lisa Whalen’s term, and Arizona is now home to Veronica Oliver, our former grad representative. Along with the departure of Susan Mueller, our long-time State Consortia Coordinator and valued voice of good-humored practicality, these changes presented us with four openings on the Board. Besides bringing new energy and ideas to the board, the election of four new members to three-year terms will help us realign the election cycle so we can meet the bylaws’ requirement to elect one third of the twelve-member board every year; our rotation had been out of sync.

I’m happy to be chair for this coming year, giving me the opportunity not only to continue collaborating with the board and the wider membership, but also to work with the University of Wisconsin’s Brad Hughes, our primary host for the fall conference in Madison. Along with the University of Wisconsin, Madison Area Technical College and Edgewood College are collaborating to host “MWCA 2011: On the Isthmus,” October 21–22, 2011, at the Pyle Conference Center on the Univ. of Wisconsin—Madison campus. Expect a call for proposals soon.

♦ Katie Levin

Table of Contents

Letters from Two Chairs.............1
Treasurer’s Report, State Consortium Reports, and Travel Grant Awards .......................2
IWCA-NCPTW Conference 2010 Reflections .........................................3
Undergraduate Reflections on the Baltimore Conference.................4
“Wanting a Scooter, Drinking Root Beer, WC Praxis” .............5
IWCA and NCPTW Baltimore 2010 Reflections .........................6

“I miss the great rivers and the brilliant sunsets and the endless fields of corn, sunflowers, and sorghum.” ~ Deaver Traywick
Dear Members and Friends of the MWCA:

We’re in the black. As we do not have a regional conference this year, we do not have too many expense items. So far this year, we made a deposit of $300 for the 2011 regional conference in Madison, Wisconsin; awarded $1800 or six Travel Grants ($300 each) for students to travel to Baltimore for the IWCA-NCPTW conference; and paid for the cost of several board conference calls. We have about $14,000 in the bank.

Please be reminded that your MWCA membership for 2010 is due if you haven’t made the payment yet. Membership payments help support MWCA activities, such as offering travel grants to students and hosting a bi-annual regional conference. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions.

Z. Z. Lehmburg,
Treasurer, MWCA

November 5, 2010

“My favorite quote from the conference: consultants should operate on the ‘edge of our expertise.’”

♦ Emily Hipps

The Kansas Writing Center Consortium will meet on Friday, March 11, 2011 on the Manhattan Campus of Kansas State University. Featured speaker will be Thomas Ferrell, Director of the University of Missouri at Kansas City Writing Center. Ferrell will share information about the regional tutor training program that is conducted each Fall for Kansas City area writing tutors. Exact time and campus location to be announced. For additional information, contact Patricia E. Ackerman via email at ackerman@sal.ksu.edu.

The Chicagoland Writing Center Association will be holding its spring 2011 conference on Feb. 12 (9:30 am-4:45 pm) at the College of Lake County. The conference theme will be “Empowering Choices.” For inquiries, please e-mail Jennifer Staben jstaben@clcillinois.edu.

The Minnesota State Consortium (also known as the Writing Center Professionals of Minnesota, or WCPM) had its most recent meeting in September at Metro State University in St. Paul. The 32 people in attendance— including literacy specialists from Metro State and a local middle school writing center— discussed ways of teaching reading in the writing center. We also rallied to support Jules Thompson, the director of the Hamline University Writing Center, who is healing from a traumatic brain injury she suffered last February. We are happy to report that Jules is healing with characteristic grace, humor, and sustained intellectual curiosity. We hope Jules will be able to join us for our next meeting, which will be in January at Macalester College. To join our listserv, WCPMlist, please email State Consortium Coordinator Katie Levin at kslevin@umn.edu.

Travel Grant Awards

The MWCA awards travel grants to MWCA and IWCA conferences on an annual basis. They are $300 awards, intended to help offset the expenses of attending a major conference for undergraduate and graduate students.

This year’s awards went to:

♦ Stephanie Cheslock, undergraduate writing consultant, Edgewood College
♦ Zahid Choudhury, graduate writing consultant, University of Iowa
♦ Julie McCormhury, graduate writing consultant, Carleton College
♦ Jasmine Kar Tang, graduate writing consultant, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
♦ Seth Trenchard, undergraduate writing consultant, University of Nebraska – Lincoln
♦ Shannon Wilson, undergraduate writing consultant, Kansas State University – Manhattan

Left to right: Jasmine, Zahid, Shannon, and Seth
IWCA - NCPTW 2010 Reflections

The most striking and memorable part of the conference for me was to meet staff, directors, and consultants from other writing centers. Of course I knew there were other writing centers, and had read center profiles from papers and articles that we read for our training at Carleton, but I had never talked to someone who worked at a different institution. Until attending sessions or speaking to other participants, it did not really resonate with me just how different writing centers can be, and what a huge difference institution type and demographics can have on the issues that staff and consultants face.

I found presenting to be very rewarding—it was a bit nerve-wracking and I was not entirely sure what to expect—but I enjoyed the process of collaborating with directors and students from other institutions, presenting, and then discussing with attendees afterwards. I got new perspectives on how writing centers integrate into campuses, and had some very stimulating discussions after the panel had ended. It was also very satisfying to work on this project for so long and then see its conclusion. As a student in a trimester program, it was difficult to focus on any one question or idea for an extended period of time (longer than our 10-week term) because our schedules and courses are always changing. It was interesting to track how my perceptions changed from when we started this project in the early spring all the way up to November.

I am so grateful that I was able to attend, and hope to do so again in the future!

Julie McCormick

When I began working as a graduate writing tutor, the positive energy at my writing center was difficult to ignore: my colleagues’ commitment to their work motivated and inspired me to become more involved in the world of writing centers. The IWCA conference in Baltimore was no different and was quite honestly the best conference experience I have ever had. The overall "feel" of the event was what stood out to me: far from performative or hierarchical, the conference offered a supportive, collegial atmosphere of professionals deeply committed to their work.

Given my personal investment and academic training in American ethnic studies, I looked for sessions that addressed critical studies of difference, finding myself at panels and workshops that involved social justice practices in writing centers. The Special Interest Group (SIG) on anti-racist activism particularly resonated with me. I felt an unexpected wave of relief upon meeting people who sought to proactively consider what it means to create spaces and practices that are anti-oppressive, in contrast to either settling on quick fixes to address racism in writing center practice, or ignoring racism and oppression altogether. The members had in fact drafted a position statement protesting, among other initiatives, Arizona's anti-immigration law SB1070 and the subsequent HB 2281, a bill that involves the banning in Arizona of ethnic studies (my home field of study).

For me, the SIG’s position statement reflects an important step in recognizing how these contemporary issues are undeniably connected to writing center work. It is imperative that this connection is acknowledged and critiqued in nuanced ways, and it was reassuring to see this embodied in a SIG. Thus, as the writing center field - and with it, the IWCA - continue to think about how to address "diversity," the conference provided important opportunities for these conversations to occur.

The IWCA conference was a critical learning experience for me. I had attended the 2010 Summer Institute in Oklahoma and was profoundly inspired by that experience. The Baltimore conference reaffirmed to me that the world of writing centers could be a new disciplinary home. I am thankful to the MWCA for helping me make this trip happen.

Jasmine Kar Tang
Undergraduate Reflections on the IWCA - NCPTW Conference in Baltimore

The conference confirmed that I need not be an expert on all topics. I can say to the writer, “I know nothing about this, tell me everything.” I can ask tons of questions, encouraging the student to think about the topic in a different way. I don’t have to tell them anything, I only have to ask. —Alex

I really enjoyed the conference and the whole trip. I learned things I could never have learned sitting in a classroom. I met a Unitarian Universalist on a train, played German railroad board games, accidentally punched Sally in the face, saw a dolphin show, ate too much seafood, watched a squirrel eating a french fry, and accidentally mooned a van of strangers. I will reminisce about this trip for a long time. —Kayla

During one session I realized that no type of conference would make me angry enough to walk away. As long as the conversation doesn’t escalate into a fist fight, the debate can be mutually beneficial. In fact, it’s the consultant’s job to de-escalate these conflicts, make sure they never reach fist-fight level. —John

If we maintain silence in a conference, it can bring people to speak about their own papers and generate ideas. People who don’t feel the need to always be talking can work very well in conferences because they listen to the writer. —Amber

The speakers explained that when dealing with disengaged students who are seated extremely comfortably, it is most effective to take on the same posture so they do not get lulled into the idea that you are going to do all of the work for them. —Heidi

I discovered many connections between jazz and writing:
- Both involve improvisation
- Learn to let things go by (don’t play everything)
- Listen. Find out who loves the song the most and follow them (what Stephen Lacy did with his drummer)
- Find your own voice
- Your creation is “a call and response” —Ellen

Melody is like the thesis: it’s the main point of both the song and the paper. Harmony ties everything together, as do the supporting parts of the paper. Rhythm is like the flow of the paper. Without these three elements, a paper will not be successful—nor will a song. —Beth

Now as I’m writing this entry on the train, I have the pleasure of seeing the sun rise slowly in the sky, its rays reflecting on the red, yellow, and orange leaves that signify fall. It’s a beautiful sight, hills rolling around us, trees standing tall above us and the houses that dot the landscape near the tracks. A light frost covers the ground and you can tell there is a crisp morning air. —Hailley
In the spirit of Hunter Stockton Thompson, notable if not erratic literary son of Louisville, I offer up the following life and professional lessons learned while gallivanting around Kentucky last March 2010 for the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Collaborative at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). For those who don’t know, the IWCA Collaborative@CCCC gives writing center supporters and practitioners a chance to convene for one day during the regularly scheduled CCCC. The Collaborative encourages writing center tutors, faculty, directors, and staff to discuss hot topics, share best practices, and feel connected to others in the field. The lessons were:

♦ A desire to ditch my little red pickup truck for a Vespa
♦ Memories of my grandfather’s sassafras tea, reincarnated as a locally-made soda
♦ Fizzing, steeping thoughts about writing center culture

Fizzing, steeping thoughts: While we met on St. Paddy’s Day, I didn’t wear green or imbibe fescue-colored ale. Instead, I attended three sessions:

♦ From Grammatical to Global: The WAC/Writing Center Connection
♦ Re-envisioning Academic Culture: Toward a Culture of Writing or a Culture of Writers?
♦ Revising Writing Centers to Address Oral and Written Communication in a Wired, Multi-Media, Web 2.0 World

The first session—“From Grammatical to Global”—raised a lot of meaningful questions about how we raise “WAC-consciousness” in our respective learning institutions. We all wondered if informal networking worked better than a formalized approach to WAC, and that’s where the conversation took off.

As for the second session (“Re-envisioning Academic Culture”), I experienced my first fishbowl conversation, and all I can say is that the experience was electrifying! The focus of this fishbowl was part research gathering for the moderators (Michele Eodice, University of Oklahoma; Kristen Garrison, Midwestern State University; Nicole Munday, Salisbury University) and part collaborative discussion about what academic culture is, how academic culture influences writing center work, what our definitions of writing culture are, and if our conceptualization of these terms change when we think of a culture of writers instead, or in addition to, writing culture, and how these cultures (of writing and writers) inform our work.

Last, but certainly not least, I attended Valerie Balester’s (Texas A&M University) “knowledge café” on how the role of multimodal composition is shifting what we do in writing centers across the nation. Balester posed two important questions:

♦ When we change from a writing center to a center that works with oral and electronic communication, how do we embrace new genres, new composing processes, and new audiences?
♦ How can we take on even more responsibility than we already assume?

I had the good fortune of speaking with writing center professionals who discussed how we use educational technology to connect with students via writing center tutoring platforms (Adobe Connect, Google Talk and Google Docs, phone conferences, etc.) and what skills we might need to learn as tutors to assist students in producing effective visual and multimodal rhetoric. The conversation was not definitive in terms of where we’re headed, but it was interesting to note that some people are trying to figure out what we call writing centers of the future: Multi-literacy centers? Performing writing centers? As usual, the possibilities are endless.

Coda: I ended my time at the IWCA Collaborative by presenting on how the Kaplan University Writing Center used Twitter to celebrate the National Day of Writing (October 20, 2009) with an interactive and collaborative story project. The eight people who attended my session shared great ways they use (or hope to use) social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to connect to a broader academic community. The IWCA Collaborative exposed me to amazing portraiture and food, inspired a switch in personal transportation, and directed me towards additional resources and writing center literature. With a sassafras soda in hand, I want to continue these conversations so we can continue to best support students and one another as we navigate academic culture, a culture of writers and writing, and the world. Should you want to continue the conversation, I welcome emails at Mhammond@kaplan.edu.

♦ Michaella Hammond, Kaplan University

This year’s IWCA Collaborative@CCCC will be held in Atlanta, Georgia on April 6, 2011. For more information, please visit the IWCA website: http://writingcenters.org/2010/11/iwca-cccc-collaborative-2011-call-for-proposals-extended-to-wednesday-november-24/
The MWCA Board Members in Baltimore

Left to right: Frankie Condon, Bobbie Olson, Katie Levin, Pat Ackerman, Carol Martin, Z.Z. Lehmberg, Helena Hall, William Provost, Jasmine Kar Tang, Lori Baker

I am a Writing Center enthusiast; the idea of peer tutoring fascinates me. Being a political scientist, however, I do not get enough chances to meet with the scholarly and professional community of writing centers. The 2010 IWCA/MWCA conference provided me with the unique and rare opportunity to share my ideas with and learn from the broader writing center community. I will remember for a long time the warmth, appreciation, and academic attention I received in the conference in Baltimore.

♦ Zahid Choudhury

Articles and news items for the next issue of the Midwest Writing Centers Association Newsletter should be sent to Carol Martin, North Park University, 3225 W Foster Ave., Chicago, IL 60625-4895 (e-mail address: Cmartin@northpark.edu).

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