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Opportunity and Transformation: How Writing Centers are Positioned in the Political Landscape of Higher Education in the United States

Abstract

This article examines how the broader political-educational climate in the United States impacts the presence of writing centers on university campuses as well as the shape(s) those writing centers take. Using a representative sample of nearly 400 accredited institutions, the researcher explores the relationship between individualized writing support offered on university campuses and stratification of educational opportunities in the U.S. Through an examination of such variables of university structure as enrollment size, sector (public, private, or for-profit), institutional type, and location, the researcher correlates the structure of writing centers to the structure of their surrounding institutions. Ultimately, the essay suggests that universities' different approaches to supporting student writing are reflective of the larger legislative environment in the U.S. as well as what the university perceives its role to be in relation to its students.

Introduction

How do writing centers get created? The story at my institution is that the writing center was created because a group of faculty advocated for it. This happened when the university was launching a new core curriculum that included a program of required writing-in-the-disciplines courses. The faculty spent several years working on and arguing for their proposal, and in the end, they succeeded.

It's a pretty good story, right? It's got a clear narrative arc, a struggle, and a band of heroes. The problem is that it's not the *whole* story. I say that because, as it turns out, what happened at my university also happened at many other institutions. We didn't know it, but we were part of a trend. Indeed, the data that I will present in this article indicate that nearly all public research universities like mine have created writing centers, even as other kinds of institutions have not. Since these trends hold true across thousands of colleges and universities, they can't simply be explained by the actions of people on individual campuses. Sure, the folks at my university fought hard for the writing center, and their efforts made a difference. But broader forces were at work too, shaping how the institution responded to their efforts.

The goal of this research is to investigate those broader forces, forces that influence the overall climate for colleges and universities, which in turn influences how and whether writing centers are created. But doing this means taking an unusually distant perspective on writing center work. Imagine focusing a camera on what's happening inside a writing center—that's what most writing center research does. Now imagine pulling the lens back until the whole university is visible, and pulling it back even further until you have a view of the whole landscape of higher education—all of the thousands of colleges and universities in a giant educational ecosystem. That's the perspective here.

And, I'll admit, this perspective is potentially disorienting. The people, places, and ideas that take center stage in this article are not the ones that typically appear in writing center research (scan down a paragraph and you'll see what I mean). And on top of that, the research methods used to investigate large-scale trends are different from what most writing center research uses. But seeing our work from this distant perspective is essential if we want to understand how the writing center movement came into being.

To illustrate, let me begin with a brief description of a hearing that took place in the United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP). In 2010, that committee undertook an extensive investigation of consumer complaints about

for-profit colleges and universities. The two-year investigation included hearings in which former students and employees of for-profits gave testimony about their experiences. It also included a series of undercover operations in which agents of the Government Accountability Office posed as students in order to glean information about for-profit college operations. The committee's report, issued in 2012, was highly critical of the for-profit college industry (United States Congress, 2012). Among the key findings was that for-profit colleges devote far less money to instruction than traditional colleges do, and in particular that they don't provide their students with instructional support services, like tutoring. The report cited the experience of a student at a large publically-traded college chain who requested tutoring support (which she did not receive), and who was later intimidated out of asking again (p. 97). Among the changes that the report called for was the enforcement of "minimum standards" for the provision of academic support (p. 10).

However, the investigation and the report, which was written by the Democratic majority members of the committee, were immediately denounced as partisan politics by senate Republicans and by representatives of the for-profit college industry (Epstein, 2011; Fain, 2012). In a certain sense, the charge of partisanship was valid. The for-profit college movement has been championed by conservatives in the Republican Party and it was a Democratic Party-led committee that launched the investigation.

This story encapsulates some of the defining issues in American higher education and it suggests the "broader forces" that this article will explore. In particular, the institutions that the hearing focused on—publically-traded for-profit colleges—speak to the question of institutional diversity and stratification of the American system. There are more than four thousand institutions of higher education in the U.S., and they differ dramatically in mission, size, curricula, location, and more. And beyond the diversity of individual institutions, the system of higher education itself is highly stratified. Wealth and prestige are distributed unequally across the spectrum of colleges and universities—there are haves and have-nots—with the result that the overall experience of college is dramatically different across institutions.

Additionally, the hearing's focus on for-profit colleges invokes the question of the larger purpose of having a system of higher education. What does American society need from higher education, and what benefits do we get from supporting colleges with our tax dollars? What responsibilities, if any, do colleges and universities have toward their students? As the charges of partisan politics suggest, these are highly contested issues, and the contestation is not limited to debates about

for-profit higher education. Indeed, the issues addressed by the hearing speak to deep and long-standing ideological differences about the role of education in society, differences that have fundamentally shaped the development of our higher education system.

To see how all of this connects to writing centers, just imagine the senate hearing as a reverse image of the story about how my writing center was created. In one case, circumstances conspired to create a writing center; in the other, circumstances conspired to create a “not-writing-center.” In both cases, the circumstances are what need our attention, especially how the institutions define their missions, campuses and curricula, and where the institutions (and their students) are positioned in hierarchies of higher education. To understand how writing centers come to be, we will need to also understand how, where, and why not-writing-centers come to be.

Research Questions

The data collection for this research is organized around two basic questions: First, which colleges and universities have writing centers and which don't? And second, among those that don't have them, what else (if anything) is done to provide individualized writing instruction? There have been several previous efforts to address the first question;¹ however, those projects focused exclusively on identifying writing centers, whereas this project aims to identify and examine writing centers and “not-writing centers” alike. But doing this involves grappling with two methodological issues.

First, looking at where writing centers *don't* exist requires a very systematic approach to deciding which institutions to look at in the first place. The previous efforts to catalogue writing centers have been largely limited to the kinds of institutions that are already familiar in our community, like state universities and private liberal arts colleges. But to get the full picture, we need to look at the full range of institutions, including those with which our professional community has few connections. In some cases, this means including colleges and universities that may not even register as “colleges” at all. A few examples: The Pontifical College Josephinum, a small seminary school in Ohio, enrolls students in curricula leading to baccalaureate degrees in Philosophy and Sacred Theology; the DigiPen Institute of Technology, a college sponsored by the Nintendo Corporation, enrolls students in curricula leading to BS degrees in gaming technology and computer science; Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts, in Scottsdale, AZ,

1 The Writing Centers Research Project and the Writing Center Directory, for example.

enrolls students in programs leading to BA degrees in culinary arts. Each of these schools is an accredited, degree-granting college, and each has a distinct approach to providing academic support. If we want to understand how writing centers fit in the overall landscape of “colleges,” then these institutions must be part of our picture.

Second, looking at writing centers and “not-writing centers” requires creating a rigorous and robust definition of what a writing center *is*—a definition that rules some support programs in, and others out. The previous efforts to catalogue writing centers generally do not explicitly define writing centers, but they imply that the definition comes from the activity performed: If a unit offers tutoring for writers (and especially if it is also called a writing center) then it “counts” as a writing center. That intuitive definition, however, did not work well for this project precisely because of the diversity of institutions included. Consider the following scenarios, all drawn from institutions I investigated for this research:

- College A advertises that it has a writing center that provides tutoring. That center is located in the same room as two other units: the support center for disabled students and the student psychological counseling center. All of these centers are open during the same daily hours, and a single individual is solely responsible for staffing all three of them.
- In College B, students who need or want help with writing are directed to request help from the academic advising office. If a student requests help, an academic advisor locates a tutor, arranges a tutoring session, and pays the tutor.
- In College C, the Center for Academic Excellence offers course-based tutoring for a wide array of classes. Students who come for tutoring receive help with their papers for various courses, but both the tutors and the students consider this to be “subject tutoring,” not “writing tutoring.”
- In College D, the writing center is run by a sorority. A few senior members of the sorority organize and advertise the service, and the other sorority sisters serve as the tutors. The project fulfills the chapter’s community service requirement, so no one is paid for participating. The university does not contribute any resources to this effort.

Do these institutions have writing centers? If the definition of a writing center is simply based on whether writing tutoring is offered, then the answer in each case would have to be yes. But in each of these scenarios,

tutoring is contextualized in ways that fundamentally change the meaning of the activity. These contextual factors, then, are a central and necessary part of defining writing centers and of distinguishing them from “not-writing-centers.”

Method

The first step in this project was to create a representative sample of accredited colleges and universities that offer baccalaureate degrees.² In 2010, when I began this research, there were 2972 accredited institutions offering baccalaureate degrees listed in the database of the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS)³, and from these I created a representative sample of 400 institutions. Based on a pilot project, I used four variables to structure the sample: enrollment size, sector, institutional type, and location.⁴ A number of institutions included in the original sample ultimately had to be dropped from the analysis. Some had closed or lost accreditation, and others had stopped offering

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- 2 In an earlier version of this study, I attempted to include degree-granting institutions at all levels—two-year, four-year, and graduate. However, that analysis revealed distinct differences in how support services work across those levels. These differences were significant enough that they would have required very different data collection methods, and drawing valid conclusions across all three levels would have required a prohibitively large sample. Note, however, that the distinctions among two-year, four-year, and graduate institutions are often blurred. Some colleges with a primary focus on offering associates degrees also offer baccalaureate degrees in one or two areas. The same is true of some primarily graduate institutions. The sample for this research is drawn from all institutions that offer baccalaureate degrees, thus it includes some institutions that are primarily two-year/grad institutions.
 - 3 This is best understood as the number of unique college *campuses* across the country, not unique institutions. IPEDS counts a “branch” campus as a separate entity when it meets three criteria: it is not a temporary location; it is beyond easy commuting distance from the “main” campus; and at least one degree program can be completed entirely on site. The sample of institutions used for this research includes a number of “branch” campuses that meet these three criteria.
 - 4 In terms of enrollment size, the sample includes institutions ranging from 2 students to 51,000 students, but overall it includes many more campuses with small enrollments than with large enrollments. Ten percent of the institutions in the sample enroll fewer than 200 students and fully one-third of the institutions in the sample have fewer than 1500 students. In terms of sector, approximately half of the sample comprises private nonprofit colleges, while the remaining half comprises roughly equal numbers of public colleges and for-profit colleges. In terms of institutional type, the sample included institutions representing 24 of the Carnegie “basic” categories. Masters, doctoral, and research institutions combined comprised 40% of the institutions, while associates and baccalaureate colleges of all types comprised 41%. The remaining 19% of the sample comprises “specialized” institutions, including those focusing on art, technology, health professions, theology, and more. In terms of location, the sample includes colleges and universities from each of the United States.

baccalaureate degrees. In the end, the sample for the research comprised 378 institutions.

With this initial dataset in hand, I then searched publically available sources for information about how each of the 378 institutions provided individualized academic support, including but not limited to writing-related support. Each institution's official website was my primary source of information. From each university homepage, I searched the following terms: "tutoring," "tutor," "academic support," "writing center," and "writing lab." In addition, I used the tabs and links on the home page to look for the same key terms. In some cases, information was not available on the institution's website, so I turned to other publically available, institutionally authorized texts, including student handbooks, catalogues, academic job postings, accreditation reports, QEP planning documents, and the like.

From these sources, I collected information about whether and how academic support and writing support was offered, and I then coded the information so that it could be analyzed statistically. That process looked like this: As I reviewed the website for each college, I wrote a paragraph-long description of how students' individual needs as writers were addressed there. As I proceeded through the list of colleges, adding new paragraphs to my records, I was also continually reviewing and reflecting on the paragraphs I had already written. Through this process of writing, reviewing, and reflecting, I came to recognize some broad organizing principles in the data. For example, one such principle was whether the institution had a "standing unit" for academic support, meaning a center or an office where tutoring was routinely and regularly available. I discovered many "standing units," and they were each a little bit different from each other. But as a group "standing units" seemed categorically different from other kinds of academic support programs. That insight became a code (standing unit: "yes" or "no"). Later it became possible (again based on the iterative process of collecting data and reviewing it) to refine that code, so that I could reliably distinguish "standing units that are writing centers" from "standing units that are not-writing-centers." The full definition appears below.

Once I had the complete data set, including institutional data from IPEDS and support service data from the college websites, I used statistical techniques (described in detail below) to analyze the data overall.

Theoretical Frameworks

My interpretations of the statistical analyses draw on an extensive body of sociological research about stratification in the system of higher education in the United States (Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007; Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008; Mullen, 2010). American colleges and universities are differentiated by status and prestige. The institutions in the top tiers comprise colleges that are highly ranked and that have selective admissions standards. Such colleges enroll disproportionate numbers of students with high socio-economic status, and students whose parents are themselves college graduates. The institutions in the bottom tiers are colleges with low or no national rankings and open admissions policies. These institutions draw their enrollments disproportionately from working class students, many of whom are also first-generation college students, adult/returning students, and racial minorities.⁵

For institutions, stratification means competition. Colleges and universities compete with each other for status and prestige, and for the funding and enrollment advantages that come with them. For students, meanwhile, stratification means that college degrees have unequal values. The key academic outcomes—graduation rates, jobs, and earnings—vary significantly from the top to the bottom tiers.⁶ Thus higher education sometimes serves to reproduce social inequalities, not to equalize them, as is commonly believed.

My interpretations also draw on a conceptual framework developed by Deborah Brandt and others related to how literacy is “sponsored” by institutions (Brandt 2001, 2005, 2009; Brandt & Clinton, 2002). In Brandt’s formulation, literacy is understood as a kind of commodity that holds value for individuals. However, to acquire new literacy, individuals must have a “sponsor”—a person or institution

5 Mullen (2010, pp. 3–11) and Stuber (2011, pp. 5–16) provide succinct summaries of recent quantitative research about stratification and make for a good starting point in reviewing this extensive literature. Carnevale & Rose (2004); Astin & Oseguera (2004); and Roska, Grodsky, Arum, & Gamoran (2007) all provide detailed analyses of SES data for students at upper versus lower tier institutions. For data about students (socio-economic status) in for-profit institutions see Turner (2006); Tierney & Hentschke (2007); Hentschke (2010); and Goldrick-Rab & Cook (2011).

6 See Walpole (2003) for a pertinent analysis of recent quantitative research. For data about outcomes at for-profits, see United States Congress (2012), especially pp. 72–80. Extensive comparative data about higher education outcomes can be found in the annual digests and reports provided by the National Center for Education Statistics.

that provides access to that literacy. Universities are among the most important sponsors of literacy because they provide access to the powerful and prestigious literacies of the professions. But Brandt argues that literacy sponsors don't provide people with access to powerful literacy just out of a spirit of benevolence; there has to be something in it for the sponsor, too. Thus, a university targets its resources so that *certain* people (usually tuition-paying students) can learn *certain kinds* of literacy in ways that cohere with and support the university's overall mission and goals. Literacy sponsorship is one of the ways that institutions can compete in a stratified system. By sponsoring prestigious literacies, and by achieving success in literacy sponsorship, an institution can improve its status.

Tracking the workings of university literacy sponsorship is complicated because institutions' choices about what and whom to sponsor are not entirely "local" to the institution itself. Take, for example, the story of how the writing center got started in my university. What does that act tell us about my institution's sponsorship of literacy? We might assume that the answer lies in motivations of the faculty who advocated for the new center, or of the higher-ups who approved their plan. But, in fact, there may have been many motivations at work: The faculty might have wanted a writing center for one reason, and the provost for another. Moreover, whatever the individual motivations were, the decision to open a writing center suggests that factors outside the institution were at work, since *the idea of a writing center comes from other institutions in the first place*. There are many colleges and universities that have writing centers, and they didn't each independently invent the idea of a writing center in response to specific concerns at their institutions. Instead, the idea was already "out there" and already being enacted at other institutions, just as other models for academic support are also "out there." So when a university opens a new writing center, what it is really doing is selecting from the existing models the one that it considers most fitting and appropriate for the literacy that it hopes to sponsor and for the competitive edge it hopes to gain.

Findings

Part 1: Models for Supporting Students

The first part of this analysis draws on the descriptive data I collected about each institution's approach to academic support: information about what services were available (if any), who provided them, who was eligible to use them, who was in charge of the service, that person's title, and more. In cases where more than one service was offered (e.g.,

if there were two different tutoring centers in the same institution), the data includes information about all services.

Based on the idea that institutions are not inventing their responses from scratch but rather are aligning their practices with existing models, I searched for patterns in these data that would reveal these underlying models, even if some of the details of the support differed. Overall, my analysis uncovered four general approaches for responding to students' individual learning needs, each of which was represented in substantial numbers of institutions.

#1: Not what we do: The institution does not officially recognize the need for individualized support

Some institutions make no explicit reference to any kind of individualized academic or writing support, neither on their websites nor in any of the publically available documents I found. This does not mean, of course, that students don't get individualized support. It may well be that faculty (or others) provide one-on-one tutoring for students in an ad-hoc fashion. But if so, this work is not organized, supported, or acknowledged by the institutions. Relatively few institutions—only 10% of the overall sample—followed this model. Those that did were mostly small colleges, typically with highly specialized curricula in theology, the arts, business, and healthcare fields. “College D,” described above, is an example of this model. It is also found at Pontifical College Josephinum, Life Pacific College, Interior Designers Institute, Hallmark College of Technology, Birthingway College of Midwifery, and Remington College of Nursing.

Based on the contextual data available, there appear to be two beliefs guiding this approach. First, many of these institutions do not see themselves as offering an integrated package of general education and disciplinary education. Rather, providing profession-specific education is the primary (and often the exclusive) mission of the institution. For example, Birthingway and the Interior Designers Institute do not even offer general education courses on their campuses; students who want to earn bachelor's degrees must arrange to take those courses elsewhere and transfer them in. Second, these colleges don't recognize “writing” as a feature of the specialized professions for which they are preparing their students. In the case of the Pontifical College Josephinum, general education courses are taught on campus, and “writing” is explicitly part of that curriculum. But the richly-literate practices addressed in the school's seminary courses—e.g., analyzing and interpreting ancient and modern religious texts—are represented not as “writing” but as “pastoral skills.”

#2: Only if you ask: The institution provides general support on an “as-needed” basis

At some institutions, students’ need for individualized writing support was explicitly recognized in university documents, but the support was made available *only* if a student asked for it and then *only* for that student. Approximately 13% of the institutions in the sample approached academic support in this way. For all of these institutions, “as-needed” support was the only model for providing support, and students were directed to use the “as-needed” tutoring for help with all subjects and skills. All but one of the institutions in this group were for-profit colleges, many specializing in technology and business degrees. The ITT Technical Colleges were part of this group as were the Minnesota College of Business campuses, Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts, and “College B” from the scenarios. The student profiled in the senate hearings also attended an institution that offered “as-needed” support.

This model of academic support seems predicated on two linked ideas. First, even though the language used to describe the tutoring service often states that academic support is a common need among students, the model itself seems to assume that most students won’t require it. Second, the model asserts that the institution is only minimally responsible for helping students who are struggling. If there are gaps between the instruction provided in class and the instruction that individual students need, it is the student’s own responsibility to deal with that.

These beliefs become evident in part from how and where the institutions articulate the services they provide. For nearly all of the institutions in this group, the as-needed tutoring model was described in student handbooks or college catalogues, not on the university website. This is significant because the primary purpose of those documents is to notify students, in a legal (or legal-ish) sense, of the requirements, rules, and policies that apply at the institution. In that context, the information about as-needed tutoring seems designed to put students on notice about their rights and responsibilities in relation to academic support. Specifically, it notifies them that if they are struggling academically, they must *not* assume that the institution will notice and intervene. Instead, they are responsible for asking for help.

#3: Help with all of your classes: The institution sponsors a “big-tent” tutoring center

In some institutions, students receive academic support, including writing support, through “all-purpose” academic tutoring centers.

Sometimes these are stand-alone units that are solely devoted to offering tutoring; “College C,” above, is an example of this, as is the support provided at the DigiPen Institute of Technology. In other cases, these centers offer tutoring in combination with other things, like disability resource centers, internship programs, and the like; “College A,” above, is an example of this. These units are commonly called Learning Centers, Tutoring Centers, and Centers for Academic Excellence. Approximately 25% of the institutions in the sample provide support in this way.

These big-tent tutoring programs are all standing units—they all have an established space on campus and offer services during regular hours. They generally adopt a welcoming and encouraging stance toward students. Information about these centers is accessible within one or two clicks from the institution’s home page, and the websites often make a point of saying that the service is helpful, open to all, and easy to use. The websites always include the center’s location and hours and information about how tutoring can be accessed. However, they frequently omit information about who works in the tutoring centers. In more than half of the cases in my sample, the web pages did not identify the director or coordinator of the service. Nearly a third of the websites do not provide any information about who provides tutoring (i.e., students, faculty, or staff).

The defining feature of these programs is that they treat academic tutoring as a non-discipline-specific activity. Tutoring for all subjects (math, writing, science, statistics, etc.) is presented under the same administrative umbrella, and the tutoring program is understood to be one unified service. Most big-tent tutoring programs are designed to provide course-based support. In most cases, there are no specifically designated “writing” tutors, but there are “English” tutors who work with students who are taking first-year composition courses. Of course, tutors in a course-based tutoring program do many of the same things that writing center tutors do: They work with students on the papers students are writing for classes. However, this is not represented as “writing” tutoring.

Unlike the two models described above, the big-tent model assumes that academic support is a regular and common need among college students and that the institution is responsible for providing it. The model also suggests that the institution sees itself as providing for students *as students*, up to the limits of what is covered by the curriculum. The tutoring seems best designed to help students understand “what the professor wants,” and to help them succeed within the courses and assignments that they are required to complete. Students’ own

self-sponsored learning goals don't fit easily in this model. Thus, the tutoring program doesn't have an independent academic "identity" or instructional goal within the curriculum; rather, it is a service unit. This may be why it "makes sense" for the large majority of these units not to identify the leader of the unit.

#4: Developing writers: The institution sponsors a writing center

In more than half (52%) of the colleges and universities in my sample, student writers receive support through centers that are specifically devoted to writing. In some cases, these are stand-alone writing centers, where all of the services are devoted to writing; in other cases, the writing center is a subunit of a larger learning center, learning commons, or tutoring center. In the latter case, I counted the subunits as writing centers only when the writing-related services were *meaningfully distinguished* from services addressing other disciplines. This meant the writing support service had at least three of the following: its own director/coordinator, its own space, its own tutors, and/or its own practices for tutor hiring and development. This, then, comprises the definition of a writing center used in this research.

Like the big-tent tutoring centers, writing centers are typically easy to locate within a few clicks from the institution's homepage. Nearly all of the writing centers in my sample were advertised as being open to all students, and the text on the websites encouraged and invited students to visit. Unlike the websites for big-tent tutoring centers, writing center websites were likely to provide explicit information about the leader of the center. The leader's title was given on 95% of the writing center websites in the sample, and 80% of the sites in the sample provided the leader's name in addition to her title.⁷

Remarkably, nearly half of all campuses that have writing centers also have other units that provide tutoring support, including support for writers (even if the support isn't called "writing tutoring"). One common pattern is to have a writing center *and* a big-tent tutoring center. Another pattern is to have a writing center that is open to all students, and one or more other tutoring centers that are open only to particular groups of students, like student athletes, students from particular cultural groups, and TRiO students. This latter approach was the only way that "remedial" writing tutoring appeared in the institutions in my sample. Almost no colleges in the sample offered

⁷ The most commonly-used titles were "director" (70%) and "coordinator" (17%).

explicitly “remedial” writing tutoring unless they also offered a non-remedial writing center.

As with big-tent tutoring centers, the writing center model is based on the idea that individualized, out-of-class academic support is a common need among students, and that the university is responsible for providing it. However, writing centers also sponsor the idea that writing development is a discipline-specific need that requires a particular approach to tutoring and that draws on knowledge from the field of writing studies. Many writing centers also position themselves as at least partially independent from the curriculum. A common statement on writing center websites is that the goals of the service are to “build better writers (not better papers)” and to address the writers’ own questions and goals. Moreover, many writing centers explicitly offer to support students on any writing projects that the students wish, including extracurricular projects. By implication, then, the tutoring provided is not about helping students to produce “what the teacher wants,” but to support them as writers in and beyond the curriculum.

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So far, then, these findings suggest that the four different models of academic support emerge from two opposing conceptions of a college’s role in relation to its students. Colleges either consider themselves to be responsible for providing help for individual students who need it (in which case they have a writing center or a big-tent learning center). Or they don’t (in which case they provide no support or provide “as-needed” support). What is significant about this—returning to the “partisan politics” claim described above—is how easily these opposing beliefs map onto the platforms of the two political parties in the United States. In those platforms, the rhetoric is addressed to the proper role of government, rather than colleges and universities. But the underlying question is the same: What responsibilities does the government/institution have in relation to citizens/students?

For progressives, the answer to that question is found in the logic of programs like Social Security and Medicare that are designed to provide a safety net for people who may need it, and in pieces of legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act that are designed to ensure that all citizens are treated fairly. The government’s role is to protect individual citizens and also to promote a more just society where all citizens, regardless of their circumstances, have fair and equal opportunities. Swap “institution” for “government,” and “student” for “citizen,” and you have an argument for a writing center. A writing

center makes the whole university more equitable by ensuring that all students have a chance to succeed.

In the conservative view, meanwhile, government-run safety net and equal opportunity programs are misguided efforts that hurt more than they help. For conservatives, the proper role of government is largely to get out of the way so that individuals are incentivized to protect and better themselves in ways that emerge from their own creative initiatives. In the conservative ideal, government would be small, providing help only in very rare circumstances. In such a scenario, failure would be a real and frightening possibility for individuals; but in the conservative view, fears motivate and failure clarifies. If people lack motivation or ability, they *should* fail; protecting them from failure simply shields them from the consequences of their own actions and leaves them dependent on others.⁸ Seen in this light, “as-needed” tutoring programs make sense as an instantiation of conservative beliefs. Small wonder, then, that these particular programs are so common in the for-profit institutions that have been embraced by the Republican Party.

Part 2: Institutions of Higher Education and Literacy Sponsorship

As the data have shown, around half of the institutions in the sample had writing centers, while the other half opted for other means of responding to students’ academic support needs. In what follows, I examine how the different approaches to sponsorship are distributed across different kinds of institutions, focusing especially on comparing institutions that have writing centers to those that don’t.

8 Foundational conservative beliefs about education are articulated in Friedman (1962). Murray (2008) and Toby (2010) offer more recent book-length treatments of these issues. See the Republican Party Platform (“We Believe in America”) for how these ideas translate to a legislative agenda.

Preliminary statistical tests⁹ revealed that there were seven institutional characteristics that were significantly correlated with whether an institution had a writing center or not:

- Sector: public, private, or for-profit
- Total number of students enrolled
- Carnegie “basic” classification
- Highest degree offered
- Location: urban, suburban, or rural
- Campus: residential or non-residential
- Curricula: specialized or non-specialized (liberal arts)

However, these seven characteristics were also significantly correlated with each other. For example, for-profit institutions are more likely to offer specialized curricula and have non-residential campuses, while public universities are more likely to have large enrollments and residential campuses, etc. So the analytical challenge is to discover which characteristics are independently related to an institution’s choice to have a writing center, and which are simply “along for the ride.” In other words, if large public research universities are more likely to have writing centers, is that related to the “public-ness” of the institution, or the “largeness,” or is it both in combination?

To get at these questions, I used a statistical package called “Decision Tree” that is designed to uncover relationships among multiple variables (Figure 1). Decision Tree works by taking a large group that is heterogeneous in terms of a key variable and progressively breaking it down into smaller and smaller sub-groups that are more homogeneous. To read Figure 1, start at the top of the diagram with Node O. This node represents the starting point of the analysis; thus it includes the full group of 378 colleges and universities in the dataset. This group is heterogeneous in terms of the key variable—meaning, it comprises a

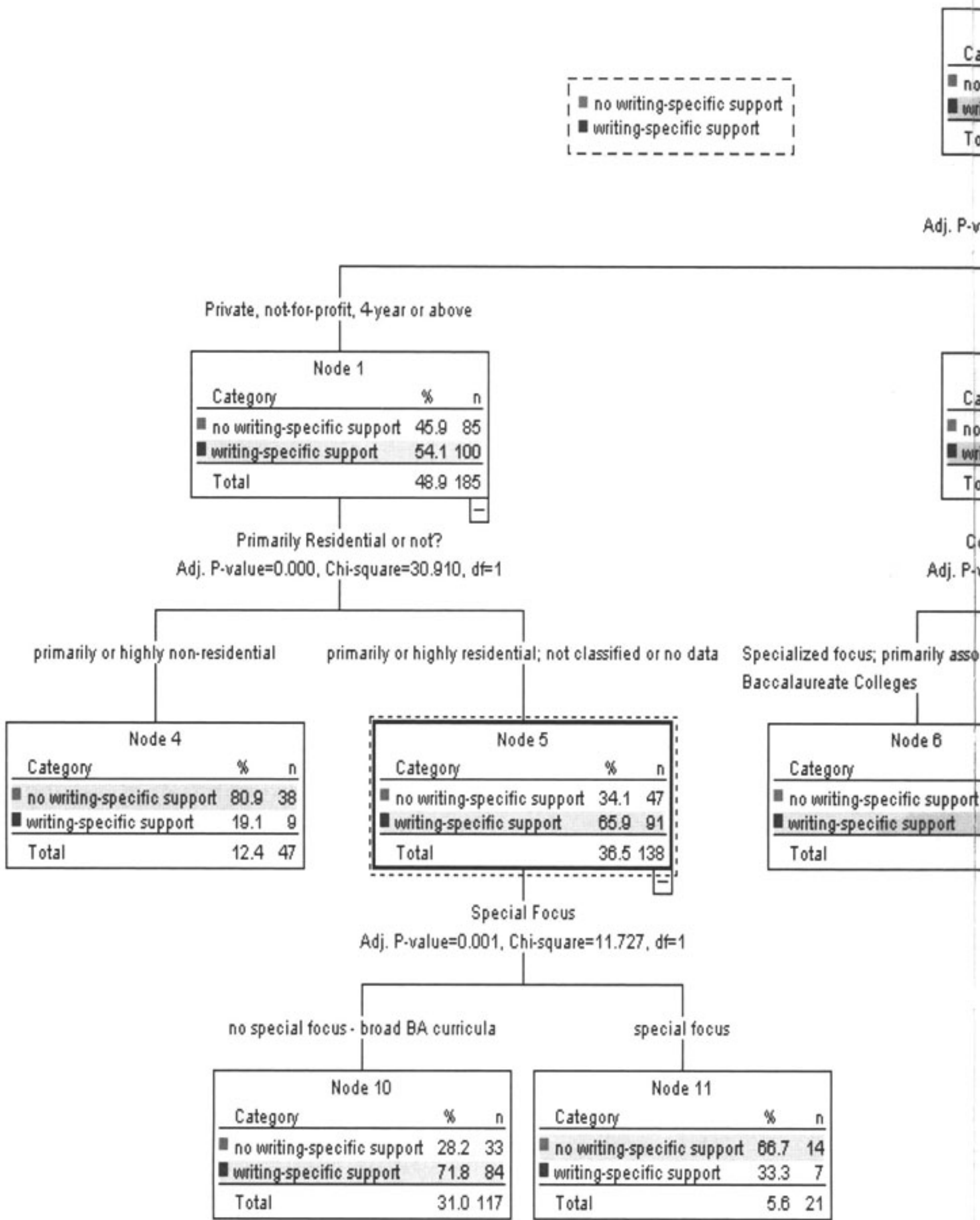
9 To uncover these correlations, I used a statistical analysis called “cross-tabulation.” Cross-tabs are a way of investigating how two variables relate to each other. Here’s an example, using “sector” and “writing center” as variables. In terms of sector, the 378 colleges in my sample were divided into three categories: 100 (26%) were public colleges; 93 (25%) were for-profit colleges; and the remaining 185 (49%) were private colleges. Meanwhile, my analysis also showed that 52% of institutions in the overall sample had writing centers, while 48% did not. So how do those two variables relate? If the relationship between the variables was entirely random, then public, private, and for-profit colleges would each have 52% of institutions with writing centers and 48% without. But in fact, the numbers *don’t* show that. They show high percentages of writing centers among public colleges and low percentages among for-profit colleges. This shows us that the relationship between the two variables is not random; they are related to each other somehow.

mixture of institutions that have writing centers and those that don't. The analysis then "grows" downward, as the group is progressively split into smaller sub-groups. The conclusions are represented in seven "terminal nodes" found at the end of each "branch." The terminal nodes are all more homogeneous than the group was at the start because the Decision Tree analysis "found" the institutions with writing centers and grouped them together. The variables that were used to "find" the writing centers and to progressively split the whole group into sub-groups are identified above each of the nodes. The higher up a variable appears in the diagram, the more significant it is in the analysis.

As Figure 1 indicates, then, the single most important variable for determining where writing centers are found is *sector*: whether an institution is private, public, or for-profit. The most striking distinction is between public institutions and for-profit institutions. Among public colleges and universities, 87% have writing centers (Node 2), while 13% do not; in for-profit colleges, those numbers are reversed (Node 3). Also, the most disparate terminal nodes branch off from Nodes 2 and 3. Node 8 indicates that for-profit colleges that do not offer graduate/professional degrees are the *least* likely of all institutions to offer a writing center (1.8%). Node 7 indicates that public universities that offer graduate degrees are the *most* likely to offer writing centers (95.5%). Meanwhile, with private colleges the overall picture is more mixed. Slightly more than half of them have writing centers, and the rest don't (Node 1). But *certain* private colleges—those that are residential and especially those that offer "non-specialized" (meaning liberal arts) curricula—have very high percentages of writing centers (Node 10).

There are a lot of interesting details in this analysis, but overall it offers two major insights into how writing centers are positioned: First, it indicates that the more closely connected an institution is to public funding and accountability—public colleges are the most, for-profits are the least—the more likely it is to have a writing center. To put this another way, the analysis suggests that institutions whose funding structures most closely match the progressive ideal for social programs also adopt a progressive "safety-net" role in relation to their students. This congruence is not coincidental; rather, it is there by design—a function of state and federal higher education policies whose effects are felt most directly on public colleges. Over the past seventy years, higher education legislation has sought to make college more broadly accessible for all Americans and particularly for low-income and racial minority students. The legislation is explicitly designed to promote

FIGURE 1



Writing Center Support yes or no

Node 0		
	%	n
no writing-specific support	47.9	181
writing-specific support	52.1	197
Total	100.0	378

Sector

Chi-square=112.802, df=2

4-year & above

Node 2		
	%	n
no writing-specific support	13.0	13
writing-specific support	87.0	87
Total	26.5	100

Private, for-profit, 4-year & above

Node 3		
Category	%	n
no writing-specific support	89.2	83
writing-specific support	10.8	10
Total	24.6	93

Carnegie Classifications

Chi-square=13.038, df=1

Does the university offer grad or professional degrees

Adj. P-value=0.001, Chi-square=11.197, df=1

Research & Doctoral; Masters Degrees

no

yes

Node 7		
Category	%	n
no writing-specific support	4.5	3
writing-specific support	95.5	64
Total	17.7	67

Node 8		
Category	%	n
no writing-specific support	98.2	54
writing-specific support	1.8	1
Total	14.6	55

Node 9		
Category	%	n
no writing-specific support	76.3	29
writing-specific support	23.7	9
Total	10.1	38

social mobility and equality by ensuring that all Americans have access to pathways to prosperity.¹⁰

But in recent decades, as evidence has emerged that “access” (i.e., simply admitting students to college) is not enough, federal and state governments have made increasing efforts to hold public colleges accountable for student outcomes, especially graduation and retention rates. After all, a student who is admitted to college but then fails to graduate may be worse off than she would have been if she had never enrolled in the first place, especially if she has accrued student loan debt. Thus the accountability measures are intended to ensure that students who enroll have a fair chance to graduate and make good on the promise that a degree offers. Or, to put this another way, the goal is to ensure that colleges meet their responsibility toward students.¹¹

Given this legislative environment, then, public colleges realize distinct benefits from having writing centers. Writing centers offer colleges powerful tools for meeting their own accountability requirements; they target specialized academic support toward students who need it and in so doing, they keep students on track toward graduation. This helps explain why 87% of public colleges overall have writing centers. And it may also explain why so many of the universities that have writing centers also have one or more additional tutoring support programs in place. Having a writing center doesn’t necessarily mean that an institution has committed to the writing center model over and against other models. Rather, it signals a general commitment to providing academic support, in whatever forms and structures are workable.

The second finding that emerges from the Decision Tree analysis is that writing centers are more likely to be found in colleges that are residential and that offer a liberal arts curriculum. Significantly, the data do not suggest that either of these two characteristics is especially important on its own; rather, it is when the two are combined that the percentage of writing centers is very high.

So what is it about this particular combination of characteristics: private and liberal arts and residential? Research on stratification suggests that the answer has to do with competing “narratives” for

10 Thelin (2004), Mumper, Gladieux, King, & Corrigan (2011), and Loss (2012) offer excellent histories of higher education in the United States, including extensive contextualized discussions of federal legislation.

11 See SHEEO (2005) for an articulation of these views. See also Thelin (2004, pp. 329–331).

higher education.¹² To get a sense of this, consider institutions that offer the reverse image: commuter “career” colleges. Such institutions often sponsor curricula in technical, culinary arts, business, nursing, paralegal studies, etc., curricula that are meant to prepare students for a particular “job niche.” In so doing, they implicitly engage students in a narrative about college: namely, that one goes to college to acquire credentials and skills that will lead to success in getting a job. Since these educational aims are instrumental—college is a means to an end—this narrative is often about getting to the end point as efficiently as possible. These are the institutions that are *least likely* to have writing centers.

By comparison, residential liberal arts colleges engage students in a narrative that asserts that the aim of college is not “merely” about getting a job, but rather about becoming an educated person. Residential liberal arts colleges do this by pairing a broad liberal arts curriculum with a rich living-and-learning environment, in which students’ out-of-class hours are filled with a variety of high-quality learning activities (clubs, internships, service-learning programs, etc.). Where the “career college” narrative emphasizes efficiency, the residential liberal arts narrative is about personal transformation. After four years of immersion in the educational life of the liberal arts university, students are transformed; they are not the same people they were before they enrolled. These are the colleges that are *more likely* to have writing centers.

And it’s not hard to see why. Writing centers offer precisely the kind of high-quality, out-of-class learning experience that residential liberal arts colleges seek to provide for their students. Moreover, the hallmarks of writing center pedagogy align almost perfectly with the liberal arts educational narrative. Consider the fact that writing centers serve curricular goals in the sense that they support students with writing assignments for classes, but at the same time we privilege individual students’ individual development. Consider too the emphasis in writing center pedagogy on encouraging students to become independent and self-directed learners.

But what may be surprising is the extent to which that connection aligns writing centers with privilege. By and large, the institutions that are least likely to have writing centers are lower tier colleges that attract

12 The idea of “narratives” as described here is drawn from Mullen (2010, pp. 11–12), but similar ideas about these two competing purposes/goals for education appear in many of the other texts cited in this article, including Friedman (1962); McDonough (1997); Thelin (2004); Tierney & Hentschke (2007); Hurst (2010); and Stuber (2011).

students with the least privilege: working class students, including many who are first-generation college students, racial minorities, and adult/returning students. And this isn't simply an accident or the result of such students not being admitted to more prestigious colleges. Rather, many working class students choose less prestigious colleges precisely to avoid the liberal-arts, education-as-transformation model. For these students, the idea of spending four years immersed in “becoming an educated person,” without a clear pathway toward a job, isn't workable or sensible. And in a larger sense, the prospect of being “transformed” by education—of becoming someone who thinks, speaks and writes differently, and perhaps “better” than they used to—carries risks and burdens for working class students. To embrace a liberal arts education, working class students must “come to terms with an achievement that potentially separates them from all they have known before” (Hurst, 2010, p. 6) and that may force them to choose between academic success and loyalty to their families and communities.¹³

In lower tier colleges, such risks are minimized because the narrative of education is more congruent with the goals and concerns of working class students and their families. At a commuter career college, no one needs to leave home or quit their job in order to get a college degree, and no one needs to worry about what they're going to “do” with what they have learned. But by choosing to attend such colleges, students may simply be exchanging the risks of alienation for other risks, especially the risk of not graduating and other generally poorer outcomes associated with lower-tier colleges, outcomes that can be traced in part back to the lack of academic support.

For conservative policy makers, this is simply a question of consumer choice: Working class students choose institutions that are less alienating, and in exchange they give up on access to some services and accept somewhat more risk in terms of outcomes.¹⁴ But the fact is that many students, like the student profiled in the senate hearing, don't realize that they are making this trade-off until it is too late. They may assume that academic support is available and find out that it isn't only after they've run into problems. More to the point, there is no

13 Working class students' choices about where to go to college, and their experiences and choices once they get there, are explored in McDonough (1997), Hurst (2010), Mullen (2010), and Stuber (2011). See Hurst (2010) also for a discussion of working class students' strategies for coping with the implications of becoming “educated.”

14 See James (2012) for an incisive analysis of how “choice” and market forces function in relation to for-profit colleges.

compelling reason that students should have to make this trade-off in the first place.

Conclusion

This analysis, then, reveals broad patterns in how colleges and universities respond to students' needs for academic support as well as in how the various models for academic support are distributed across the stratified system of higher education. These data show that writing centers are very strongly aligned with public universities where literacy sponsorship is inflected with concerns about providing equal opportunity in and through education. Moreover, writing centers are also aligned with residential liberal arts colleges where literacy sponsorship is inflected with ideas about "personal transformation" and with the prestigious narrative of liberal arts education. Meanwhile, writing centers are generally not found in for-profit colleges and in commuter "career" colleges. These broad patterns can't be the result of local "on-campus" issues or personalities. Rather, they emerge from larger forces powerful enough to shape the educational environment across the thousands of colleges and universities in the American system.

Theorizing writing center work from this distant perspective serves as a useful challenge to theories of writing centers that were developed based on experiences inside institutions. Inside a single institution, a writing center might well seem "marginalized" and powerless, and if we reason forward from those impressions, we will conclude that writing center work is marginalized and powerless. But in the system of higher education overall, writing centers are neither. The fact is that writing centers are the single most common model for academic support, and a majority of institutions have them. Moreover, in the most powerful sectors of the university landscape—public colleges, residential liberal arts colleges—writing centers are nearly ubiquitous. More importantly, writing centers clearly serve institutions in their efforts to compete in a stratified university system. Writing centers allow universities to signal the kind of literacy they sponsor, and they give universities a concrete venue for operationalizing institutional goals and agendas. These are potential sources of strength for our field.

But even as it has revealed these potential strengths, this systemic analysis reveals deeply troubling limitations in how writing centers are positioned. Writing centers may be amply represented in the most powerful sectors of the higher education landscape, but we are largely absent from the lower-tier institutions whose students could most benefit from academic support and advocacy. Moreover, our work has

been shaped in ways that would make it difficult for us to serve such students even if we were present in lower-tier institutions. The liberal-arts-inflected pedagogies and practices that our field espouses were developed for the relatively privileged students who are in the majority at our institutions. Those pedagogies can't address the critical concerns that working class students bring with them to college, such as how to acquire job skills and credentials as quickly as possible and how to acquire new literacies in ways that do not "separate them from all that they've known before," as Hurst (2010) puts it (p. 6).

For the writing center movement to grow and for it to make good on the social justice agenda that many writing center specialists embrace, we will need to challenge that limitation, and to find ways to re-think and re-imagine our pedagogies.¹⁵ Some in our community may not want to engage in this. The allure of the liberal arts narrative is very powerful, and some may fear that engaging with a less privileged narrative of higher education and with less privileged students will threaten the status of writing centers. But by not engaging with working class students on their own terms (and in institutions where they are in the majority), we risk contributing to the persistent inequality of the academic system.

In a larger sense, this analysis suggests that we need to radically expand our understanding of writing center advocacy from something we do inside our own institutions (advocating for funding, space, status, etc.) to something that we do in larger political contexts that are addressed to the system of higher education overall. Our professional community has a clear stake in higher education policy decisions at the state and federal level. If we want to advocate for writing centers and for students—including students who are not our own students—we must find ways to act collectively on these stakes. Again, there may be some in our professional community who will not want to engage in this way—it's partisan, political, and conflicted—but not acting means that the future of writing centers will be left to others to decide. Writing centers live in political spaces—in a stratified and competitive system of higher education, in a polarized national political climate—and in the end there are no neutral positions.

15 Two recent texts might serve as useful starting points for re-imagining writing center pedagogies: Brandt (2005) explores the kinds of professional writing required in the knowledge economy; Horner & Lu (2009) explore the challenges of creating "pragmatic" writing pedagogies for composition classrooms.

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