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Utah State University

“All Right Stop, Collaborate, and Listen”
A Writing Center’s role in Community Collaboration

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ENGL 4910

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Abstract

Writing centers become inextricable parts of the community that surrounds them. Community ties allow writing centers the chance to nurture a love for writing outside of the confines of a university classroom. This column aims to explore the ways in which writing center tutors have the ability to cultivate practices of writing through engaging in community collaboration. The Utah State Writing Center has created a community collaboration known as Helicon West. Helicon West is an event in which members from the University and community have a chance to listen to writing as well as share their own during open mic reading. This column utilizes Helicon West as a framework for understanding both why campus collaboration is critical for writing centers and how writing centers can implement collaboration. The first section of the column delves into the responsibility writing centers have to encourage writing practices. The section then gives several examples of the ways in which collaboration benefits writing centers such as making the writing process more approachable and helping students realize writing isn't solely academic. The other primary section of the piece centers around the ways in which writing centers can implement community collaboration. Collaboration may seem like a daunting task; however, writing center tutors are bestowed with a plethora of resources from peers, colleagues, the university, and the community. The example of the origin and purpose of Helicon West is implemented to give a concrete example of effective collaboration. Overall community collaborations are a writing centers chance to expand a love for writing from a university to an entire community.

“All Right Stop, Collaborate and Listen”: Introducing Collaboration into Writing Centers

On Valentines evening, I found myself seated in the Logan city library sipping on a cup of decaf coffee rather than whisked away on a romantic rendezvous. That night, the library was hosting Helicon West--- an open mic night for public readings of original work. For the previous month or so, I had been helping out at Helicon West as part of my role in the writing center and had loved hearing the creative work of the community. However, the reading that took place on that Valentines evening would significantly change my outlook on the importance of Helicon West and my role in the writing center.

On that particular evening, I had convinced a close friend of mine to bring some original poetry to read, and she had agreed on the condition I read something as well. That rash agreement was how I found myself shaking behind a podium in front of a room full of people, reading a poem I'd hastily written. However, as I shared my poem, I was met with nothing short of an outpouring of love from the attendees of Helicon West.

After I had finished reading, my friend stood to read her poems. Her first two poems were read smoothly, yet when she began sharing her third poem things took a turn. As she read, her tiny frame shook, and her voice broke with emotion as she poured her soul in a few short stanzas. Tears streamed down her face as she bared her heart to a room full of strangers. Her reading humbled me as I was able to see firsthand the freedom and strength that sharing writing brings. Helicon West had allowed my friend to feel she had a voice and a safe space to share it. My friend is by no means a published poet, in fact she's a bio-chemical engineering major who has confessed she hates to write. Yet, Helicon West provided her with an opportunity to share writing in a way that was meaningful to her.

One of my primary goals in the writing center is to help students foster a better relationship with their writing. However, in a twenty minute session the idea of encouraging lifelong writing practices can seem daunting at best. Events such as Helicon West allow us as tutors to extend the work we do in our sessions into the community; it validates writing as something not solely dedicated to classrooms but rather something that expresses humanity. This column will employ Helicon West as a framework for understanding how campus collaborations benefit writers within the writing center and the community at large, and discuss how writing center tutors can help implement these programs.

Why is Collaboration Critical?

As tutors we implicitly agree to take on a sense of responsibility the moment we decide to join a writing center staff. We are bestowed with the crucial responsibility of promoting writing and the processes encompassed with it to our students and communities. The work we do exclusively in a tutoring session helps provide foundational support, but we have the resources and abilities to do even more. Campus collaborations allow us as tutors to transcend only helping the students who choose to visit the writing center, and instead encourage individuals from a myriad of backgrounds to engage in writing practices. Outside of our responsibility to provide students with writing experiences, the benefits derived from collaborating clearly make it a worthwhile endeavor.

One of the primary advantages of collaboration is the ability for students to engage in aspects of the writing process outside of strictly-academic settings. For example, Helicon West is held in the community library and allows community members to have a platform to share their writing uncensored. This structure gives writers a sense of limitless creativity as they have the

ability to share their voice without fear of judgment. Writers are thus able to see themselves as authentic creators outside of a classroom, while engaging with a real audience.

Engaging in writing practices outside of strictly academic settings can also foster an environment in which students feel more comfortable writing. Students can oftentimes be slightly intimidated by a one on one tutoring session. Campus collaboration allows tutors the opportunity to create an environment that may seem a bit less daunting to students. As tutors we aim to encourage students to see themselves as writers, rather than students who write, and collaborative programs allow us to achieve that goal.

Another benefit collaborative efforts bestow, is a sense of connection between the university and community. When students begin interacting with the community, it fosters a symbiotic relationship that improves the writers' ability as well as community growth. In a journal titled "The national Writing Project: Creating a Professional Learning Community That Supports the Teaching of Writing" Jeffery Kaplan argues "learning occurs within social contexts ... group dynamics encourage interaction and reflection, resulting in a sum greater than its whole. The more individuals collaborate and cooperate in their learning the more they will benefit from their mutual presence and engaged participation" (338). As tutors we hope to promote the learning of writing, and as Kaplan argues the best way to do so is through social contexts within our communities. Oftentimes universities and communities are thought of as two separate identities. However, community outreach programs promote the interaction and integration of student learning into the community. As a byproduct of this integration, when students graduate and move on to their various occupations, they have already built foundations of community and can better bridge the gap between university and community

How Do Writing Centers Create These Programs?

To better understand how these collaborations come to be, we as tutors can look at the origins of Helicon West. Helicon West was created in 2005 by Star Coulbrooke and Michael Sowder, two faculty members of Utah State University. The event originally began on campus but was moved to a local coffee shop within the community. After moving to a few different locations, Helicon West ultimately ended up being held at the local Logan City Library. Star and Michael were passionate about creating a space for open readings and through their dedication promoted literature and writing within the community (Coulbrooke). As can be seen with the example of Helicon West, the creation of these programs starts with nothing more than an idea. However, when an idea is combined with a high degree of passion and drive it evolves into something that grows the entire community.

The first step of creating community collaborations is to then begin working on an idea. Writing Center tutors who hope to engage in community collaboration programs must evaluate their community needs and aspects of writing they are passionate about. Once that direction is established, tutors must reach out into the community. Helicon West was created by one of the directors of the writing center; however, as a tutors ourselves we have access to the resources to engage in collaborating as well. Communities offer diverse opportunities for event locations such as libraries and parks. Communities are also made up of writers and readers that can be excellent resources as well.

It can seem a bit daunting to reach out into the community, but writing centers offer peer support that make the task a bit easier. As writing center tutors we can speak to our directors, professors, and other tutors to help make phone calls, send emails, and make visits. Don't forget that working within a writing center also gives a tutor access to individuals with advanced

writing skills. These individuals can provide help with writing proposals for funding, letters to rally support, and flyers to promote events. Once an individual has secured proper support, the process becomes a matter of organization with a dash of trial and error. Establishing community collaborations will take time and may not be easy, but with the support offered within writing centers and communities, they are attainable.

So What?

When I was initially introduced to Helicon West, I was excited to participate, yet failed to understand just how great of an impact it has on all involved. In my short time at Helicon West, I have been able to see love of writing nurtured, as the University and community come together to create a safe place to share. This ability to nurture love for writing is at the heart of every writing center, and campus collaborations allow for writing center tutors to share that love on a larger scale. Outside of Helicon West, the Utah State Writing Center has created outreach programs including art collaborations, TEA Time to help ELL Students, the Cache Valley Community Writing Center, and a science writing center. Each of these collaborations aims to help connect the community with the primary writing center and model the desperate need for collaboration. These models represent the many avenues writing center tutors have, it just becomes a matter of finding what works best for them. As writing center tutors it may be daunting to reach out; however, we have the resources and responsibility to share our passion for writing.

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