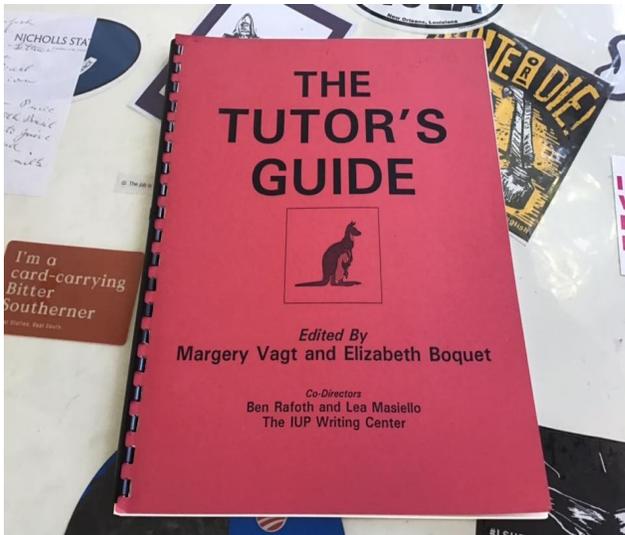


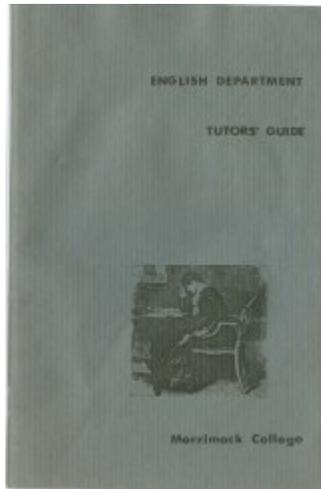
## Season of the Witch: Northeast Writing Center Stories

### Back Home in a Witch City Writing Center

After a twenty-year journey in the world of academic administration, following two decades at Merrimack College as Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center, I didn't know I'd have the opportunity to do more writing center work. Then, not long ago, Beth Boquet posted on social media an image of the tutor's guide she co-edited with Margery Vagt in 1992.



It made me remember a similar guide Judith Stanford and I prepared for Merrimack's



writing tutors in 1981. When there was an opportunity to take a position as Writing Center Coordinator at Salem State University (SSU), I thought about histories of several Northeast writing center communities of practice that may have been forgotten. Since accepting that position in 2019, I have done some research which has led to many questions and a few conclusions. And it has given me the opportunity to work with extraordinary undergraduate and graduate writing tutors who take unsure writers over thresholds to become more confident writers. So, as literary Salem is always preparing for the season of the witch, I am compelled to tell some writing center stories.

**Who is Frank Devlin?**

A framed photograph of Frank Devlin hangs in the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center. In 1979, Devlin began the Writing Center at SSU, that his colleagues Nancy Lusignan Schultz, Bonnie Asselin, and Donnalee Rubin helped him to develop. He participated in the 1979 NEH/Iowa Institute on Writing. Lou Kelly served as an Institute mentor for those working in writing centers, so Frank Devlin would have worked with her at Iowa. Devlin believed that the Writing Center should be for advanced writers, not just for those who require developmental assistance. Thus, perhaps inspired by Kelly, he altered the Center's community of practice by instituting a Practicum for future tutors, updating it with new ideas and applications brought forward by the writing center community.

### **Why does this story matter?**

Data and artifacts suggest similarities in the development of the Connors Writing Center at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) and the Merrimack College Writing Center. These centers started at about the same time, 1980, or soon afterward, and have been administered by writing center workers who, together, established local affiliates, such as the New England Writing Centers Association (NEWCA, 1985), which is now the Northeast Writing Centers Association, and later the Boston Rhetoric and Writing Network (BRAWN, 2011). In addition to geography, they were related by faculty—some of whom, like me, went from one of these institutions to another. They shared similar views on writing centers and writing, including hosting conferences, establishing writing intensive curriculums and vertical writing programs, employing writing fellows and course-embedded tutors as well as tutoring graduate students and offering in-person and remote resources to faculty, librarians, and staff.

I have uncovered and digitized manuscripts of conference programs and proceedings as well as published videos and articles that speak to some of the core issues still being addressed by the writing center community. This link to NEWCA materials, for instance, illustrates the progressive thinking—even early on—of writing center workers in the Northeast:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/s5p614kn1vllp9m/AAD7E8sQy80eyLSSv6CEJyyKa?dl=0>

Current researchers in the field will note important questions about the topics evident in these artifacts, eventually addressing them nationally and internationally.

It may be that the cross-institutional patterns, say, in administrative structure and leadership, can bring about future best practices, not just at these Northeast institutions, but in the larger writing center community. Administration has vexed the Northeast, causing pain to good writing center workers. There could be lessons in recent administrative moves that might help others avoid fraught situations. I am also interested in the next steps for these centers at this inflection moment societally. How will these centers develop to be more inclusive, to shun ableism, and to include directors and staff reflective of the student body's diversity?

### **What story does the research tell?**

Having access to SSU's archives has helped me to become aware of Devlin's place in writing center history. When I visited the Connors Writing Center at UNH, I was impressed with what the Center offered undergraduate and graduate writers. The archives there show how the Connors Writing Center flourished under Robert J. (Bob) Connors, reaching out to the University's many constituencies, including graduate students. I then returned to Merrimack's Writing Center. I was similarly impressed, especially in finding

out how it employed Deborah Burns's Writing Fellows program as a surrogate Business Writing Center to augment the peer tutoring still offered to all writers.

These initiatives exacted costs. As the Connors Writing Center got bigger, its resources shrank, causing Connors himself to resign in frustration his position as Director: "conditions for the Center," he said "have become marginal" (letter). While Merrimack's Center and Writing Fellows program gained national notoriety, its administration placed the Center under the umbrella of student success—a move that disenfranchised Burns and Maxwell Award co-recipient, Kathleen Shine Cain. And while Devlin and his colleagues tried to enhance the operations of the SSU Writing Center, fiscal constraints led to transitory leadership.

### **What stories do the artifacts tell?**

In 1980, Judith Stanford and I began the tutoring program at Merrimack that, with the help of Cain, Michael Rossi, and (later) Kathryn Nielsen, became the Writing Center. Merrimack was struggling to break away from a current-traditional approach to writing: a horizontal, two-course, first-year sequence with an emphasis on the modes of discourse and grammatical correctness. That "transgressive" tutoring guide, along with tutor preparation, was aimed at helping novice writers figure out how to meet the rigid demands of Standard American English. Nevertheless, the process movement was gaining momentum, so Cain, Rossi, and I began to operationalize a generalist peer tutoring program that dealt with the many issues writing centers confronted—from the budget to race and identity. We constructed a professional development program, enhancing the tutoring with approaches aligned with the best practices in writing and rhetoric.

Merrimack joined with Phillips Academy in nearby Andover, Massachusetts, and the Bread Loaf School of English in Ripton, Vermont, to work with students in the Lawrence Public Schools. This program gave Merrimack writing tutors the opportunity to collaborate with Lawrence students on social justice issues in the city, like cleaning up the environment, instilling in them a sense of pride for their environmental awareness and writing accomplishment—augmented by the progressive practices Bread Loaf provided. The Andover/Merrimack College/Bread Loaf Writing Workshops were a manifestation of Kenneth Bruffee’s necessary and noble tutoring plan implemented at Brooklyn College after open admissions. Both endeavors gave students access to worlds they had not imagined entering—through working and writing together.

When Burns came to Merrimack, she altered the Writing Center’s community of practice in a profound way, adding a Writing Fellows component that extended tutoring across the disciplines. By the time I left Merrimack to enter academic administration, even though Merrimack had not succeeded in fully implementing a Writing Intensive Curriculum or a Vertical Writing Program, Burns’s Writing Fellows firmly planted the seed for such a development that is currently being nurtured.

As noted, the Writing Center at SSU changed after Devlin’s participation in the NEH/Iowa Institute and then again upon publication of his 1996 *Writing Center Journal* article, “The Writing Center and the Good Writer.” Devlin altered the Center’s community of practice, encouraging professors to use the Center as a studio—a laboratory, to borrow Neal Lerner’s term—where writers could work with tutors on developing texts. In this way, the professor, the coordinators, the tutors, and the students aligned the assignments and the ways to meet the expectations for those assignments. It

was natural, then, for the Writing Center to support the University's change to writing intensive general education requirements. When Tanya Rodrigue became Coordinator of the Writing Intensive Curriculum, along with then-Writing Center Coordinator, Rebecca Hallman Martini, the University implemented the Course Embedded Tutoring Program. Rodrigue assured contemporary rhetorical best practice across the curriculum augmented with effective in-course tutoring provided by Writing Center tutors. The tutoring provided to the University's writers has even moved into the community where Writing Center tutors work one-on-one with non-traditional, early access Salem High School students enrolled in credit-bearing introductory University courses. The Mary G. Walsh Writing Center is establishing a "'literal center' for writing [in the community and] across the university that is inclusive not only of student writers but also of faculty and administrators . . ." (Pemberton 42-3).

At the UNH, teaching writing meant using a conference method to provide helpful interventions for developing writers. Writing centers learned from the UNH conference method. Conferencing offered a way to provide constructive responses during the writing process, since such interventions were not intimidating, like a "Mack Truck," but helpful in steering the writer through the turbulent waters of the writing process, like an "expert canoeist" (Newkirk 325). Many of the UNH conferencing strategies have been used in perfecting tutor preparation programs.

UNH also hosted major conferences on writing featuring those who helped build the field of writing and rhetoric. Later UNH rhetoricians and writing center workers developed BRAWN. Involvement in the BRAWN network undoubtedly helped the

Connors Writing Center provide expert appointment-based tutoring, online tutoring, tutoring for graduate students, and OWL resources for writers and teachers of writing.

**What else might these stories mean?**

While in academic administration, all of my decision-making was rooted in a writing-centered, social justice ideology. For example, with Lerner's help, I empowered faculty at Southern Vermont College (SVC) to build a general education 4X4 curriculum undergirded by a writing-centered laboratory learning pedagogy. The College added a Course Apprenticeship Program, which was really an embedded tutor program, and even showed its community partner, Lincoln High School in Yonkers, New York, how to implement a similar practice while providing the graduates rapid admission into SVC upon graduation.

At the last stop of my administrative journey, D'Youville College, I was encouraged by the president and VPAA to help build an Associate in Arts degree for new Americans. To construct community and sustain student persistence and progress, the new program employed the principles of peer tutoring and collaborative learning, just as Bruffee did years ago at Brooklyn College. Not only did Bruffee recognize that open admissions meant many first-generation and under-represented students entered the institution without preparation, importantly, he saw them as resources who could help one another to persist and progress. I recalled that history when constructing the program for new Americans. I am pleased that the degree has New York State Education Department (NYSED) approval, which is helping scores of new Americans to enter Buffalo's social, cultural, intellectual, and economic communities.

I couldn't have participated in developing that program at D'Youville without the experience of forming Merrimack's partnership with Phillips Academy to establish the Andover/Merrimack College/Bread Loaf Writing Workshop. I am now involved with University and community partners in extending SSU's Early Access Program <sup>1</sup>. Like the Andover/Merrimack College/Bread Loaf program, the Early Access program is a social justice writing center initiative to provide under-represented students access to higher education by inspiring a love of writing and the writing process. Additionally, it has led to the development of a writing center at SHS, its tutors able to participate in SSU's Practicum and thus learning how to tutor their high school peers.

### **What are the unfinished stories?**

The intersections among these three institutions are noteworthy: the graduate programs at SSU and UNH produced talented individuals who went on to work in writing centers. The work that UNH, SSU, and Merrimack College is encouraging in metagenres (empirical inquiry, problem solving, research from sources, performance) and multimodal writing (in new media) as well as in conceptual and empirical research is transforming the communities of practice beyond the humanistic, qualitative, alphabetic researched paper. We are learning from one another about how to manage confidentiality better and to partner with our library colleagues. <sup>2</sup> The institutions have variations of in-course tutoring, from Merrimack's Writing Fellows to SSU's course-embedded tutors. All are reconsidering the relationship that must exist among writing across the curriculum programs, writing centers, and graduate students.

None of the institutions got the administrative structure exactly right, which caused pain: Connors resigned in frustration, Cain was not going to be renewed so she

decided to retire, Burns had to move from English to Communication, and SSU encounters opposition to its Coordinator holding faculty status.<sup>3</sup> Identity, race, and ableism remain challenges to the administration of these centers. To my knowledge, neither a person of color nor a member of the LGBTQIA community has directed these writing centers. The institutions also have to do better to encourage disabled leaders.

Writing centers like those at Merrimack College, Salem State University, and the University of New Hampshire exist to show writers how to negotiate a pedagogy of despair. The writing center model offers a pedagogy of hope. Writing center workers give the gift of community within the writing center, throughout the institution, and in the community. I am committed to that story for all the seasons at Salem State University by teaching the Writing Center Practicum, mentoring research projects, and helping the field advance progressive and transformative leadership.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Forten Scholars was the original name for the program, taken from Charlotte Forten, class of 1856, who was Salem State's first African American graduate. Forten was an abolitionist, a women's rights activist, an educator, an author, and a translator.

<sup>2</sup> See Molly Parsons, Elizabeth Dolinger, and Katherine E. Tirabassi, "Good to Know?: Confidentiality and Privacy in Writing Centers and Libraries," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Vol. 45, No. 9-10 (May/June, 2021), pp. 10-17.

<sup>3</sup> Rivier University's Writing Center in Nashua, New Hampshire, faced multiple cutbacks and staffing issues after longtime Director, Bonnie Sunstein, took a position at the University of Iowa upon earning the Ph.D. from the University of New Hampshire.

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