Landmark Essays
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Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge James J. Murphy, for his belief in this project and his kind support during its completion.

Eric Hobson, Director of Writing Programs at the St. Louis College of Pharmacy, and Byron Stay, Chair of the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at Mount St. Mary’s College, the best of colleagues and friends, have encouraged our efforts from the very beginning.

Our colleagues in the William L. Adams Writing Center at Texas Christian University—Mary Nell Kivikko, Mary Lane, Margaret-Rose Marek, and Steve Sherwood—made our work possible through their generous gifts of time and guidance.

Our friends and family—Frida Blumenberg, Amy Whitten, and Curtis and Adnie Law—believed in us and our work. Their kindness, affection, and willingness to listen are appreciated.
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Introduction

Landmark Essays on Writing Centers
by Christina Murphy and Joe Law

This collection of landmark essays introduces the reader to the ideas that have shaped writing center theory and practice. These essays have been selected not only for the insight they offer into issues but also for their contributions to writing center scholarship. They provide both a history and an examination of the philosophies, praxis, and politics that have defined writing centers as an emerging field. This volume demonstrates the ways a clearer profile of the discipline has emerged from the research and reflection of writers like those represented here. Ultimately, these essays help to chart the legitimation of writing centers. As former National Writing Centers Association President Jeanne Simpson has stated, “The evidence indicates that we have achieved a kind of legitimacy: writing centers have become academically respectable programs.”

Historical Perspectives

One of the misperceptions the essays correct is the belief, common among academicians, that writing centers sprang up within the past two decades. In actuality, writing centers have been part of American higher education since the 1930s and have undergone numerous redefinitions in responding to (and shaping) the dominant paradigms of writing instruction in the twentieth century—as Muriel Harris’ overview indicates. Lou Kelly’s account of her experiences in one of these early writing centers outlines some of these transformations in a specific context. As her essay reveals, writing centers emerged while the conservative model for education was at its high point. In writing instruction, this model focused on the text as a “product” that could be modified to be brought into accord with the accepted standards and conventions of edited prose. Robert H. Moore’s essay typifies this conservative attitude, which views the writing center exclusively as a site for diagnosing and removing language deficiencies. As a result, writing centers very quickly became identified as “the grammar and drill center, the fix-it shop, the first aid station” (North).

This identification with “fix-it-shops” created several problems, as Peter Carino points out in his study of the metaphors with which writing centers have been defined. First, the work of the writing center was separated from the work of the classroom. Classrooms instructed; writing centers remediated. Second, the focus on remediation tended to push writing centers to the margins of the academy as supplemental—essentially peripheral and expendable—instruction. Thus, the first stage of writing center history was
characterized both by this marginalization and by efforts to attain legitimacy within the academy. The essays of Gary A. Olson and Evelyn Ashton-Jones, Judith Summerfield, and Jeanne Simpson represent efforts to obtain a higher status for writing centers and writing center professionals within the academy.

Theoretical Foundations

The second stage of writing center history was marked by a paradigm shift from a conservative model of writing instruction to a liberal or expressivist one. The expressivist model dominated writing instruction (and therefore writing centers) from the 1970s through the 1980s. Here the emphasis moved from the text to the writer—specifically, to the writer's intellectual and creative processes involved in generating texts. Stephen M. North's essay is considered both a manifesto of expressivism and the herald of a new understanding of the writing center. In North's view of writing center practice, "... the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form, it goes like this: Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing."

Within the expressivist paradigm, writers worked as individuals and pursued solitary aims. Little attention was paid to the way society and culture influenced them. With the emergence of social constructionism in the late 1980s, the romantic vision of the individual writer was replaced by one in which knowledge emerged from consensus within discourse communities. Meaning was no longer an absolute truth discovered in solitude but a construct negotiated by like-minded peers. A new pedagogy emerged, one that emphasized collaborative learning and writing and was highly attuned to sociocultural influences—particularly the social dimensions of language, knowledge, and writing. Social constructionists advocate the extensive use of peer group critiquing to reflect the workings of discourse communities and to minimize the role of the tutor as an authority figure. Collaboration and collaborative learning play a central role in social constructionist pedagogy, as individuals learn to negotiate meanings and construct knowledge.

This progression in writing center ideology from conservative, to liberal, to liberatory philosophies is traced in the essay by Christina Murphy. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford develop the liberatory aspects of writing center pedagogy by focusing on the social and historical mechanisms by which knowledge is created and meaning is communicated by writers. Marilyn Cooper emphasizes a liberatory pedagogy of empowerment, arguing that writing centers have "the essential function of critiquing institutions and creating knowledge about writing."

As writing centers defined their standing within the academy, one of the most significant issues they faced was establishing a theoretical basis for tutoring—particularly peer tutoring. Throughout most of the modern era, peer tutoring has been central to writing center pedagogy. As Kenneth A. Bruffee states, "peer tutoring was a type of collaborative learning. It did not seem to change what people learned but, rather, the social context in which they learned it." Even though peer tutoring redefined the context and process of
students’ learning experiences, the principles and effects of peer tutoring went unexamined by scholars for decades. As Bruffee notes, “peer tutoring harnessed the educative force of peer influence that had been—and largely still is—ignored and hence wasted by traditional forms of education.”

Alice M. Gillam presents a way of approaching the conflicting goals often set for writing center tutors—“normalizing” the writing of students to fit with institutional expectations and encouraging free self-expression. Drawing upon the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, she argues that these conflicting views of writing are symptomatic of two opposing forces inherent in language: centripetal forces that “centralize, unify, and stabilize language” and centrifugal forces that “perpetually destabilize language through multiple meanings, variable contexts, and the free play of dialects.” To deal with these situations, Gillam recommends that tutors adopt Bakhtin’s concepts of *addressivity* and *answerability*, concepts that raise productively complex issues of audience and ethics.

**Defining Praxis**

Whereas the essays in the previous section present theoretical perspectives, those in this section explore ways such assumptions are played out in the day-to-day activities of writing centers—administration, assessment, professionalization, self-definition, and pedagogy. The essayists here recognize the impossibility of providing a single framework for understanding the writing center’s purpose, function, and significance. Since institutional demands and settings differ, so do administrative philosophies and designs. Jeanne Simpson, Steve Braye, and Beth Boquet examine how perceptions of the writing center’s marginality affect the fulfillment of its mission. They raise a question central to writing center administration: “How do we walk that tightrope between our own goals, often contrary to the institution, and the goals of our schools, which we must serve in some way in order to have any effectiveness or power?” They argue that change often can be made more readily from a position outside traditional boundaries and question how much of this flexibility will be retained if writing centers seek institutional status.

Muriel Harris applies concepts of collaborative learning to writing center administration, stressing the need for flexibility by examining several scenarios from different perspectives. Dave Healy explores still another relationship—that between the writing center and classroom. Rather than arguing that both sites of writing instruction are essentially the same, Healy contends that distinctions between them are necessary and valuable. While upholding the merit of classroom instruction, Healy maintains that “... tutors and writing centers provide an alternative to the authority of teachers and classrooms”; in addition, “that alternative is important as a catalyst to students’ developing sense of independence and their own authority.” Similarly, Ray Wallace and Richard Leahy investigate the writing center’s relationship to classroom instruction in writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-to-learn programs.

While all these essayists debate the institutional standing of writing cen-
ters and writing center practice, their discussions demonstrate ways in which writing centers provide a practical arena for testing theoretical assumptions about education. In addition, the range of these debates indicates the varied and changing philosophies that inform writing center praxis. One practice that has come under particular scrutiny is peer tutoring. Harvey Kail and John Trimbur describe several models for peer tutoring, delineating ways these models fit into institutional structures. In a multicultural narrative, Anne DiPardo contextualizes the political implications of peer tutoring. DiPardo’s analysis leads her to conclude that all individuals “negotiate among multiple identities, moving between public and private selves, living in a present shadowed by the past, encountering periods in which time and circumstance converge to realign or even restructure our images of who we are.” Consequently, “as increasing numbers of non-Anglo students pass through the doors of our writing centers, such knowledge of our own shape-shifting can help us begin—if only begin—to understand the social and linguistic challenges which inform their struggles with writing.” Meg Woolbright, too, advocates a reconceptualization of the tutor’s role. Approaching writing center tutorials from a feminist perspective, Woolbright contrasts the collaborative learning of writing center tutorials with traditional classroom pedagogy, emphasizing the connections of the former to feminist thought: “Both feminist and writing center commentators advocate teaching methods that are non-hierarchical, cooperative, interactive ventures between students and tutors talking about issues grounded in the students’ own experience. They are, above all, conversations between equals in which knowledge is constructed, not transmitted.” Woolbright’s analysis of an individual tutorial, though, demonstrates how tenuous a feminist/collaborative approach must remain in the patriarchal context of the modern educational system.

The Idea of a Writing Center: Future Directions

The essays in this volume chart the emergence of writing centers and the growing recognition of their contributions, roles, and importance. As a nascent discipline, writing centers reflect the concerns with marginality and with finding a respected place in the academy that characterize any new field of academic inquiry, practice, and research. Concomitantly, professionals in these fields seek standing within the academy and a way of defining and validating their contributions to the educational process. Reflecting upon these goals in terms of writing center history reveals the development of an alternative pedagogy—one that might seem radical but that has its roots in the philosophies of Socrates and Aristotle. The “radical” dimensions of writing center pedagogy legitimately shift the focus of the instructional process back to the individual learner. That learner’s text, creative processes, and socio-historical background are addressed and responded to in writing center tutorials. While the focus of attention might shift from text, to writer, to social context, writing center pedagogy continues to be committed to the goal of assisting writers as individuals who bring particular talents, histories, and imperatives to the tutorial.
As writing centers—and the scholarship that defines their efforts—move into the next century, the concerns of the original writing center movement are not lost, only modified by changing actualities. Writing center professionals still seek to explain and validate their work; they still battle to avoid marginalization and the misapplication of writing center resources to noncompelling ends; they still respond to and challenge paradigms of writing instruction and interpretations of educational objectives and aims.

The emphases have changed, though, from narratives of a fledgling discipline to rigorous, scholarly investigations of that discipline’s contributions to the knowledge structures of the academy. As writing centers advance toward the next century, their scholarship and practice will continue to respond to the ways in which knowledge is created, assessed, and implemented within a culture. Certainly, too, scholarship and practice will critique and determine the ways writing centers can contribute to this process. Consequently, both enterprises will emphasize the writing center’s role within society rather than solely its place within the academy. As recent writing center scholarship indicates, the focus of inquiry is already shifting from practitioner lore to a broader understanding of the social influences upon knowledge production within a culture. Contemporary writing center theorists look to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary investigations to interpret the work they do and to clarify their aims to the academy at large. Their work employs a variety of philosophical perspectives, ranging from sociolinguistics to psychoanalytic theory, to show the complex nature and potential of writing center interactions. The idea of a writing center has now become the multidimensional realities of the writing center within the academy and within society as a whole. What the writing center’s role will be in future redefinitions of the educational process, how that role will be negotiated and evaluated, and how writing center professionals will shape educational values will constitute the future landmark directions and essays on writing center theory and practice.
Original Citations for Essays in This Collection


Part 1:

Historical Perspectives
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The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory
by Robert H. Moore

Writing clinics and writing laboratories are becoming increasingly popular among American universities and colleges as remedial agencies for removing students' deficiencies in composition. A recent survey of one hundred and twenty leading universities and colleges throughout the country was made at the time that a clinic was established at the University of Illinois, to determine the incidence, methods, and effectiveness of such agencies. It procured fifty-five replies, forty-nine of them indicating in some detail the nature of the remedial measures being pursued. Of these forty-nine institutions, twenty-four now make use of writing clinics or laboratories of one sort or another, and eleven others are contemplating their establishment. In other words, 70 per cent of the colleges indicating the nature of their remedial work either now use or are considering using the clinic or laboratory in the solving of students' writing difficulties. And, even if it be assumed that none of the other seventy-five institutions are interested in the device, there remain at least 20 per cent of the colleges selected for the survey which are using the method, and an additional 10 per cent considering its adoption.

The survey was primarily concerned with the clinic and the laboratory rather than with remedial measures in general, so that it is not always possible to determine from the data assembled how much of the remedial burden in a given college is shared with such other devices as the precollege-level course, the segregating of poorly prepared freshmen into special sections of the regular elementary composition course, the upper-class remedial course, the specialized course in technical writing, the graduation proficiency examination, or individual tutoring. The University of Illinois, for example, uses the clinic to supplement all the above devices except the segregation of freshmen into special sections of the regular course. Yet it can be said that the two devices are sufficiently successful to enable thirteen universities to depend on the clinic or the laboratory for all remedial work; and at least one, the University of Miami, uses the laboratory method exclusively in its elementary composition program.


'Remedial reading, a related problem, is most often handled by a separate agency, frequently under the guidance of trained psychologists rather than of English teachers.
The techniques of the clinic and of the laboratory are, of course, far more widespread than are formally established agencies. The clinic is primarily concerned with the diagnosis of the individual student's writing difficulties and the suggestion of remedial measures that might profitably be pursued. Such diagnosis and prescription are an early concern, as well, of the class instructor in conference, the counselor in a university tutoring bureau, the individually procured tutor, and the instructor in the laboratory. The laboratory, in turn, is primarily concerned with the direct and continuing supervision of the remedial efforts of the individual student, and such supervision, in greater or less degree, must also be given by the class instructor, the tutor, and the clinician. The advantages of the formally established agency, then, lie less in its possession of esoteric methods than in its ready accessibility, its concentration on the removal of specific deficiencies, and its development of instructors particularly skilled in remedial procedures.

As the methods of the clinic and the laboratory overlap, so does the terminology. As the names imply, the clinic is chiefly concerned with suggesting measures for self-help, the laboratory with work done directly under the guidance of an instructor; but in practice the terms are almost interchangeable, "laboratory" being the more common and the laboratory approach being more often used, particularly in those schools depending on such agencies for the bulk of their remedial efforts. For convenience in discussing operating procedures, however, I shall draw theoretical distinctions between the two, with the final reminder that only the initial emphasis on one approach or the other serves, in the last analysis, to distinguish the relationship between the individual student and the clinic or the laboratory to which he turns for help.

The writing clinic customarily supplements other remedial devices, such as the compulsory upper-class remedial course for students whose writing proficiency is deemed inadequate to meet standards prescribed for graduation. Consultation with the clinic, consequently, is likely to be voluntary and to spring from a student's own realization—often reinforced by a dean's or an instructor's comments—that his writing skill is less satisfactory than it should be and is handicapping him in the writing of examinations, term papers, and reports. Occasionally, compulsion is involved, most frequently through the device of withholding credit for a course in which writing deficiencies have been noted; but usually the clinic is an agency to which the student himself as an individual applies for help in removing a deficiency of which he is personally aware.

As a result, the problem of diagnosis is often not difficult. A preliminary interview may in itself disclose the basic weakness, particularly with upper-classmen or graduate students who have had a good deal of experience with college writing problems. If the problem is one of spelling or punctuation, for example, the student himself can easily identify it. More frequent, however, and more baffling to the student are weaknesses in the organization and development of papers or examination answers or the tendency to write vague, telescoped, or garbled sentences rather than concise and specific ones.
The student with such deficiencies usually knows only that his writing somehow does not say what he thinks it does. But, even with these more complex problems, the experience of the clinician can often enable him to uncover the basic difficulty through an interview alone.

If the preliminary interview does not expose the difficulty, various other means may be employed. If the student has suddenly been impelled to seek assistance because a returned examination or term paper was less successful than he had anticipated, he is likely to have brought the paper with him, particularly if his impulse has been reinforced by tart comments from his instructor. If he has not brought it with him at first, he usually has it at home, perhaps with several others like it, and can produce it for analysis. The most successful diagnosis, probably, is that which results from an analysis, with the student, of specimens of the writing that he has actually done in his classes. And, incidentally, the student can be made aware of the direct connection between writing deficiency and unsatisfactory grades and so takes the first remedial step in the midst of the process of diagnosis itself.

If specimens of his classroom writing are not available—if his consultation, for example, has sprung from a recommendation by a dean concerned with his general academic record—at least two other diagnostic measures may be used, neither wholly satisfactory. One is the analysis of a paper written for the purpose, the other is the interpretation of a diagnostic test or tests. The disadvantages of the first are threefold: it is difficult to find subjects not too remote from the classroom subjects, it is impossible to reproduce the classroom conditions and (a point to which I shall return) it is impossible for the student to write as he usually writes when he is not thinking primarily of the quality of his English; the writing which he produces to order for analysis, consequently, is not his normal writing, whether for better or for worse. The disadvantage of the diagnostic test lies in its basic artificiality: no test of which I am aware is more than indicative of probable deficiencies, so that reasonably certain diagnosis must still await analysis of actual writing, preferably that produced for a classroom situation.

Diagnosis having been made, by one or several of these means, the remedial measures to be followed must be outlined. The more intelligent and eager the student, of course, the easier it is to discover the difficulty in the first place and to determine means to enable him to remove it. The clinic is not, as a rule, concerned with the direct supervision of remedial efforts, with providing extensive tutoring; it is therefore most satisfactory as a supplement to a wider remedial program, since only the intelligent and eager student can be wholly successful in applying even the best self-help measures. Here, as elsewhere, the more resourceful the clinician is in suggesting new approaches to old problems, the more quickly does self-help become effective help. A student who is deficient in many ways may be urged, and in some institutions required, to enroll in remedial classes or to seek private tutoring. Where the clinic is a supplementary agency in a balanced remedial program, the students with numerous and glaring deficiencies will usually have been caught elsewhere in the remedial net. The students who consult the clinic are, as a result,
troubled by specific and limited weaknesses, and remedial efforts can be concentrated on those.

Students exhibiting weaknesses in the handling of purely mechanical problems can be referred to specialized study groups, if they are provided, or can be urged to secure private tutoring directed toward removing the specific deficiencies involved, or can be made aware of the existence of numerous specialized remedial texts dealing particularly with their problems. In the last connection it might be remarked that a single publisher provides a convenient, inexpensive, and, on the whole, admirable series of remedial pamphlets, of whose existence most students are completely unaware. In the handling of spelling problems, for example, the appropriate pamphlet in that series offers the best presentation with which I am familiar of the very complex procedures necessary for the removal of spelling difficulty. Spelling classes following the same procedures, however, are superior, since it requires intense ambition on the part of the student to persist in the work on his own. Frequently, of course, the clinician can himself supplement these formal aids with teaching devices suggested by his own experience and the circumstances arising during specific interviews and, wherever possible, will do so. Conscientious work by the student with such materials and periodic visits to the clinic for assistance and for checks on progress will usually result in the removal of the mechanical difficulty. It depends on how willing the student is to make the effort.

Problems in the organization and development of material are more complex but, with intelligent students, are more quickly removed. Frequently, little more is necessary than a demonstration of the technique of phrasing a thesis and constructing a scratch outline which permits winnowing and rearranging ideas. Practice at such preliminary planning of subject matter, with clinical analysis of the resulting writing (writing, preferably, which is directly related to his college courses) can do wonders for the student who somehow—usually because of youthful indifference—never realized that the same techniques, when they were presented in his elementary composition courses, would someday be of personal use to him.

Similar writing practice, with emphasis on specific diction, concise phrasing and the necessity for revisional rereading of what was actually written, not what was merely intended, can be of nearly equal assistance to the student who, in the haste of writing examinations or belated papers, produces vague, telescoped, or garbled sentences. It must, however, be pointed out that such writing often accompanies garbled information or habitually confused thinking. Psychological clinics can sometimes be called on for assistance in the latter event. The same psychological clinics are frequently equipped to assist in removing writing difficulties which stem from reading deficiencies or from complex personality disorders. They lie, properly, outside the province of the writing clinic.

The writing clinic works with the individual student. The writing labora-

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1 Only a few English clinics deal to any great extent with remedial reading problems.
tory on the other hand, is far more likely to work with the individual as a member of a group, usually a group with varying problems. It is more economical than the clinic, in that one instructor in a given hour can work with ten or twenty students where the clinician can scarcely work with more than four at most. Further, the laboratory can more successfully be used as the sole remedial agency, if the institution is willing to provide only one. It is less likely, however, to uncover individual difficulties as rapidly as the clinic does or to avoid wasting the student’s time on material that he does not need. And it adds the actual tutoring of students to the costs of the remedial program. Only by considering the remedial needs of a particular student body can a final choice be made between the two types of agency on grounds of economy.

Customarily, many or all of the students coming to the writing laboratory attend—often willingly, of course—under compulsion, as the result of failure in proficiency examinations or of faculty referral, the latter being frequently accompanied by the withholding of course credit pending the removal of deficiencies. Most laboratories, however, are also open to students voluntarily seeking assistance. With the laboratory, as with the clinic and all other remedial devices, satisfactory results are most readily secured when the student, whatever the means of his coming, is personally convinced of the desirability of improving his writing skill.

Initial diagnosis in the laboratory is more likely than in the clinic to depend upon available tests or on the student’s own analysis of his weaknesses. However, some laboratories do also use analysis by the instructor of specimens of the student’s writing—of term papers, examinations, or “themes” produced for the purpose. The most successful laboratories, like the clinics, attempt to individualize the work throughout, which, of course, increases the cost and the complexity of the program as it increases its effectiveness.

The remedial treatment used in the laboratory varies widely. Frequently, an entire group is put through the same review course, with roving instructors constantly available to answer questions, advise on organizational problems, and check on progress. Less often, particularly in laboratories to which students may come at any time and leave at will, personal files are kept to record the difficulties and progress of each student, and the instructor turns from each problem to the next as it arises. Least often of all, students with similar problems are segregated in small groups, or students may even be handled individually, particularly in the early stages. Both the last two types of treatment can readily concentrate instruction on specifically defined needs.

Following diagnosis of the student’s needs—and those needs are usually fairly clear cut and limited in kind—remedial measures are prescribed. Workbooks or handbooks are often used for preliminary review,3 the work

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3 Those who use workbooks, it might be remarked, are at least balanced by those who object to them violently.
with them being done in the laboratory, with the instructor available for consultation or, if the entire group is struggling with the same problem, for group explanation and discussion. As soon as the student convinces the instructor that the basic principles are clear, he is put to practicing the kind of writing with which he has trouble, whether he writes "themes" to assigned or self-suggested topics, expositions of subject matter drawn from his other courses, sample answers to examination questions, or the actual papers assigned in his other courses. During all this work the laboratory instructor and the laboratory dictionaries, handbooks, and other reference books are there for the student to consult when his own resources are unable to carry him further. As problems arise, the instructor makes use of all the teaching devices at his command to clarify the basic principles involved and to stimulate the student to apply them in his own practice. The laboratory is a highly successful remedial device for those students who are willing to make intelligent use of the assistance provided.

Most institutions employing the laboratory method send at least some of the students to it under compulsion. The machinery for releasing them from that compulsion is usually of one of two kinds: either a formal proficiency examination, set by the laboratory instructors in the laboratory or by a separate testing agency, must be passed, or the instructors must certify from the work the student has done that he has demonstrated that he has become capable of writing satisfactorily. (Only rarely, it might be remarked parenthetically, is the examination, if there is one, purely of the objective type.) Students who come to the laboratory voluntarily are, as a rule, allowed to stop coming whenever they themselves feel that they have attained a satisfactory degree of skill.

Except for students working in the laboratory as a regular, assigned part of their composition courses, credit is customarily not given for either laboratory or clinical work.

A very few universities charge the students fees—ranging from five dollars for two quarters to two dollars and a half an hour—for the service. Most of them offer the service without charge, accepting the handling of remedial composition problems as a necessary, if deplorable, part of the task of American colleges and universities. The expense of the agency is usually borne by the English department, perhaps on the ground that it will be blamed anyway—surely unjustly—for all student lapses in English in other courses throughout the university and that it might better protect itself by being able to point to the remedial agencies which it provides. Occasionally the expense is borne by the university itself, as an administrative rather than a teaching expense.

Clinic and laboratory staffs are likely to be self-made. Customarily they are experienced members of the English department who are particularly interested in remedial composition, though much of the direct tutoring in the laboratories is provided by graduate assistants, who are, of course, often themselves experienced instructors. Only rarely do members of the staff devote full time to the work, though the equivalent of several full-time in-
structors is provided for the larger laboratories.

As with all remedial measures, much of the enduring success of the work of the clinic or the laboratory depends on members of faculties outside the English department. The complaint is nationwide that members of other departments carp bitterly to their colleagues in English about the quality of student writing but can only with difficulty be persuaded to point out to the students themselves that clear and effective writing is important. Three universities report having tried the clinic or the laboratory and then having abandoned it because too few students came or were sent to it. The students’ indifference to the quality of their writing springs inevitably from faculty indifference to it, even though that faculty indifference may be more apparent than real. In his writing, as in much else, the student will do no more than he has to. I remarked earlier on the difference that often exists between the quality of the writing which a student can produce when he is aware that his writing skill is to be considered and that of his habitual writing. If instructors in non-English courses would insist on the best writing of which the student is capable, they would find—amid much student grumbling—that the English departments have builded better than is often supposed.

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*A fourth institution abandoned its clinic when the director moved from the English department to the school of education.*
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