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Author(s): Brian Gogan, Kelly Belanger, Ashley Patriarca and Megan O'Neill
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Brian Gogan, Kelly Belanger, Ashley Patriarca, Megan O'Neill

Research Centers as Change Agents: Reshaping Work in Rhetoric and Writing

This article defines research centers as associative enterprises for solving scholarly and societal problems that cannot be adequately addressed by individuals. We identify more than fifty research centers in rhetoric and writing, past and present, and argue that they function as change agents by emphasizing collaboration and conducting research focused on publics.

In his 2009 Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair's address, Charles Bazerman called upon our discipline to "assert ourselves as a professional force in the education and policy worlds," move out from under the shadow of English departments, examine other disciplinary models, and face "the fear of stepping up to power" (576, 577). In doing so, he challenged rhetoric and writing scholars to bring our research to wider public audiences and identified "a greater need for publicly persuasive evidence to warrant our practices" (579). Bazerman's address echoes remarks from Andrea Lunsford at the 2008 CCCC convention and from Doug Hesse at the 2008 Hofstra University "'Who Owns Writing?' Revisited" conference. These three addresses all urged scholars to alter the ethos of the independent professional, connect our interests, and turn research to a public focus.

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As members of a relatively new research center, the Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society (CSRS) at Virginia Tech, we heard these remarks and speculated that rhetoric and writing research centers may already be functioning as change agents, answering the calls issued by Bazerman, Lunsford, and Hesse.[1] Our experience developing the CSRS, now in its sixth year, underscores that research centers have rich potential to "reshape our research, teaching, and engagement activities as they foster new projects, knowledge, and publics" ("Call" 1). In our center, we work collaboratively to address a central research question: How do texts (digital, print, multimedia, visual, verbal) and related communication practices mediate knowledge and action in a variety of social and professional contexts? (Rude 176). These collaborations involve partnering with documentary filmmakers, a civil rights education museum, a theater company, and other centers (e.g., the Center for Innovation in Construction Safety and Health Research, the Engineering Communications Center, the Institute for Society, Culture and Environment, and the National Writing Project). Our partners provide access to the public audiences they reach every day, allowing our research to contribute new perspectives to a set of publics we may not otherwise reach. These partners and their publics, in turn, challenge our work processes, research questions, and assumptions. By necessity, research centers grow in fits and starts. They often rely on improvisation and must carefully distinguish between opportunities and distractions. Such undulations reflect the much-studied dynamics of organizational change processes and change projects (Peterson and Spencer 144; Kezar and Eckel 440–41). Groups of scholars who choose to participate in research centers must hone the competencies required of change agents: building teams, negotiating resources, resolving conflicts, setting goals, and staying attuned to constraints and possibilities in the center's larger contexts (Van de Ven and Poole 511–14; Recklies). The many challenges we have faced—from securing funding and focusing our mission to obtaining faculty and graduate student "buy-in"—typify change efforts that contest "deeply embedded patterns of organizational behavior and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs, or ideologies that members have about their organization or its work" (Peterson and Spencer 438).

To examine more fully our sense that research centers can be powerful change agents, we undertook a systematic process of reflecting on our own center work and studying past and present centers in the discipline.

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center work and studying past and present centers in the discipline. We initiated numerous conversations—including more than a dozen interviews with directors of other research centers[2]—and sifted through library stacks, policy documents, mission statements, and websites. We traced research center scholarship, examined research center self-representation, and analyzed the location of research center work in our discipline's history and language. Early on, when we needed to define what we meant by a *research center*, we turned to our home institution's description of a research center as an associative enterprise. Although research centers are known by many different metaphorical names (centers, laboratories, studios, institutes, collectives, and environments), our institution characterizes them all as organizations that allow "faculty and their associates from varied backgrounds and expertise to come together to solve common problems that could not otherwise be addressed" (Virginia). More precisely, our institution defines a center as "a group of faculty, staff, and students who declare a shared technical interest and pursue shared research, instruction, and outreach as an *enterprise* that involves common activities; these may include cooperative research and scholarship, shared resources, operations, facilities and personnel, and require appropriate oversight, reporting, and review" (Virginia, original emphasis). The term *technical* in this definition suggests that centers, at least at our university, typically focus on research in science or engineering; however, collaborative, publicly oriented research centers do exist in the humanities and in our own discipline.

By this definition, we found that more than fifty research centers devoted to studying writing, rhetoric, or professional communication have been established across the United States since the 1960s, with the work of the earliest centers emerging alongside the nascent discipline of rhetoric and writing during a time of rapid growth and professionalization. Despite the enormous energy that many of our discipline's most prolific scholars have devoted to research center work, the place of rhetoric and writing research centers in the discipline has remained largely unexamined. One contributing factor may be that, for many rhetoric and writing scholars, the term *writing research center* is nearly interchangeable with the term *writing center*. Writing centers—centers focused primarily on delivering tutorial support services—have a long history in the discipline as sites for research, even though research is not their primary

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mission. With writing centers at hundreds of institutions and numerous conferences and associations dedicated to their work, these centers are far more visible than writing research centers. Just as many writing centers function as research sites, the reverse is also true: some research centers are closely connected to writing centers. A few research centers share physical space with writing centers, while others offer writing tutorial or technology support services as a component of a larger center. For the purposes of this article, we not only distinguish *research centers* from *writing centers*, but we further distinguish research centers from research groups that graduate students form with their advisors around dissertation work, even though these groups share some functions of a more formalized center by apprenticing young scholars. Finally, we refrain from defining centers as ad hoc groups of faculty and students who collaborate on articles, books, reports, or grants although, again, these activities are often part of a research center's work.

Our research and reflection suggest that strategically developed research centers have already begun to transform research cultures, support collaboration, and bring rhetoric and writing research to public audiences. At the same time, we caution that center work needs to be more fully acknowledged in our discipline's discourse, lest it be forgotten. With such acknowledgments, new generations of scholars can more knowledgeably assess the complexities and professional benefits of affiliating with research centers, both for their own careers and for the discipline. In the four sections that follow, we (1) discuss how two early national research centers helped legitimize the discipline of rhetoric and writing and addressed society beyond academia; (2) examine the challenges and achievements of four contemporary centers; (3) identify how centers across the country strive to impact publics; and (4) propose ways to enhance the effectiveness and visibility of our collective work conducted through research centers.

Legitimizing Our Work: Two National Center Initiatives

Two federally funded national center initiatives, the first dating to the 1960s and the second to the 1980s, asserted legitimacy for the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies and paved the way for subsequent research center enterprises. The first initiative, which encompassed twenty-three Project English centers, motivated an unprecedented emphasis on writing research and teaching within English studies and sponsored the discipline's earliest empirical studies of writing. In the second initiative, affiliates of the National Center for the Study of

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Writing and Literacy adopted increasingly diverse research methodologies and sites of inquiry in order to make disciplinary claims about writing and writing pedagogy credible to academics, policymakers, and publics. Together, the two initiatives played pivotal roles in establishing a disciplinary research culture that includes both quantitative and qualitative research methods, initiates collaborations across disciplines, studies diverse groups of writers, and examines writing in both academic and nonacademic settings.

The launch of Project English Curriculum Study Centers has been recognized as one of several "authorizing moments in our disciplinary formation" (Strain 4). In 1961, motivated by federally funded, post-Sputnik reform projects in math and science, leaders of the MLA and NCTE recognized their disciplines "were falling farther and farther behind, becoming less valid, less effective" (Kitzhaber 135). These leaders sought to reposition English as a critical subject through, among other means, research and development centers that were funded at university sites for as many as five years. These centers, which constituted the "most distinctive feature of Project English," were intended to parallel centers in science and math and "engage in research, develop new curricula, field test new courses of study, then disseminate the results and so benefit English teaching throughout the nation" (United States 40; Kitzhaber 137).

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Project English relied in no small part upon rhetoric and writing, and the emerging discipline clearly benefitted from this reliance. To avoid any reservations that Congress might have had about funding work with novels or poems (reservations connected to a general "distrust of literature" and lingering suspicions of un-American activity), Sterling McMurrin, the commissioner of education for the Kennedy administration, established Project English by requesting and securing federal monies for "'reading and the written and oral usage of the English language'" (Kitzhaber 136–37). As Margaret Strain's "In Defense of a Nation: The National Defense Act, Project English, and the Origins of Empirical Research in Composition" explains, researchers who sought Project English funding needed to learn "the political and scientific discourse necessary to garner research funding" (16). Strain traces the impetus for Richard Brad-

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dock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer's groundbreaking *Research in Written Composition* and the NCTE journal *Research in the Teaching of English* to "the government's, perhaps unwitting, hand in the disciplinary formation of composition" through Project English research centers (18). Project English centers were also closely tied to the CCCC: four former chairs—Harold B. Allen, Albert R. Kitzhaber, Erwin R. Steinberg, and Wallace W. Douglas—led four different centers, and other composition scholars such as Richard Larson and George Hillocks Jr. led Project English institutes and demonstration centers.[3] These individuals saw an opportunity to legitimate the study of rhetoric and writing, forging a "New English" in a manner akin to the "New Science" and "New Math," through the work of research centers.[4] Researchers adopted empirical methods that resulted in foundational studies, such as D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke's writing process research that originated the term *prewriting* (Strain 532). Combining research and curriculum development, all the centers connected primary, secondary, and postsecondary educators in new ways, and at least two centers studied college writing courses. The relationship between Project English and the legitimization of rhetoric and writing may not have been a direct causal relationship; however, the "increased focus on composition within Project English," especially in high schools, may have moved CCCC members to more quickly professionalize college composition (Pender). In short, rhetoric and writing studies benefited from moves to professionalize English studies as a whole, and these moves emerged from United States Cold War–era concerns with national prominence and security.

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Retrospective accounts of Project English describe the impact of the centers' scholarship on rhetoric and writing, language, and literary studies; they also reveal challenges leaders faced as directors of our discipline's first national research centers. In the 1967 *CCC* article "The Government and English Teaching: A Retrospective View," Kitzhaber asserts that in large part because of the Project English Curriculum Study Centers "we do have a 'New English,' though [. . .] it may not at first look startlingly new" (141). The work of these centers is detailed in more than 250 publications,[5] and the scope of this work remains impressive. Uniting scholars in English, education, linguistics, and communication, the centers' research compelled university English departments "to take an unashamed interest in the preparation of teachers for the schools, to

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move English methods courses into the English Department, to update their language course and offer new courses in rhetoric, even to begin offering new doctorates in English-Education" (Kitzhaber 140). As a result, today's graduate programs in rhetoric, writing, and English education are indebted to connections established through Project English centers.

Despite this impact, the Project English centers faced many of the same challenges as today's rhetoric and writing research centers. Centers in the 1960s struggled to find distribution channels, obtain copyrights, and employ the professional editing and design that might have made their work compelling for public audiences. Most problematically, although Project English centers were run by respected scholars in English and in the newly developing discipline of composition, they could not attract scholars with the prominence of their counterparts in math and science (which in some cases included Nobel laureates). The English centers were also underfunded compared with those centers in other disciplines. In a 1964 attempt to encourage more English professors to propose Curriculum Study Centers, Erwin Steinberg appealed to professional "responsibility" and not scholarly recognition or compensation (52–53). Moreover, the experiences of Wallace Douglas, described by Deborah Holdstein in her 2009 *CCC* "Putting the Thanks Up Front," suggest that collaborative research center work in the late 1960s might well be categorized as a "lesson in disciplinary marginalization" (208). Perhaps with more prominent scholars involved and more substantial funding, the centers would have developed a larger mission that extended beyond the initial federal grants. As it was, when the government support expired, the centers closed (Kitzhaber 139). Yet even Kitzhaber, who acknowledges the problems with Project English centers, holds firm in his belief that "Project English, and especially the part of it concerned with the Curriculum Study Centers, has been a considerable success" (141).

More than a decade after the last Project English center ceased operation, a second federally funded, national center initiative began. In 1985, the Federal Office of Educational Research and Improvement issued a five-year grant for the National Center for the Study of Writing. The office issued a second award in 1990, establishing the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy (NCSWL). Both iterations of the NCSWL focused on the study and teaching of writing, including college composition. Like the Project English centers, the NCSWL drew upon the strengths of teachers of English at all levels and contributed to the growing legitimacy of rhetoric and writing as a discipline. As a center publication notes, "within the area of literacy, writing is a young

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area of study and indeed has been the forgotten of the three R's" (Flower et al. 3). During its ten-year existence, the NCSWL produced at least fifteen books, nineteen scholarly articles, six dissertations, forty-one occasional papers, seventy-five technical reports, and a handful of interviews, websites, brochures, and multimedia programs. These publications reflect the NCSWL's mission to develop a "cooperative, multidisciplinary perspective that will, in its turn, lead to the building of a social-cognitive theory of writing" (Freedman et al. 4). Not only did the NCSWL work to bridge the discipline's schisms between studies of process and product, context and cognition, but the center aimed to influence writing instruction at all levels by distributing new knowledge about writing and learning to homes, schools, universities, workplaces, and communities (61). To achieve this impact, the NCSWL tapped into networks of teachers, federal funding agencies, and policymakers, many established through the work of Project English and the National Writing Project (NWP), with which the NCSWL partnered.[6]

Where Project English centers stumbled, the NCSWL succeeded: the NCSWL was driven by a group of nationally prominent researchers, it was supported by more diversified funding, and its directors undertook a highly strategic mission. The NCSWL also benefited from the foothold that the rhetoric and writing discipline had established in various university colleges and departments by the mid-1980s. The NCSWL received strong support from the dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. The center's initial leadership team—Sarah Warshauer Freedman, Linda Flower, Richard Sterling, J. R. Hayes, and Glynda Hull—worked closely with a twelve-member national advisory board, a thirty-five-member publication review board, the Carnegie Corporation, and a cadre of Stanford University scholars, including Arthur Applebee, Shirley Brice Heath, and Judith Langer (Freedman et al.). The NCSWL also partnered with other organizations to further subsidize research projects. This support, whether a computer from Apple Computer, Inc., or an award from the Spencer Foundation, constitutes a type of support that Project English centers rarely garnered. It suggests that NCSWL was an enterprise committed to developing partnerships and maintaining a collaborative ethos. Indeed, the more than twenty researchers who worked for the NCSWL regularly co-authored articles, some of which report on the NCSWL's work with educators of all levels, national and international, and with other centers, including the Center for the Study of Reading and the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (Flower et al.; Freedman et al.).

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In the NCSWL, we find a group of scholars engaged in a national enterprise, asserting a professional force, and aiming for public persuasiveness. While the Project English centers primarily addressed an audience of educators, the NCSWL increasingly became aware of a wider range of audiences to whom they would need to address claims of legitimacy. In 1985, the NCSWL's research reached professional educators through classroom observations, conferences, and publications (Freedman, Dyson, and Flower, " Center" 5). By 1990, they were targeting "American educators, policy-makers, and the public" (Bouman 2). While the Project English centers asserted the legitimacy of a New English through a fairly cohesive claim that connected English education with national security, the NCSWL outlined a mission in which writing fulfills many diverse purposes—societal and individual, educational and economic. Here, the center's Occasional Paper 31, "Writing Matters," proves illustrative. Written in June 1992 and coauthored by Sara Warshauer Freedman at Berkeley and Fred Hechinger of the Carnegie Corporation, the paper is purposefully written in "non-technical language for a general audience" (National). Asserting the value of literate workers, the coauthors link academia and society: "The ability to communicate in spoken and written language is no academic luxury; it is the key to economic and social success in a competitive society" (Freedman and Hechinger 8). The NCSWL's work, its scholars declared, is not solely an academic exercise; it significantly benefits society.

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When the second five-year grant expired, the NCSWL ceased operation, declaring that the center "has completed its mission and no longer functions as an independent entity" (Flower 35). Even after its closure, the NCSWL remains a model of an enterprise that brought together an interdisciplinary group of researchers to investigate writing, and its work continues to guide the framing and conduct of our discipline's research. The NCSWL's 1994 Occasional Paper 36, "Moving Writing Research into the 21st Century," has been reprinted in the 1996 *Composition in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis and Change* and in the 2009 *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*. Authored by Freedman, this groundbreaking piece advocates for including the learning of diverse populations into our studies of writing. Rhetoric and writing scholars continue to value this inclusive stance, and the NCSWL's attention to research methodologies solidified the growing discipline's research culture. Although the

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impact of the NCSWL's publicly oriented work has been variously assessed,[7] we concur with the NCSWL's claim that "the Center's impact has been substantial" (Flower et al. 3).

"Stepping Up" Our Center Work: Visibility, Productivity, and Sustainability

Since the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy ceased operation in 1995, no coordinated efforts to establish national rhetoric and writing research centers have emerged. Instead, we find an array of more localized research centers established at individual institutions across the nation. Although often working in isolation from one another, scholars participating in these centers are enacting Bazerman's challenge to "step up" to power. "Stepping up" is a rhetorical act that provides rhetoric and writing research with more visibility, more resources, and potentially more intellectual rigor than might otherwise be possible. As one center director explains, "we're smarter as a group than [we are] as individuals."

When groups of scholars formally identify their research enterprise as a center, they assert themselves as change agents, becoming a more visible professional force to institutional administrators, potential funders, colleagues in the discipline, and publics. Often these assertions position rhetoric and writing research centers as unprecedented endeavors, even when similar enterprises have been undertaken by others in our discipline. For instance, the NCSWL's claim that "there was no significant federal investment in writing research until the Center was first funded" reflects a seeming unawareness of Project English centers (Flower et al. 3). This lack of connection among centers' work, exacerbated by the increased localization of research centers, detracts from our potential collective impact and individual effectiveness. As organizational change researchers Kezar and Eckel contend, campus change agents need to achieve perspective on their own organizations by working with a "network of institutions" (457). Unfortunately, the national profiles of our research centers are so low that one director, when developing a new research center, assumed he needed to turn outside of the discipline for effective research center models. He cited research groups focusing on cognitive psychology and activity

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theory, the Goals 2000 group that developed literacy standards for schools, and Glynda Hull's work at Berkeley, which he did not explicitly link to the NCSWL. Another center director enthusiastically described a vision of forging a center that would be "the first of our kind in our field," a center comparable to revenue-generating research centers in other disciplines; yet models for this kind of rhetoric and writing research center were available for more than a decade prior to this center's founding. To help remedy this lack of connections and visibility, we have identified several sustained, productive centers that embrace cross-disciplinary collaborations and function at the college or university levels, rather than following the humanities center tradition of supporting mostly individual scholarship within a single department. Such centers benefit from diverse perspectives on research projects, which are often combined with highly focused missions.

Visibility can increase incrementally, as the growth of what is now called the Digital Writing Research Lab (DWRL, formerly the Computer Writing and Research Lab) at the University of Texas at Austin demonstrates. The DWRL started "almost casually" in 1986 "as a by-product" of a successful proposal to IBM, a team-taught computers and writing seminar, and a particularly energized cohort of graduate students (Slatin 22). In 1988, a small group of English and English education researchers affiliated with the DWRL developed the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment, a nationally recognized and widely adopted tool for synchronous collaborative writing on a local area network. Almost a quarter century later, the center occupies a dozen rooms in two buildings, annually hosts over a hundred classes with a combined enrollment of approximately two thousand students, and maintains a staff of almost forty individuals, including a director, three assistant directors, a program administrator, a systems administrator, and dozens of graduate student workers. Graduate research is configured in smaller work groups around topics, such as visual rhetoric and cross-cultural rhetoric, and supported through conference participation stipends. Since 1999, the DWRL has published the peer-reviewed *Currents in Electronic Literacy* (Digital).

The DWRL has persevered through tremendous growth, three name changes, four changes in directorship, and a politically charged controversy regarding the university's first-year composition course in the early 1990s. In his 1998 "The Computer Writing and Research Lab: A Brief Institutional History," founding director John Slatin provides an insider's look at the DWRL's strikingly cross-disciplinary evolution. As Slatin explains, the burgeoning

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laboratory reached out to colleagues across the humanities, from American studies to classics. The resources available to the laboratory have also grown as a result of successful proposals and the lab's portion of a university-wide student technology fee. In the past decade, the DWRL's annual operating budget ranged from approximately $200,000 to $400,000 (Spinuzzi; Syverson).

Whereas the DWRL developed organically from a small group of faculty and graduate students with common interests, most rhetoric and writing research centers are created more deliberately. In 1997, the Ohio State University's Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing (CSTW) was established by Andrea Lunsford. Both Lunsford's scholarship on collaborative writing and experience serving on the NCSWL Publication Review Board developed a perspective about research that fit comfortably with the concept of a center. In 1996, Lunsford's comments on a panel at the First Biennial Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition connected research center work with deteriorating disciplinary boundaries:

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> I really think that traditional disciplinarity is crumbling all around us. That's one reason we see institutes and centers springing up everywhere. At this historical moment, composition seems perfectly poised for such an interdisciplinary enterprise than almost anybody else in traditional fields, through our work with texts and information providers and consumers. What we need to find is a site—and increasingly, I don't think it is going to be in the English department. (Takayoshi 210)

At the time of her comments, Lunsford led the University Writing Board, a group composed of representatives from multiple disciplines and charged with reviewing the Ohio State University's writing instruction. When the board's proposal to form the CSTW—"an interdisciplinary support and research unit" in the College of Humanities—was approved in 1997, Lunsford became the center's first director (Center, "About").

The CSTW's affiliation with the College of Humanities resulted in support from the college dean and garnered additional funding, visibility, and partners for research on writing. Well before the CSTW was established, the university's doctoral program in rhetoric and composition had created a vital, collaborative culture among students and faculty that resulted in the study of curricula and the publication of papers, dissertations, and articles. But as a formal research

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enterprise, the CSTW received a physical space in the Mendenhall Laboratory building and a staff that currently includes approximately forty graduate students, a director, an associate director, three program coordinators, three assistant coordinators, and a few undergraduate consultants. The center directs a professional writing minor, oversees a writing-across-the-curriculum program, maintains the University Writing Center, offers technology support services, and participates in various outreach programs. The center designation also positioned the CSTW to secure a modest endowment to sustain some of these programs. Moreover, the CSTW issues annual, college-sponsored dissertation research awards (of up to $2,500 each) and university research grants (of up to $5,000 each) for projects that study rhetoric and writing (Center, "Dissertation;" "Grants").

The CSTW is a college-level center, yet its directors have always come from the English Department's Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy program, and the writing center that is part of the research center was formerly run by the English Department. In contrast, Colorado State University's rhetoric and writing research center began at the college level (with co-directors from two different departments) and regularly receives university-level support. Established in 1991 by Mike Palmquist from the English Department and Donald Zimmerman from the Journalism and Technical Communication Department, the Center for Research on Writing and Communication Technologies (CROWACT) exemplifies a sustainable and highly productive rhetoric and writing research center that crosses disciplinary boundaries in order to concretely address problems of social concern and afford scholars the recognition required to advance through the ranks in academia.[8] Over the past nineteen years, CROWACT has pursued an ambitious research agenda that garnered more than 6.2 million dollars of awards from funders including the state of Colorado, the National Institutes of Health, the Environmental Protection Agency, IBM, the AMC Cancer Research Center, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Zimmerman, *Center*). Center work encompasses prototyping a nutrition website for multicultural adults, developing consumer communication strategies for grocery patrons seeking to reduce exposure to chemical residues, surveying corporate pollution practices, and generating constituency guides for state agencies (Zimmerman, *Curriculum*). CROWACT also developed the highly visible WAC Clearinghouse website, initiated a writing major, and received $350,000 to develop an online writing center. The center also supported a collaboratively written book, *Transitions: Teaching Writing in Computer-Supported and Traditional Classrooms,* which

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was published in 1998 by faculty members Palmquist and Kate Kiefer, graduate student James Hartvigsen, and undergraduate student Barbara Goodlew.

Although the center's lengthy list of publications, technical reports, and grants usually lists Zimmerman or Palmquist among the coauthors, the center unites faculty from speech communication, civil engineering, computer science, food science, and human nutrition. With an annual operating budget of $28,200 allocated to the center through the university's Office of the Vice President for Research, the center is expected to secure project funding through external grants or contracts. Thus, the center functions as a place "to support faculty with interest in a focused, common research area" by connecting individual research interests with grant opportunities (Palmquist). According to Palmquist, two of CROWACT's main challenges have been involving faculty, particularly newer faculty, in center work and promoting an understanding that the center is not simply a funding source but a catalyst for generating extra-institutional funding.

Despite CROWACT's nineteen-year history of securing external funding and publishing in cross-disciplinary venues, it has not been widely recognized in rhetoric and writing as a successful example of an "autonomous" center model—that is, one that is fueled by external funding. This lack of visibility and acknowledgment is perplexing and could be attributed to publication venues that extend beyond the rhetoric and writing discipline (e.g., the *Journal of Environmental Education* or the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*). Yet CROWACT's work also appears in *Technical Communication* and *Computers and Composition,* suggesting that, while the content of work is noticed, its overt affiliation with rhetoric and writing research centers may not be. Another contributing factor may be that Colorado State does not have a doctoral program in rhetoric and writing; therefore, they lack the disciplinary visibility such programs can bring to a center. In any case, when more recently established centers have sought to sustain themselves through external funding on a model more like that found in the sciences, their directors seemed unaware that a successful model within the rhetoric and writing discipline exists.

One prominent recently established center is Michigan State University's Writing in Digital Environments Center (WIDE). WIDE's focused mission, significant body of publications, memorable acronym,[9] and anchoring in a prominent rhetoric and writing doctoral program have positioned this center as arguably the most visible research center in the discipline today. At present, WIDE's program staff includes two directors, a full-time software developer,

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a part-time network administrator, and a part-time controller. Graduate and undergraduate students are hired for research positions as opportunities become available and gain experience leading research projects that often include partners and clients outside of academia. WIDE's mission focuses on a series of research questions that guide them in examining "how digital technologies—such as the networked personal computer, the Internet and World Wide Web, and computer-based classrooms and workplaces—change the processes, products, and contexts for writing, particularly in organizational and collaborative composing contexts" (Writing). WIDE, which is funded by the Michigan State University Foundation and the College of Arts and Letters, also distinguishes itself from other centers by having hired their co-director, William Hart-Davidson, from another institution to enhance the center's research program. This move reflects the senior-level administrative support considered critical for institutional change strategies to succeed (Kezar and Eckel 446).

WIDE's prolific publications, including Jeff Grabill's 2007 *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action* and W. Michele Simmons and Grabill's 2007 *CCC* article "Toward a Civic Rhetoric for Technologically and Scientifically Complex Places: Invention, Performance, and Participation," contribute to conversations about writing, technology, and civic action. The center's projects include a mix of scholarly publications and public products for Michigan State University–affiliated and community-based clients. WIDE projects aim to impact publics by "producing software [and] information systems that implement the results of writing research and find their way into real-world scenarios, organizations, companies, classrooms, [and] individuals' work habits" (Hart-Davidson). The deliverables for these projects, as Hart-Davidson notes, are material, allowing "our work in the field as a whole [to] make it out of journals, out of books, and into the places where it can have a concrete effect on the way people are working." As WIDE scholars continue to develop such products, the potential impact of the center's work continues to grow. The center has established an infrastructure and reputation that position it well for even more influential work, despite ongoing challenges inherent in pursuing external funding for research.

While much can be learned from these examples of successful centers, much can also be learned from centers whose change efforts have been derailed by conflicting institutional cultures.

While much can be learned from these examples of successful centers, much can also be learned from centers whose change efforts have been derailed by conflicting institutional cultures. Department-level centers are especially

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uncertain enterprises. Two directors of departmental centers noted in interviews that collaborative work and the pursuit of external research funding ran counter to departmental cultures and traditions. They found it difficult to encourage faculty to invest time and energy in such work. One director noted that it was "a stretch" to "move faculty to a collaborative research model." In another case, "petty and stupid" departmental politics arose regarding naming issues. As this director explained, faculty wondered whose research interests would be represented in the center's name. A different center director recalled that his department was reluctant to approve faculty course buy-outs. Even when faculty members successfully secured grants and enjoyed what one director described as the "intellectual fest" of collaborative work, they met resistance. This director observed that, "when you do things out of the ordinary, there is a good deal of subtle, but forceful, pushback." This resistance poses a substantial threat to center work: assistant and associate professors seeking tenure and promotion in such departments could understandably view working outside the ordinary expectations as posing a significant risk to their careers. They may find it more comfortable, and more politic, to work within the traditional system of individual rewards for humanities disciplines. At the same time, as Palmquist has pointed out, both newer scholars and cross-disciplinary researchers are needed to keep research center work alive. Without the perspectives from scholars in other disciplines—involvement that brings skill sets which challenge expectations of the ordinary—departmental centers can flounder. In some cases, centers have been disbanded; in others, they continue as informal, but less active, collaborative research groups; in one case, we found a departmental center was converted to a college-level center, where it no longer identified with rhetoric and writing as it adopted a broader, more interdisciplinary mission. These examples of common challenges underscore the need to locate centers strategically and allow time for the cultural changes they bring to take root. Most successful centers take at least five years to establish themselves as viable parts of their institutional cultures. Achieving public persuasiveness, then, is another challenge.

Influencing Publics and Policy

Our research reveals that the collective impact of research center work on the rhetoric and writing discipline is significant; however, beyond the discipline, the impact is less clear. Products can be produced, services offered, gatherings held, grant awards tabulated, texts disseminated, and claims made, but what is the collective public impact of these efforts? The National Writing Project

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continues to cultivate its support from and relationship with the federal government, and centers such as NCTE's James R. Squire Office of Policy Research and the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Network for Media Action are initiating efforts to communicate rhetoric and writing research findings to policymakers and the public at large. Otherwise, our research centers appear to be either completely detached from activity in policy arenas or relying on what Jay Clayton terms a "resolutely solitary model of influence." In this public intellectual model, humanities scholars usually hope to influence members of the elite or shape public opinion through books or other single-authored works. In "Collaborative Grants: A New Paradigm for the Humanities," Clayton urges humanities scholars to serve as experts at public hearings, issue white papers, "get in the news," publish in cross-disciplinary journals, and seek positions on policy committees (these groups often include physicians, attorneys, religious groups, corporate interests, and patient advocacy groups, but not humanities scholars). Our research suggests that rhetoric and writing research centers have yet to assert themselves in this "mediating sphere" (Clayton).

Nevertheless, many center directors assert that their work *should* reach a public, and such assertions are themselves significant, functioning as speech acts that move organizations toward new social realities (Ford and Ford 546). Deborah Bosley, former director of the Center for Writing, Language, and Literacy at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, contends that "it's important to support research in particular that can speak to a public community." Bosley's reference to "a public community" suggests that such a construct exists outside of disciplinary and institutional boundaries (i.e., outside of academic communities) and that there are many public communities; furthermore, these public communities organize around a mutual interest (Warner 68–69). This use of the word *public* corresponds to Diane Davis's use of the word when she describes efforts to bring the Digital Writing and Research Lab "more into public consciousness." These claims employ the word *public* in the same way in which Bazerman, Lunsford, and Hesse use the term, and in the same way in which the NCSWL used it. For research centers, a public is an extra-disciplinary, extra-institutional group.

Beyond stating public persuasiveness as a goal, research centers strive to achieve this goal by composing texts for different public audiences, crafting their work to meet the needs of these differing publics. At the Ohio State University's CSTW, current director Richard (Dickie) Selfe creates vision statements according to his audience. Selfe notes that these statements "do look somewhat alike," but each one presents "a different kind of vision for

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these different audiences." At the University of Minnesota's Center for Writing, directors Kirsten Jamsen and Katie Levin have encouraged their center's research grant recipients to consider alternative forms of publication—not just printed texts, but also videos, web pages, and public events. "Dissemination," according to Jamsen, "is very broadly conceived." Many centers post white papers, transcripts, and bibliographies online. They host websites, monitor Twitter feeds, maintain blogs, and offer open-source technology to publics beyond the campus. These increasingly open and accessible publications are often supported by traditional articles, books, or conference presentations. Multilayered dissemination strategies allow centers to produce work valued by academic disciplines while creating a space for faculty and students to reach publics beyond the university. The move toward alternate ways of publishing research suggests that today's centers constantly work to establish new links with broader audiences. As a result, research centers are uniquely positioned and strongly motivated to push the discipline toward greater acceptance of these alternate publications in ways that individual voices cannot.

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Like the earlier national centers, local research centers frequently seek government or charitable foundation support through grant monies, sometimes in partnership with other nonprofit organizations. As Project English scholars discovered in the 1960s, grant writing compels researchers to explain themselves and their work in jargon-free language that makes tacit understandings of that work more explicit than academic journals usually require. While grant applications must demonstrate scholarly acumen and methodological rigor, they also depend on communicating emotional investments in the work that connect with the investments and interests of the potential sponsors and program officers. For example, in the case of Kent State University's Center for Research on Workplace Literacy (CRWL), a grant from the state of Ohio worked to alleviate "some pressure from the board of regents and the legislature to make better connections between universities and the community, particularly the business community." In fact, the grant charged the CRWL with conduct-

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ing "research relevant to those communities." According to another center's director, grant awards give centers and the discipline "a kind of prestige that has generally been absent from our field." More than prestige, grant awards can force research centers to wield a very specific form of publicly persuasive power. Grant writing, whether funded or unfunded, documents efforts to publicly and persuasively present center work.

Despite their familiarity to audiences outside of the discipline, grant proposals remain relatively rare within it. More familiar are public events: lectures, symposia, and other community-wide gatherings. Initiating these events can persuade a public by showcasing research and developing dialogue. Many centers regularly plan such events and assemble media kits, design posters, and issue press releases. Arguably, the greatest rhetorical challenge exists in persuading individuals to attend these gatherings. Cheryl Glenn, co-director of Penn State University's Center for Democratic Deliberation (CDD), points to one such event as the center's most successful work to date. Partnering with the Rock Ethics Institute, the Africana Research Center, the Department of African and African-American Studies, and the Department of Comparative Literature, the CDD organized a lecture by Kwame Anthony Appiah. Glenn notes that while some university-sponsored talks garner only small audiences, this lecture "packed the room." Glenn attributes the event's success not only to the research that Appiah presented, but also to the center's successful interdisciplinary partnerships and its ability to convene an audience.

To establish receptivity and trust with groups in and beyond their own institutions, center directors and teams must practice skillful negotiation, careful listening, flexibility, and patience. At our own center's inaugural event, *Representations of Race and the African American Community*, one keynote speaker, Catherine Pendergast, drew upon classicist Danielle S. Allen's contention that "trust production" is essential for meaningful communication across diverse communities and cultures (Allen 154). Eli Goldblatt identifies other key concerns for change agents working with community groups based on his experience with public outreach programs such as community writing and literacy centers:

> [Y]ou have to identify the true self-interest of the communities involved and figure out how to get resources to address those needs. You have to identify well-connected leaders with an effective approach to actual problems in the [community]. You have to talk through conflicts and negotiate any tensions between organizations that are each struggling for their existence. (137)

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In the opinion of one center director, the relationships his center developed are "not unlike the kind of research relationships you'd typically see in the hard sciences and the social sciences." We interpret this statement to mean that research relationships serve the respective self-interests of the parties involved as they each work toward a common goal. Such relationships, as the rich literature on activist research and service-learning reminds us (Cushman; Herzberg; Schutz and Gere; and others), can raise complex ethical and power issues. For this type of work, sustained commitment and openness to co-creation of knowledge with community partners are not only obligatory but desirable facets of the research center's work as an agent of change.

Issues of power, trust, and self-interest also come into play when research centers enter into agreements with public or institutional clients. Public persuasion by means of client services often entails convincing a client that a particular research method will yield the most useful data. The Usability Research Lab at Texas Tech University stresses the importance of iterative testing and a standard-based method to their clients. As one center director pointed out, delicate issues may arise when scholars request to use data gathered through conducting client-contracted services for their own publications. Along with academic articles, research centers produce texts, such as proposals and reports, in order to present publicly persuasive research during conferences, site visits, workshops, and open houses. Such persuasion entails a strong grasp of interpersonal and often intercultural communication skills. Since becoming director of the Usability Center at Southern Polytechnic State University, Carol Barnum has developed marketing materials and other recruitment tools and revised the center's website to more fully represent its services. These strategic moves increased the number of client partners to such an extent that the center is now seeking to establish a separate student center in order to dedicate the Usability Center to client work. Client service projects can generate revenue as well as new technologies or tools for nonacademic use. WIDE, for instance, has worked with academic and administrative departments at Michigan State University, the Information Technology Empowerment Center in Lansing, Michigan, and NCTE, among other groups, to create projects that apply writing research to professional and academic situations.

These many efforts to reach publics notwithstanding, little consensus exists among center directors as to the public impact of center work. One director, for instance, perceives her center's impact as "tremendous," describing it as a "standard bearer" for the discipline. Another believes some research centers can, and have, put universities "on the map" nationally. Yet many center direc-

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tors view their center's impact with skepticism. "I don't think," one director ventured, "we achieved the level of impact I had hoped we would." Another director disclosed that he is "not sure we've had much of an impact at all." Impact, for him, is "incremental and never something that's seismic." Two other directors echo this sentiment as they describe the impact of their organizations as "indirect." Taken in aggregate, the collective public persuasiveness of rhetoric and writing research centers proves inconsistent, at best. The work of our centers, especially when we consider all kinds and models of centers together, falls short of our highest ambitions. In the words of one director, "you can't expect to just speak and be heard."

The work of our centers, especially when we consider all kinds and models of centers together, falls short of our highest ambitions. In the words of one director, "you can't expect to just speak and be heard."

Conceptualizing Our Center Work: Past, Present, Future

Given the current difficulty of determining the public impact of research centers, we conclude by calling upon the discipline to increase the visibility and influence of our collective work. First, research centers need to be recognized as agents of change in our disciplinary *past.* Major overviews of our discipline frequently omit research center work, recognizing only individual scholars. Yet, the career choices and the research approaches of many members in our discipline have been shaped by research center association as graduate student collaborators, affiliated faculty members, or center directors. For nearly fifty years, research centers have produced work that continues to influence our discipline. Histories of the discipline should not focus solely on important figures, books, and articles but should expand to include the significant research collectives and collaborations so integral to our work.

We must further acknowledge research centers as a vibrant aspect of our *present.* In spite of the vast array of work occurring at individual centers across the nation, research centers currently struggle to find public voices that speak powerfully to multiple audiences. Recognizing the work of these centers within the discipline is an essential step toward public recognition. Developing a network, consortium, or clearinghouse of peer research centers, for instance, would enable organizations to collaborate and share strategies for changing, when needed, departmental, institutional, or disciplinary research cultures. Together, we could seek out a greater presence in policy-related discussions that affect publics. Such a step hearkens back to the still-influential work of the earliest rhetoric and writing research centers.

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Finally, we urge the discipline of rhetoric and writing to conceptualize research centers as a generative rhetorical strategy for our discipline's *future* role in persuading public groups. Here, we call upon our discipline to deploy the trope of metonymy in its research discourse. It seems fitting to us that the fundamentally associative work of research centers be captured in metonymy, an associative language of juxtapositions and constellations. Metonymy stands in sharp contrast to the metaphorical tropings that currently dominate our discipline's discussion of research centers. We need only to examine the Braddock Award–winning article "Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change" to see how metaphor obscures center work. In this article, James Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey Grabill, and Libby Miles recall their experiences establishing and naming the Professional Writing Usability Lab at Purdue University. Inside the English Department, the "lab" was viewed suspiciously, but outside the department "the [term] lab signaled that serious work was going on" (629). According to the authors, "the lab metaphor connected to the dominant scientific paradigm at Purdue, and usability was recognized as a legitimate focus of technology development" (629). For the Purdue researchers, use of the term *lab* functioned as a signal of legitimate research. Yet, signaling serious work is different than *doing* serious work: making knowledge and persuading publics with that knowledge.

Developing a network, consortium, or clearinghouse of peer research centers, for instance, would enable organizations to collaborate and share strategies for changing, when needed, departmental, institutional, or disciplinary research cultures. Together, we could seek out a greater presence in policy-related discussions that affect publics.

Illuminating the associative work of the rhetoric and writing research center calls for the use of metonymy. A case in point involves Jeff Rice, Gregory Ulmer, and the University of Florida's Networked Writing Environment (NWE). In the foreword to Rice's book *The Rhetoric of Cool: Composition Studies and New Media*, Ulmer associates Rice's research with the work of the NWE. As Ulmer explains, "[t]o understand where *The Rhetoric of Cool* is coming from, it may be helpful to know where Jeff Rice came from" (ix). He traces Rice's book project back to Rice's earlier associations, specifically the graduate program at the University of Florida and the "intellectual climate" of the NWE (ix). Ulmer states: "There are multiple dynamics in progress at any graduate program, but the one Rice picked up on was *associated* with the Networked Writing Environment" (ix; our emphasis). Rice proposes *chora* as a means for understanding

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associational argument and analysis—and it is Ulmer's own metonymic tracing of Rice's work that leads readers to the NWE, a research center that operated from 1994 to 2008. As Ulmer suggests, it makes sense that a scholar strongly influenced by his affiliation with a highly collaborative research center offers an analytical framework in *The Rhetoric of Cool* that focuses on associational argument. As this case indicates, locating the work of rhetoric and writing research centers requires a close investigation of the peripheral spaces within our professional discourses. Often we begin to see the influence of research centers, past and present, in our colleagues' endnotes, footnotes, acknowledgments, and forewords.

For our discipline to draw upon these valuable guides, we point readers to a new, interactive online directory of rhetoric and writing research centers available on the CCCC website (www.ncte.org/cccc). In compiling the first phase of this directory, we listed associated faculty next to each center and further connected these centers to particular institutions. Our directory only partially represents the full range of faculty and students who contributed to and were influenced by the grants, articles, books, conference presentations, reports, university and community events, newsletters, white papers, websites, discussions, debates, and other texts that research centers often produce. We ask scholars to contribute to this interactive resource—and to draw from it to find partnerships, models, and exemplary means of public persuasion.

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Notes

1. In accordance with our inclusive approach to the center enterprise and our home program's inclusive approach to our discipline, we deliberately refer to "rhetoric and writing" research centers in this article. "Rhetoric and writing" unites the work of fields that might otherwise be parceled as "rhetoric and composition," "composition studies," "technical writing," "business writing," "professional writing," "writing studies," "technical communication," "business communication," or "professional communication."

2. These interviews were conducted in compliance with Virginia Tech's Institutional

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Review Board (Protocol 08-547). All of the individuals whom we interviewed provided us with their informed consent.

3. Steinberg and another former CCCC Chair, John C. Gerber, each served terms as the Project English national coordinator.

4. Numerous histories have connected our discipline's development with Project English. See Harris (1–17), North (9–17), and Pender, among others, for discussions of Project English's impact.

5. For a comprehensive listing of these publications, see Butler and O'Donnell.

6. Throughout its existence, the NCSWL partnered with the NWP, which was established in 1974. Both organizations were headquartered at the University of California Berkeley, and both organizations shared a publication, the *Quarterly*. Today, the NWP's website archives the *Quarterly*, as well as the NCSWL's papers and reports. The NCSWL also maintained a site at Carnegie Mellon University, which functioned as a collaborator with the Community Literacy Center.

7. For instance, see Freedman's "Afterword," in which the impact of the NCSWL appears less definitive (Freedman, Dyson, and Flower, "Revisited" 56).

8. Palmquist served as co-director of CROWACT from 1991 to 2009.

9. The extensive literature in business marketing on the topic of branding would be useful for center directors to examine and may be a fruitful area for future research on centers in rhetoric and writing.

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Brian Gogan

Brian Gogan is a doctoral candidate in rhetoric and writing at Virginia Tech, where he teaches courses in college composition and business writing. His scholarly interests include Baudrillardian rhetoric, critical theory, letter writing, public writing, and professional communication. He has served as assistant director, research assistant, and research affiliate in the Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society.

Kelly Belanger

Kelly Belanger is an associate professor of English at Virginia Tech, where she directs the Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society and co-directs the Blue Ridge Writing Project. She is coauthor of *Second Shift: Teaching Writing to Working Adults*, and her research focuses on the rhetoric of social and institutional change. She has published articles on writing program administration, professional communication, basic writing, gender and writing, and critical pedagogy.

Ashley Patriarca

Ashley Patriarca is a doctoral candidate in the rhetoric and writing program at Virginia Tech, where she teaches courses in technical writing. She is a member of the Center for the Study of Research in Society. Her current research focuses on the communication of risk through information design.

Megan O'Neill

Megan O'Neill is a doctoral candidate in the rhetoric and writing program at Virginia Tech. She is a member of the Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society and teaches a variety of undergraduate writing courses, including composition, professional writing, and rhetoric and communication for leadership. Her current research combines feminist research methodologies and critical pedagogy to inform service-learning and community literacy practices.

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