

Our Documented Growth as a Field and Community: An Analysis of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*

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The *Writing Lab Newsletter* is a serial publication that began as a one-woman effort. Muriel Harris released the first issue in April 1977, hoping to create "a forum for exchanging ideas and information about writing centers in high schools, colleges, and universities." By December of 1984, the mailing list had grown so explosively that Harris was forced to print a warning that only recipients who offered donations toward its publication would remain on the mailing list.

The *Writing Lab Newsletter's* increasing popularity and small staff also caused the issues to shift from monthly issues to larger, bimonthly issues in November of 2010. Production is always paused between June and August, as many writing centers close between the spring and fall semesters. In spite of the changes it has undergone in the last thirty-five years, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* remains true to its tagline: "promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing."

The Newsletter's original issues served to connect recipients through a printed mailing list, publishing conversational submissions in response to the previous issue's list of questions. Since then, the call for submissions has become a behind-the-scenes process, moved from the actual printed issue to a section of the website. Now including essays on research as well as pedagogy, the issues have developed an air of professionalism. And yet, true to the collaborative ideology on which writing centers are built, student voices are still included alongside those of directors and accomplished scholars. Over time, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* has primarily remained a collection of "articles, conference announcements, book reviews, professional news, and a column by and for tutors." The following analysis will trace the archive's points of interest over time—a shift toward research and technology has mirrored that occurring in the field. The *Writing Lab Newsletter* has adapted and grown throughout its history, always striving to unify and stimulate conversation within the writing center community.

Foundations: Issues from the Late 1970s

Muriel Harris began working at Purdue University's writing center in 1976, a year prior to releasing the *Writing Lab Newsletter's* debut issue. At this point in time, writing centers were rapidly gaining popularity across the United States. This expansion is likely due, at least partially, to the

Expressivist movement and the increasing diversity on college campuses. These two factors challenged composition professors to provide individualized attention to an ever-widening range of diverse students. Because writing centers foster peer collaboration on a one-to-one basis, they helped to alleviate or at least supplement instructors' efforts. As new writing centers emerged and the field of composition continued to develop and change, the *Writing Lab Newsletter's* first issues seek to answer the most pressing questions at hand: Who are we? and What, exactly, do we do?

The first issue, released in April 1977, is dedicated almost entirely to putting writing center directors in contact with one another. Harris was encouraged to start the *Writing Lab Newsletter* after that year's meeting of the 4 C's, so it's fair to assume that the first mailing list includes those who initially expressed interest while at the conference. The first few pages of the first issue are set up to share recipients' suggestions for future issues. Harris prints Amy Richards' suggestion "that we consider the possibility of forming a bank or repository for copies of our own home-made lab materials." Beginning these archives is a crucial step in the writing center community; a collected history began to record and shape the fluid idea of the writing center. A list of approximately fifty Newsletter recipients and their respective mailing addresses follows these suggestions.

The second issue, published in May 1977, includes a call for contributions that creates a slightly more focused picture of the *Writing Lab Newsletter's* purpose. The most pressing questions identified are: What resources do you have and use?, How do you keep your records?, and What teaching strategies do you use to train your staff? Staff training is a logical interest for anyone developing a new writing center; the interest in evaluation techniques is a marker of writing centers' reflective practice. Without much writing center research already published at this point in time, Harris instead invites others to share their opinions and practices regarding these concerns. To begin the conversation, Harris includes two forms used by Purdue University's Writing Center, providing readers with a model to use or to respond to in discussion.

The third and final issue of the first publishing year was released in June 1977. Announcing its summer hiatus, the Newsletter also leaves writing center personnel with questions to consider and resources to use in preparation for the next academic year. The overarching theme of the issues revolves around two more questions: Who are we really here to serve? and What problems are we responsible for tackling? Specific points of concern, listed as questions for readers to write about, are staff training, how the director's philosophy affects his or her writing center and staff, financing and budget concerns, in-session concerns such as the risk of proofreading, how to best evaluate sessions and our work as a whole, and how to keep records. These questions were also generated at the 4 C's. This issue has a bit more substance than previous ones: Rather than just posing

questions, a few contributors share about a paragraph of information on suggested readings. These do not yet take the form of book reviews or analyses—they merely mention the names of resources and where to find them. These tips include book titles, articles in various publications, upcoming meetings and conferences, and catalogues from which to order educational materials. The issue still includes a list of new members, helping recipients keep an up-to-date network of colleagues across the nation.