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Locating the International Writing Center Community

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Schlagworte: collaboration; writing program; academic writing; writing support

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Locating the International Writing Center Community

Pamela Bromley

Abstract

Writing centers are expanding globally, but little is known about the locations of all centers outside the United States. This study, conducted in 2015–16, shares a comprehensive database of non-US writing centers (n = 552) and survey of professionals (n = 218) compared to similar US studies. The study finds that more than half of writing centers outside the US are located in six countries – Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, South Africa, and the United Kingdom – and that non-US writing centers have somewhat different institutional positions compared to their US peers. Locating writing centers outside the US is a first step to understanding the ways in which the work of these centers, as a group, compares to their US counterparts.

Introduction

Writing centers are expanding globally, as seen in the growth of professional organizations and scholarship. International Writing Centers (IWCs)—defined here as writing centers outside the United States¹—have created associations to connect practitioners, promote professionalization, and encourage collaboration and research, thereby building a shared disciplinary identity and helping writing centers to advocate for themselves and their work in and beyond their local institutions (Girgensohn/Peters 2012; Scott 2017). Unlike US-based writing centers, which are generally part of a larger writing program (Finer/White-Farnham, 2017), IWCs generally serve as their institution's locus for writing and may offer courses, workshops, writing groups, and/or pedagogical support for faculty and graduate students, as well as one-on-one consultations (e.g., Bräuer 2002: 61ff.; Ganobcsik-Williams 2012: 503f.; Santa 2009: 3; Nichols 2017: 185).

Academic writing professionals, often located in writing centers (Scott 2017: 45), have created many national and international associations. Four organizations outside the US have become International Writing Center Association (IWCA) affiliates: the European Writing Centers Association in 1988, Middle East-North Africa Writing Centers Alliance in 2007, Canadian Writing Centres Association/L'Association canadienne des centres de

1 Though a complex history (e.g., Lerner 2009), the first writing centers were established in the US (Bromley 2017: 25; Nichols 2017: 183). For a history of writing teaching and methods in German universities, see Kreitz 2020.

redaction in 2013; and La Red Latinoamericana de Centros y Programas de Escritura in 2014. The European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), established in 2001, also connects global writing researchers. National writing center or studies organizations have been established in Switzerland (2005), Israel (2007), Austria (2009), Germany (2013), Ireland (2015), the Netherlands (2016), and Russia (2017); networks and gatherings are also present in Argentina, China, Japan, South Africa, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (Bromley et al. 2021: 25 ff.; Song 2018; Writing Centers Association of Japan 2022).

Like organizations, scholarship connects practitioners and also builds new knowledge and a shared disciplinary identity, as underscored in the foreword of *JoSch*'s first issue (Kowal et al., 2010: 2). Much scholarship investigates IWC initiatives (e.g., the many contributions in Thaiss et al. 2012). Several European journals focus exclusively on writing center work and academic writing, such as this journal, published in Germany since 2010, and *Journal of Academic Writing*, published in the United Kingdom since 2011. IWC scholars also connect research and practice across borders (e.g., Datig/Herkner 2014; Dreyfurst/Liebetanz/Voigt 2018; Santa 2009; Scott 2017; WLN 2022). The rapid growth in organizations and scholarship highlights that IWCs are part of a larger community exchanging ideas, practices, and individuals.

While IWCs are expanding, no systematic investigation of these centers exists; that is, no census has been taken. To my knowledge, such investigations have only occurred in the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) and the National Census of Writing (NCW) in the US, and a Latin American study asking and adapting relevant questions from the US surveys to that context (Molina-Natera/López-Gil 2020). A similar initiative is underway in the Middle East North Africa region (Hodges et al. 2022). Because a census gathers and shares data systematically, stakeholders are able to see and position themselves as part of a larger community and to make evidence-based arguments grounded in that community. This article partially fills that gap for IWCs, highlighting their geographic and institutional locations compared to their US peers. This study also helps lay the groundwork for a systematic investigation of IWC work, highlighting writing centers as an important part of a growing, changing global educational system, with accompanying massification, internationalization, and multilingualism.

Methodology

This study has two parts: a database of IWCs and a survey of IWC professionals. I created an IWC database by internet searches of: the Writing Center Directory at St. Cloud State University; international IWCA affiliate websites; and country names and Canadian provinces alongside “writing center,” “writing centre,” “writing lab,” “learning center,” “learning centre,” and “academic resource.” I undertook the search in languages where I could decipher basic information: English, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Por-

tuguese, Spanish, and Swedish. The database includes IWC contact information, geographic location, names, and whether one-on-one consultations were offered. I define IWCs as those centers offering one-on-one appointments, a hallmark of writing center practice (Harris 1988), excluding centers hosting only workshops and/or courses. If an institution had several centers, all were included (e.g., the University of Osnabrück has three IWCs, one each for students in English, German, and Law). By April 2015, I had located 552 IWCs.

To learn more about IWC work, I conducted an Institutional Review Board-approved survey of IWC professionals, replicating questions from the WCRP and the NCW to allow direct comparisons, adding and adapting questions for the international context. A similar approach was used in Latin America (Molina-Natera/López-Gil 2020: 100 f.). I emailed the survey to database contacts in May 2015, issuing one reminder; data collection closed in March 2016. Of the 552 IWCs in the database, 69 had no functioning email address. Of the 483 IWCs with working email addresses, 218 responded, with an average of 165 responses per question, for a response rate of 34 %, in line with published studies about organizations (Baruch/Holtom 2008: 1155).

When possible, I compare my survey results to the two largest surveys: the 2017 NCW (n = 727, combining two-year and four-year institution responses), and the raw data from the 2016–17 WCRP (n = 273; participants can skip questions in both surveys). The institutions completing the NCW are all US-based, while just 5 % of institutions in WCRP are outside the US, making it a good, if imperfect, comparison. The Latin American survey, while important, had just 23 responses and thus is excluded here.

Important limitations exist, as the database does not include the full population of IWCs. A center had to have a website in specific languages to be included in the database; certainly the database would be more complete by employing someone to search in other languages. A center must also have a working email address to have the option to complete the survey (although 15 % of IWC respondents reported that they did not have a website). Importantly, survey responses are not fully representative of IWCs in the database. Three regions are well-represented: 4 % of responses were from sub-Saharan Africa (4 % of the IWCs in the database), 5 % from the Near East (8 % of IWCs), 2 % from South and Central Asia (3 % of IWCs). However, the Western Hemisphere (35 % of respondents and 29 % of IWCs in the database) and Europe and Eurasia (45 % of respondents and 35 % of IWCs) are over-represented while East Asia and the Pacific is underrepresented (10 % of respondents but 21 % of IWCs). While it is not possible to generalize from a sample to an entire population (Grutsch McKinney 2015: 30), this study captures a wide range of IWCs that have not been systematically documented. Finally, the data shared in this article were collected in 2015–16 and are compared to relevant data from that period; a pandemic pause has allowed for publication. While the data is not current, and it could benefit from searching for IWCs in more languages, it allows us to see our recent past more clearly; the study is currently being repeated, which should allow us to see some ways the IWC community has changed.

Results and Discussion

Geographical Location

Geography, of course, is an essential aspect of location. Using the database, I find 552 IWCs located in 77 countries outside the US, shown in Table 1.

Table 1

IWC distribution by country and region*

(the country with the most IWCs in the region is italicized)

Africa	25	Europe	194	Near East	43
Ethiopia	1	Albania	1	Algeria	1
Ghana	2	Austria	6	Bahrain	1
Namibia	2	Azerbaijan	1	Egypt	2
<i>South Africa</i>	20	Belgium	1	Iraq	1
East Asia & the Pacific	115	Bulgaria	1	Israel	1
<i>Australia</i>	48	Cyprus	1	Kuwait	2
China	7	Czech Republic	1	Lebanon	3
China, Hong Kong	3	Denmark	1	Morocco	1
China, Macau	1	Estonia	3	Oman	3
Fiji	2	Finland	1	Qatar	8
Japan	23	France	2	Saudi Arabia	6
Mongolia	1	<i>Germany</i>	85	Turkey	1
New Zealand	11	Greece	3	<i>United Arab Emirates</i>	13
Singapore	5	Hungary	1	Western Hemisphere	160
South Korea	7	Iceland	1	Argentina	5
Taiwan	6	Ireland	5	Bermuda	1
Vietnam	1	Italy	6	Brazil	1
South & Central Asia	14	Liechtenstein	1	<i>Canada</i>	123
Afghanistan	1	Netherlands	5	Chile	4
Bangladesh	2	Norway	4	Colombia	16
<i>India</i>	5	Poland	3	Ecuador	1
Kazakhstan	2	Romania	1	El Salvador	1
Kyrgyzstan	1	Russia	1	Jamaica	1
Nepal	1	Spain	3	Mexico	3
Pakistan	2	Sweden	18	Puerto Rico	1
Global**	1	Switzerland	5	Trinidad & Tobago	1
**Webster University's online writing center serves all 10 international campuses		Turkey	11	Uruguay	2
		Ukraine	2		
		United Kingdom	20		
Grand Total	552				

* Regions from US State Department (2021)

33 countries, from Afghanistan to Vietnam, have just 1 IWC, 27 countries have 2–5, and 12 countries have 6–19 IWCs. 58% of IWCs are in just 6 countries: Australia (48), Canada (123), Germany (85), Japan (23), South Africa (20), and the United Kingdom (20). Countries with the most IWCs have strong ties to the US: all but Germany and Japan are English-speaking, and West Germany and Japan’s education systems were reshaped by the US after 1945 (Ash 2006: 253; Nakayama 1989: 32). The US, currently “the most powerful academic system ... pioneered academic thinking and curricular trends” influencing global higher education (Altbach et al. 2009: 17) – perhaps including writing centers.

Interesting regional differences surface when comparing the distribution of IWCs and universities, shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Distribution of IWCs and Universities, by Region*

Region	% of IWCs	% of World Universities
East Asia and the Pacific	21%	27%
Europe and Eurasia	35%	33%
Near East	8%	5%
South and Central Asia	3%	12%
Sub-Saharan Africa	4%	7%
Western Hemisphere	29%	16%

* University statistics derived from Förster (2016)

In four regions, IWC and university distribution generally aligns: Europe and Eurasia, East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Near East. In two regions, though, there are substantial differences: the Western Hemisphere has many more IWCs relative to universities, while South and Central Asia has comparatively more universities relative to IWCs. Geography could play a role. Perhaps countries in the Western Hemisphere are more influenced by US educational practices (they are, at the very least, closer geographically), while countries in South and Central Asia may not be as strongly influenced.

Institutional Location

Institutional location is likewise important, as seen via institutional type, writing center name, and campus location. First, using the database, I determine the types of institutions hosting IWCs. 95% (523) of IWCs are in universities; other locations include community writing centers (12), secondary schools (8), two-year colleges (4), and for-profit organizations (5). This information is quite similar to the US; in the WCRP, 97% (266) writing centers reported they were in higher education, with a few at secondary schools (4) and workplaces (2). That IWCs are mostly, but not exclusively, located in universities is

intriguing; perhaps writing centers will continue to expand into for- and non-profit ventures (Scherübl 2016; Weber Metzenroth 2022).

A center’s name may be another important way it positions itself in and beyond its institution. Such positioning may or may not be intentional: while an IWC may be able to choose its own name, the larger institution may also determine the IWC’s name. Examining the database, I find 76% (418) of IWCs have an English name, while many also have names in English and in their country’s language. Translating the names of the 24% (134) of IWCs with non-English or multiple names (e.g. Laboratorio Bla-Bla- Blá at the University of Medellín, Colombia, or the Språkverkstad/Language Lab at the University of Borås, Sweden), I find that 74% of IWCs have “writing” in their name and 68% include “center” or “centre.” Other common parts of IWC names are “academic” (13%), “learning” (12%), “English” (5.4%), “support” (4.5%), “language” (4.5%), “skills” (4.2%), and “lab” (4.0%). The politics of writing center names has long been debated (e.g., Carino 1992: 31; Lerner 2009: 2 f.). That most IWCs use “writing” and “center” or “centre” in their names connects them to the larger writing center community, as IWCA and all its regional affiliates use “writing center/centre” in their names. Terms like “support,” “skills,” and “lab” – not uncommon in IWC names – could be read “pejoratively,” showcasing IWCs as locations for remediation (Carino 1992: 36). Or perhaps “lab,” as a place to experiment and learn, is a clear reflection of writing center ethos (Lerner 2009: 14). That “English” and “language” are common parts of IWC names may indicate that writing centers support the growing numbers of students around the world working in English as an additional language (e.g., Altbach et al., 2009: 7 ff.; Brinkschulte/Stonian/Borges 2015: 19).

Finally, using survey data, I consider IWC’s campus location, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Campus Location of IWCs and US Writing Centers

Campus Location	2015–16 IWC (n = 168)	2016–17 WCRP (n = 257)	2017 NCW* (n = 550)
Classroom or Academic Building	27 %	29 %	41 %
Library	25 %	46 %	55 %
Learning or Student Centers	26 %	11 %	n/a
Other (including free-standing, residential)	22 %	14 %	25 %

* Respondents were allowed to select multiple options

A center’s physical location can reflect its position in the larger community (Haviland/Fye/Colby 2001: 85) and its institutional power (Singh-Corcoran/Emika 2011). The most common location for IWCs is classroom buildings, followed closely by libraries and learning or student centers. This finding differs from US writing centers, where most centers are in classroom buildings or libraries, with just 11% located in learning or student centers.

19% of IWCs have more than one location; in the U.S., 16% (NCW) to 35% (WCRP) of centers report multiple or satellite locations. That a large proportion have multiple locations may indicate that writing centers are becoming more “de-centered,” increasingly connected to their institution’s teaching and research missions (Kinhead/Harris 2000: 23).

Conclusions

This study raises an important question: what *is* a writing center? Many places that were ultimately excluded from the list of 552 IWCs support writers but do not provide one-on-one tutorials, the definition used by Harris (1988) and here. However, key terms must be defined and it is impressive that over 500 IWCs (as well as associated organizations and scholarship) meet this definition and comprise this diverse yet cohesive community. Understanding IWC’s locations is a first step to promoting the exchange of ideas, individuals, and institutions.

Certainly, my thinking about what a writing center is and what a writing center does has changed as a result of conducting this project. As I repeat the census in 2022–2023, I continue to consider what defines a writing center and how that definition shifts across contexts. The understanding that a writing center provides, at minimum, one-on-one tutoring – with other offerings, such as courses or workshops, as optional additions – may, indeed, be particular to the US. As the writing center concept continues to travel globally, our understanding of what exactly a writing center is may also need to shift. IWCs show that writing centers can be places that can support undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty as writers and teachers, using a range of activities from one-on-one sessions to workshops to courses. Considering writing centers in this more expansive way, which is common amongst IWCs, can expand US understandings of what writing centers are and what writing centers do. That is, we all need to be conscious of what assumptions we make about writing center work and what approaches we may want to import into or adapt to our own centers (see, e. g., Ganobcsik-Williams 2012: 501 f.).

Looking at IWCs also provides a window into a changing higher education landscape. Between 2001 and 2020, global higher education enrollment more than doubled, to 236 million students (UNESCO 2022). While the US was the first country with “mass higher education,” higher education in “almost all countries [has] dramatically increased” (Altbach et al. 2009: vi). While expanding higher education increases access for more, and more diverse, students, it also means that students are seen as one among many. Writing centers, where students work with someone attentive to their specific needs, are places where “the mass template methods of the academy can be undone” (Gardner/Ramsey 2005: 26). Writing centers have worked hard to introduce and revise pedagogies to support larger and more diverse student populations, such as by integrating and adapting multilingual pedagogies (e. g., Lu/Horner 2016; Brinkschulte/Stonian/Borges 2015). As higher education continues to expand, writing centers are well positioned to serve stu-

dents' and universities' changing needs and goals. Documenting writing centers enables them to situate themselves in a larger community, to better advocate for themselves and their essential role.

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