

GENERAL FACULTIES COUNCIL

Question from GFC Member, Shumaila Hemani (submitted by email April 29, 2016)

Question 14.1 from S. Hemani:

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Decision to Move C4W from Faculty of Arts

I am writing with regards to the recent decision to move Center for Writers (C4W) from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta to Student Services. This decision did not go through ANY level of governance and came as a shock for both the Director of C4W, Dr. Lucie Moussu and the tutors because none of these stakeholders were consulted in the process of decision-making.

Writing is commonly accepted as a craft but for the students at the University to develop this skill effectively during their undergraduate and graduate years, it is essential that support for writing is available to students—and for free, to avoid equity issues. It is even more important that these services are reflexively administered such that people directing and offering these services are academics with due experience and a PhD in a field related to improving the writing and communication skills of all students (especially international students!).

The Centre for Writers and its placement in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta has a history. The decision to establish the centre came about as a result of THREE years of extensive research and consultation (details of the 300-page report can found here: <http://writing.ualberta.ca/en/Writing%20Task%20Force.aspx>), in which the Writing Task Force (which included many students and representatives from across campus) agreed that the C4W should be housed in an academic Faculty and have an academic director. This was approved by all levels of governance (Student Union, GFC, TLAT, FAC, etc.) and every single Faculty on campus. This thinking and philosophy enabled the centre to function as an academic body within the university. It currently can conduct research and publish on writing issues, attend and present at conferences, and be active in the field. The current director, Dr. Lucie Moussu, for example, is currently the President of the Canadian Writing Centres Association, and many tutors at the Centre would be presenting or volunteering at the upcoming Congress of Humanities in Calgary.

The present decision to move C4W from Faculty of Arts was done behind doors and with zero consultation with students or faculty members. How is it that a very successful writing center at the University of Alberta, that has been offering free services to support students and faculty members in higher-order problems in writing (e.g., critical thinking, understanding of audience), can be moved to “Student Services” without the consultation of

its academic supervisor Dr. Lucie Moussu or anyone else in the Faculty of Arts or elsewhere at the university?

Dr. Moussu's research in the area of writing center work has not only inspired students from MLCS to research on this subject but also drawn students from Computer Sciences to adopt qualitative approaches to studying the writing behaviors of students. She has published in international journals, presented at numerous international conferences, helped build a strong professional association, organized writing centre conferences, successfully applied for grants for her work (including a recent SSHRC grant), and also supported the work of numerous writing centres across the world. It is important for a research university like the UoA to acknowledge that just as writing is not only a craft but also a research field evident through the effective "Writing Studies" program, writing centers are part of this academic milieu of critical thinking and reflexive analysis of current practices.

Unfortunately, as a result of the current decision, Dr. Lucie Moussu will have to resign from her position because of her dismissal from the Centre. In addition to this, the tutors were recently contacted by Barbara Heagle who opened her letter with the following words:

"It has come to my attention that the change in administration for the C4W, which has just been announced, may have led to some misunderstanding about the status of the C4W and its tutors. I want to dispel any rumors or misinformation, and make the situation as clear as possible."

The tone and language of this email is disrespectful to the current director who is subtly being accused of spreading "rumors and misinformation." As a graduate student at the University, I find it shameful that the official communication generated by the Faculty of Arts dishonors the academic staff in this way!!

I, as an international student and tutor at the Center for Writers for three years, have found not only a sense of community at this center but also an openness to embrace students from diverse cultures and backgrounds as creating a true sense of egalitarianism, equity, support, and mutual respect that I have not adequately witnessed at any other places on campus, especially not the Student Services. The Centre for Writers is increasingly diverse in its employment of student tutors. The tutors at the Centre for Writers are both domestic and international and come from great diversity of ethnic and disciplinary backgrounds---an element that is not very evident in institutions run by Student Services.

For me, the Centre for Writers has not only been a source of student employment but its people and resources are a continuous inspiration to think and improve my writing. I believe that by removing this free service from the Faculty of Arts would do a great disservice to the faculty and students, and lower the standards of student writing in courses and publications, placing a greater burden on the professors to guide their students to cultivate good writing habits.

The common belief is that writing centres are remedial places where only struggling students will go. Research shows that this is absolutely not the case—excellent students know that good writing takes time to learn, that a second pair of eyes is crucial to their progress, and that the discussions that take place in writing centres are critical to their understanding and learning of academic writing in their disciplines. The philosophy upon which this center has been thriving is rooted in a body of thinking about the purpose of Centre for Writers in the wider academia and Canadian and American Writing Associations. Research shows that “fixing” students papers will not teach them how to become good communicators and successful professionals. This institution is not a clinic where students get their writing “fixed” but a place of careful reflection and questioning that has connections with thinking in other disciplines of arts.

Even though, the Faculty of Arts is undergoing a very difficult moment in its history, removing the support for writing from the faculty will undermine the very goals of the faculty to promote excellence in research and teaching. The recent announcement by Dean David Turpin mentioned and I quote:

“I am pleased to report that the government is providing stable funding to Alberta’s 26 post-secondary institutions as promised in Bill 3. We will receive a two percent increase to the base operating grant. Tuition remains frozen, but we will receive backfill funding to cover the loss in tuition revenue equivalent to the annual CPI increase. The government has also extended much-needed funding to the end of July 2017 to support student mental health initiatives.”

Considering this positive increase, a case needs to be made to maintain this center for writers within the Faculty of Arts that was once established through three years of extensive research by a university-wide committee, at the request of the Student Union, and has been serving students from Arts, Humanities, Sciences and every other faculty and department across campus.

In order to maintain excellence in the writing and communication skills produced from this university, I, as a Graduate Representative at the General Faculties of Council, would like to petition against the recent decision that was taken mysteriously (without the consultation of any stakeholders) to move the Centre for Writers out of Arts and remove Dr. Lucie Moussu from its directorship, and call for bringing this issue for discussion at the next FAC meeting.

Sincerely,
Shumaila Hemani

Doctoral Student, Music

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