

By Charlotte West



# Writing Across Cultures

### Writing Centers Serve International Students and Provide Opportunities for Collaboration on Campus

**C**laire Do's writing in her first-year composition class was so strong that her professor recommended she apply for a job as a consultant in Howe Writing Center at Miami University in Ohio. When Do, an accounting major from Vietnam, went to the website to apply, she saw that the center had a new counterpart on campus: the English Language Learner (ELL) Writing Center. "I like that it's for international students—students like me," Do says.

Do, who has studied English since she was 5 years old, is familiar with the challenges of being a multilingual writer, which helps her relate to the international students with whom she works. Vietnamese and Chinese speakers, for instance, might make the same errors when writing in English because of similar grammatical structures in their native language. "I can identify the problems that international students may have because I understand where they come from," she says.

Campus writing centers have always provided academic support for any student who needs help with writing assignments. But the growing number of international students on some campuses has placed new demands on writing centers, causing directors to rethink training, services, and partnerships across campus. Consequently, writing centers serve as prime sites for collaboration between writing faculty and international offices.

### Bolstering a Critical Resource

Launched in 2018, Miami's ELL Writing Center was created to support the university's commitment to comprehensive internationalization and foster a sense of inclusion for the 3,000 international students on campus.

While the ELL Writing Center is unique in its specific focus on multilingual writers, many campus writing centers have ramped up support for the increasing numbers of international students they host. Other institutions have hired dedicated professional staff who specialize in working with multilingual writers. Brown University's writing center, for instance, employs two professional ELL specialists, one who supports undergraduate students and another who works with graduate students.

A 2015 study, *International Students at the University of California: The Impact on Writing Center Practice*, traced how a growing international population affected the writing centers at three University of California campuses. The authors found that international students were significantly overrepresented among writing center users compared to their overall proportion of the student population.

In addition to increased demand for services, the study notes that "existing writing center staff may not have the specialized training necessary to optimally serve an international student clientele. This can lead to significant challenges for writing centers, but center personnel also recognize that they can play a significant role in promoting the academic success of a changing student population."

### A Win-Win for Student Consultants

The study results point to a need for writing center consultants, who are often undergraduate peer tutors, to receive specialized training necessary. At Miami, consultants take a semester-long

course where they are trained in second language acquisition and English as a Second Language writing theories. The idea is not to offer proofreading or editing services, but to help non-native English speakers become more aware of their own writing process.

“We discuss strategies that our consultants can use to help students to correct their own errors,” says coordinator Larysa Bobrova. “The consultants who work with multilingual writers need training that covers a variety of culturally responsive pedagogical techniques and strategies for consulting at different stages of the writing process.”

Writing consultant Sydni Moore, who took the class last year, says they spent a lot of time talking about what it means to be a multilingual writer. “It was really good training in how to identify and anticipate the issues that international students might have and be able to effectively communicate with them in a way that allows them to identify and correct their own problems instead of us just editing their papers,” says Moore, a senior majoring in marketing and Spanish.

Writing center consultants working with international students also need to learn intercultural competence. “The idea of what constitutes good writing shifts across cultures. And so you can’t make judgments,” says Noreen Lape, director of the writing program and associate provost of academic affairs at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Claire Do, an international student from Vietnam, works with other international students in the English Language Learner Writing Center at Miami University in Ohio.



Dickinson’s Norman M. Eberly Multilingual Writing Center is the only writing center in the United States that offers tutoring services in both English and the 11 modern languages taught at the college. According to Lape, the writing center tries to flout what she calls “native speaker privilege.”

Similarly, Bobrova says that it’s not necessary to be a native speaker to write persuasively in a language. “This is something that both our students and our faculty need to know in order to make their pedagogy inclusive and to celebrate the diversity of language and cultures,” she says.

That’s why international students with strong English skills like Do make excellent writing consultants. “At Dickinson, we have native speakers tutoring in the language, but right now we [also] have about seven Vietnamese students and other international students tutoring English writing,” Lape says.

## A Nexus for Collaboration

Because they straddle academic affairs and student support services, writing centers are uniquely positioned to foster collaboration between different units supporting international students. Dickinson’s Multilingual Writing Center, for instance, came about as the result of collaboration between writing faculty, international student services, and foreign language faculty.

At San Jose State University, the writing center has partnered with international student services to offer a series of workshops for international students on topics such as email etiquette and professional communication, plagiarism and paraphrasing, and PowerPoint design. An increasing number of writing centers also are expanding their services to include tutoring in public speaking and opportunities for informal conversation.

In addition to the academic support they provide for international students, writing centers also provide a space for domestic and international students to interact. “I absolutely love working at the ELL Writing Center because it is a chance to really connect with the international students,” says Moore. “Some of them are just there to improve their writing, but almost every time they tell me, ‘I really enjoy being able to talk to American students.’” ■

**CHARLOTTE WEST** is a freelance writer who has contributed to *IE* since 2007.

## Resources

*From English-Centric to Multilingual: The Norman M. Eberly Multilingual Writing Center at Dickinson College:* [bit.ly/2o1CokK](https://bit.ly/2o1CokK)

*International Students at the University of California: The Impact on Writing Center Practice:* [bit.ly/32EmFXC](https://bit.ly/32EmFXC)

The English Language Learner Writing Center at Miami University: [miamioh.edu/ellwc](https://miamioh.edu/ellwc)

The Norman M. Eberly Multilingual Writing Center at Dickinson College: [bit.ly/2MrgiBl](https://bit.ly/2MrgiBl)