Strategic plan idea: Building a Province-wide Online Writing Centre

Executive Summary
I propose that we leverage our existing writing studies leadership, resources, and expertise at the 5 University of Alberta writing centres to build an online writing centre to serve both U of A students and post-secondary student from across Alberta. This online centre would support U of A students on all campuses and in online programs and could also support eCampusAlberta students at the other 25 post-secondary institutions in Alberta (the majority of which do not have writing centres at all).

The increasing desire and propensity of undergraduate students to access knowledge online, together with the trend toward more blended and entirely online degree programming, makes the provision of writing support online even more important for achieving degree outcomes for communication skills (p. 141, Campus Alberta Quality Council Handbook). Existing and new content posted online would be linked to the new peer review software (The Game of Writing) developed in the Faculty of Arts to support writing courses at the U of A. This facility would offer a secure platform for students to help other students for free, and for paid and trained undergraduate students to provide commentary on student drafts.

A province-wide online writing centre would cement the U of A’s leadership position in writing support within the province and extend it across the country and beyond.

Costs
The costs for development could be covered from six sources:

1. eCampusAlberta, which currently spends $150,000 to provide approximately 1700 reviews of student papers;
2. retain current U of Alberta fees to the eCampusAlberta group (approximately $20,000/yr) that we could use as for development (eCampusAlberta might accept the work done on the online writing centre as an in-kind payment rather than a cash transfer);
3. re-deploy the current $40,000 Writing Across the Curriculum budget to support the development of this tool;
4. propose that the Government of Alberta fund this as an open educational resource (OER) initiative;
5. partner with the British Columbia equivalent of eCampusAlberta, BC Campus; they also outsourced writing tutoring (WriteAway.ca) and might be interested in developing a shared online resource;
6. apply for higher education innovation funding from organizations such as the Gates Foundation and the Lilly Foundation;
7. Write partnership grants from SSHRC if we partner with other levels of education (secondary school boards such as Edmonton Public Schools) and workplace writing improvement (Enmax Energy, Epcor).

Together these funds could be used to hire undergraduate and graduate students to create more resources for the site and to provide feedback to other students from across the province on their writing.

**Scalability & Student Engagement**

Instructors from courses at any campus could set up virtual spaces exclusively for students in their classes to access; peer review through those sites would not involve additional costs for paid tutors, and that makes this part of the solution scalable financially. The use of gamification strategies has the potential to drive engagement among non-paid students (ratings for good comments, for example, might drive students to achieve status within the system; rewards, such as access to paid tutors, might depend on the amount and quality of participation by non-paid students).

Paid tutoring costs would still expand as volume increased, however. A scheme for distributing those costs among the institutions (beyond the eCampusAlberta $150,000 fund) would still need to be worked out. For context, the Centre for Writers (one of the 5 writing centres at the U of A) saw over 4600 students with a budget of less than $100,000 in 2014/15.

**Proof of Concept**

The Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL) is the oldest and most well-known online writing resource (over 30 years old). No parallel site exists in Canada, despite the widespread prevalence of writing centres at post-secondary institutions in Canada.

We propose an online writing resource that goes **beyond** just content (pages, documents) by providing a platform to **support feedback** by peers, undergraduate paid tutors, graduate tutors, and instructors.

We have the beginnings of the kinds of document-based resources we need on the current Centre for Writers website (http://c4w.ualberta.ca/en/resources.aspx; http://c4w.ualberta.ca/en/online-tutoring.aspx) and at the Bilingual Writing Centre at Campus St. Jean (https://uofa.ualberta.ca/campus-saint-jean/vie-etudiante/services-aux-etudiants/centre-ecriture-bilingue/ressources-pour-les-etudiants).

We also have a well-developed Game of Writing software system (gwrit.ualberta.ca) that supports peer feedback for large (200 student) writing classes in Writing Studies 102 each term. This software has been designed and programmed for large-scale usage and has been developed exclusively at the U of A.
Next Steps

1. Develop a fuller proposal in consultation with writing centre directors here and at other schools in Alberta (and BC if they are interested in partnering).
2. Form an Advisory Committee from these directors to provide guidance for the development of the online resource.
3. Write funding proposals based on the proposal/plan developed in step 1.
4. Approach the Faculty of Arts to negotiate costs for using the Game of Writing software and adapting it to this new context.
5. Consult with IST re. possible cost scenarios for hosting the online site either at the U of A or via cloud hosting services.
6. Create a development timetable based on funding and partnership agreements.