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Writing Theories and Practices

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Writing Center Space: Crafting Our Campus Identity

“If you write, you belong here!” our motto exclaims, inviting all student writers to engage with Trinity College’s Writing Center, and promising that they will improve as writers through a collaborative and nurturing process. These claims perfectly reflect modern writing center pedagogies, which maintain that writing centers must be non-institutional spaces where tutors focus on fostering individual writers instead of “fixing” specific pieces of writing. However, simply stating the values of our Writing Center is not as powerful as showing them through the way in which we arrange our space. Everything from the entrance to the furniture to the sensory atmosphere of a writing center influences the way students subconsciously perceive the type of space they have entered. For example, if a student feels that they have entered an institutional space, they will be more likely to look to the tutor for the “right” answers. On the contrary, a space that feels like home will put the student at ease to more openly discuss their writing. Trinity College’s Writing Center has come a long way in its quest to create the latter space, but there are still many short-term and long-term improvements that can be made. The following research will investigate how different aspects of space contribute the creation of a collaborative, nurturing and flexible environment for our Writing Center.

Before we can analyze aspects of space, we must first define more specifically the desired identity of our writing center and how space fits into it. Shiffman introduces the idea of a “midwife teacher,” who has the power to “deliver new understanding and knowledge through an

interchange of ideas or negotiation rather than by merely depositing information into the students' minds" (2). This means that the student takes an active role in the learning process and his or her ideas are just as valuable as the tutor's. It is important to keep in mind that this unique setup where "the student is the driving force, the person in charge, the one who decides that instruction is needed, and... the subject upon whom the tutor focuses" means that the success of the session ultimately depends on the student (Shiffman 4). However, students may not understand this since our format is so entirely different from the typical academic structure that they are used to. This is where space comes into play. If students enter a room that looks nothing like a typical classroom, they will sense that the Writing Center stands apart from the clear teacher-student power structure that they are familiar with. And as long as this space is unfamiliar but not uncomfortable—more on that later—the students who enter our writing center will feel open to "experience being part of an academic community" (Glushko and Griffin). After all, that's what a writing center is at its core: an open academic community.

One of the greatest factors in defining a community is space. "The look and feel of architectural spaces does influence its occupants and visitors" (Hadfield, et al. 167). It is important to note this inclusion of occupants in addition to visitors. Tutors spend the most time in our respective writing centers, and we too feel the effects of the space around us. While the tutors at Trinity College understand that our Writing Center is grounded in focusing on the writer instead of the writing and have been taught tutoring strategies that best yield highly collaborative sessions, everyone slips into simply feeding students the "correct" answers once in a while. I have personally noticed that I do this more frequently when I have been in the space for a long time and am starting to feel the harsh lighting or the pressing silence. In order to prevent space from interfering with our abilities to be patient and empathetic tutors, we must "work toward

creating a collaborative environment for ourselves and our students” (Mageebon 9). Another important aspect of our writing community is the idea that writing is a highly intimate form of expression, and if collaboration is going to work, everyone involved needs to feel secure. Our sense of security is inexorably tied to space, and “providing a liberatory environment for developing writers” should be a top priority for all writing centers (Shiffman 5). With all this in mind, the ideal writing center space is one that is comfortable, nurturing, more reminiscent of home than a traditional classroom and feels like a community.

The feeling of home is important in any learning space, but it is essential for a writing center space. One cannot underestimate that value of “home and hominess,” and “architectural theorists” emphasize the importance of creating a space that makes people feel “happy, productive, creative and social” (Hadfield et al. 170). While this seems self-evident, many of the spaces we encounter on a daily basis fail to positively affect our mood and social interactions. In fact, quite a few of the classrooms on Trinity’s campus were designed to be functional, but aesthetic value does not seem to have been taken into account. The problem with this is that human beings need to feel a certain level of comfort in order to learn and an even higher level of comfort in order to write. In general, students are most likely to “feel comfortable learning in a space that they have control over,” such as their own home (Howard and Schendel 2). Although most learning must occur outside of the home, it is easy to mimic the feeling of being at home with the right furniture and ambience. This is particularly important for a writing center because we need our students to feel at ease and open to learning something new about writing. A space designed with home in mind also suggests the feminine qualities—nurturing, caring, empathy—that writing centers prize. And the design of such a space is a collaboration in and of itself: “the collaboration of experts—those in design and those in writing—who come together in a

participatory, iterative process” all to help us craft “an identity that speaks implicitly to [our] patrons” (Hadfield et al. 175). The clearest way to establish our Writing Center’s identity as a nurturing and collaborative place is through conscientious design; we must consider the implications of every architectural decision from the location to the minute interior details.

The initial impact of a writing center’s space can be traced to its position on campus. Before students even enter the writing center, they must locate it, and they will form their first assumptions based on that location. It would be ideal if all writing centers could be “found in places in which learning is intended to be collaborative and where students discover how to make meaning as writers using the writing process” (Mageebon 9-10). A writing center will more easily communicate its message if the building or department in which it is housed is also known to value collaboration and self-discovery. Our Writing Center is housed in the English Department Building, which is quite fitting since the building itself is a house, and our English Department is known for being a welcoming and nurturing community (Figure 1). On the other hand, it is on the North edge of campus—fairly isolated from the rest of the academic community. There is a trend of writing centers attempting to improve their location by “migrat[ing] from the edges of campus life to the very heart” of campus (Shiffman 5). Placing a writing center in the center of campus makes it appear more welcoming to everyone in the campus community, rather than implying, for example, that it is a space to be primarily used by English majors. A writing center in the heart of campus also symbolically suggests that student writing is a core concern and makes seeking our help convenient for students on all ends of campus. This being said, a writing center should be “in the center of campus, but away from the hustle and bustle—a quiet place where students could center their emotions and energies and write” (Glushko and Griffin). It is necessary that a writing center have a certain level of isolation

in order to help students forget their daily stressors. While it is often impossible to find the perfect location, these are all factors that should be taken into consideration.

Once students locate a writing center, the entrance is the next crucial aspect of space that will set the tone for the session to come. The goal for an entryway should be that “students walking in the door know they are not there to get someone to correct or edit their papers for them” (Harris 7). In other words, we must find the most effective way to communicate our writing center’s purpose and identity through the setup of our entrance. The easiest way to do this could be with a bulletin board that provides a sense of who we are and what we do. “Bulletin boards outside the entrance demystify tutoring for the first time visitor by offering explanations” (Hadfield et al. 171). However, if we’re going to rely on a bulletin board to make a noticeable impact, it has to be impossible to miss, (due to its placement, size, use of bright colors, etc.) Our bulletin board, for example, does its best to convey our message, but it is not eye-catching enough that a student would stop and read it before entering for the first time. Another idea similar to a bulletin board is a “wooden door hang” expressing our hours and mission statement (Girgensohn). I think this may be slightly more effective in terms of drawing attention because door hangs are not as common as bulletin boards, and they also feel more “homey” and welcoming.

Going beyond signs, the ultimate way to give students a sense of our Writing Center before they enter is by making the space completely visible from the outside. Glass walls would easily accomplish this task, ensuring that anyone walking by “can see tutors and students working together and get a sense of what’s going on in the center before they actually decide to step through our door” (Glushko and Griffin). While I think this would work wonderfully in terms of enhancing people’s understanding of a writing center from the outside, it may be

detrimental to the tutoring sessions on the inside. Some students—and even tutors—may feel overly exposed if everyone walking by can see them, or they may find themselves too easily distracted by these passersby. A compromise may be to have one glass wall that is just obstructed enough—by a couch, or a bookshelf for example—to allow people to see inside the writing center without those inside feeling completely exposed (Figure 2). Meanwhile, once students make the decision to enter, it is important to have someone waiting at the front to welcome them. Most writing centers, ours included, have a reception desk to greet and direct students who come in for a tutoring session. In addition, Mageebon requests in his own writing center “that one tutor remain in the front space to greet students or answer student questions” (11). This could aid the creation of a writing center community by allowing tutors to pop in to other sessions with advice or help students in a more informal manner. To prevent the creation of a hierarchy where this tutor in the front is seen as the “head tutor,” who holds all the solutions, the tutors could constantly switch between their formal sessions and being “on call.” Because first impressions are so easily skewed, setting up the entrance of a space is tricky, and creating the right tone may require some trial and error.

Moving on to the room itself, furniture is always a good indicator of both the function and tone of a space. In terms of function, the room must present itself as “multifunctional” with the use of moveable tables and chairs (Girgensohn). Tables and chairs on wheels send the message that this is a flexible environment; we are able to adapt our space to various needs, and we are able to tailor our tutoring strategies to each individual student. Not only does moveable furniture suggest flexibility, but “small things like moveable seats and tables in a writing environment allow users to feel control” (Howard and Schendel 3). Although visitors are unlikely to take the initiative to reorganize the space, the mere thought that they have that option

is both a comforting and empowering introduction to their tutoring sessions. Our Writing Center has moveable furniture, and though it often remains unmoved throughout the night, it still manages to send the message of adaptability. But since the furniture often does remain unmoved, a good starting arrangement involves “distributing the tables like small islands ready for conversations” (Girgensohn). Each tutoring session should have its own little space to allow for more intimate conversations. Within these conversations, there is the suggestion that “the tutor and student sit side-by-side, so the student understands the tutor is a collaborator in the writing process” (Mageebon 10). Round tables allow students to sit “side-by-side” but at enough of an angle that they can make comfortable eye-contact. I am actually fond of our square tables that allow students to sit comfortably at a ninety-degree angle but with no head of the table. Furniture mobility and placement sends a symbolic message about a writing center’s flexibility and sense of authority—or lack thereof.

The look of the furniture itself influences the tone of the space. Glushko and Griffin advocate “new fun, comfy furniture” over the “unforgiving oak furniture” typically found in academic spaces. Fun and comfy furniture creates a relaxed but energetic atmosphere perfectly tailored to informal but productive conversation. Harris suggests that this furniture be “slightly dilapidated and comfortable with no possibility of being mistaken for the stuff that can only be described as motel modern” (7). Though we do want to stray from the traditional, we should err on the side of comfort over modernity. A writing center should feel close to home, and anything that tries to send a forced message of creativity—like oddly shaped chairs and couches—may isolate the student. On that note, a writing center should stay away from bold patterns and choose calming colors, like “soft green fabrics, green being a universally accepted and reassuring color” (Hadfield et al. 171). Our new, dark blue armchairs follow these guidelines pretty well, though

the ideal would be a slightly worn but comfy mix of couches and armchairs that one may be find in a coffee shop or in the comfort of their own home. In addition, in the ideal center, “tables and shelves are made from light wood, which warms the room” (172). Our white, plastic tables do have a harsher, colder effect than that of light wood, but realistically speaking, it may be difficult to find wooden tables that are so easily moveable. Therefore, choosing the right furniture for a writing center essentially requires balancing feelings of innovation and flexibility with those of familiarity and comfort.

Wall décor also plays a key role in creating a bright and welcoming identity for our Writing Center. Our plain walls could be significantly improved with a quick addition of the appropriate décor. Any space, even with “white walls” can be made “bright and colorful” with artwork, particularly if we chose “to display student artwork” (Glushko and Griffin). We might consider initially seeking artwork right at home: from our tutors and coordinators. This would help paint us as creative, relatable individuals. Some other suggestions include bulletin boards, a writing center schedule and tutor photos and biographies, which would all be “intended to make the space friendlier for students by providing interesting information about writing skills and making the space more attractive” (Mageebon 10). I might add to this list posters or little wooden signs with famous quotes about writing—particularly ones that encourage individuality and the idea that anyone and everyone can be a writer. Classic comic strips about writing could be a cute addition as well. Grammatically-themed posters from the 90’s that can be found in every high school English classroom should be avoided at all costs. We could also take better advantage of our white board space. Glushko and Griffin used theirs to post GRE vocabulary words (Figure 3). Funny or rare vocabulary words with illustrations may more effectively create

a relaxed, test and grade-free environment. A writing center's wall décor, though relevant to writing, should be inspiring or humorous rather than strictly informative.

Wall décor is just part of an overall sensory atmosphere that sets the mood of a writing center. Sights, smells and sounds both consciously and subconsciously effect tutors and students in the space. Lighting plays a significant role in the creation of the desired sensory atmosphere. Harsh, unnatural lighting aggravates the senses, creating a stressful environment that is reminiscent of institutional spaces (e.g. high school classrooms, hospitals, the Department of Motor Vehicles, etc.). To avoid this, writing centers should consider "indirect cove lighting, using warm, fluorescent lamps" that "makes a horizontal line throughout the room, which has a calming effect, bounces off the ceiling and eliminates shadows" (Hadfield et al. 171). Our Writing Center's "institutional wall sconces" are aesthetically pleasing and soften the room with dimmed, indirect light. However, this effect is somewhat canceled out by the overhead lights; although they are not offensively bright, they still cast light directly down upon the sessions. Simpler contributors to general ambience range from flowers and candy bowls to curtains to coffee makers. Curtains soften the look of the windows and the natural light that comes in through these windows—which in our case, take up a significant portion of the room. Candy bowls and fresh flowers show that someone is caring and tending to the space as though it were a home. A coffee machine produces the comforting smell of coffee, and its familiar gurgling sound adds to the background noise (Girgensohn). Writing centers depend on these tiny, feminine touches to create a comforting and nurturing a space.

Because writing centers function around conversations, sound plays a key role in the formation of an ideal sensory atmosphere. "Ideal writing centers don't threaten students by being too quiet, too impersonal, too much like an old-fashioned library or a sterile modern office.

Instead, ideal centers are open, airy and noisy” (Harris 6-7). The idea of a noisy study space wonderfully conflicts with all our previous experiences of study halls and libraries; a writing center is a unique space where lively conversation is encouraged, and there are no stern librarians to “shh” students. The more noise we can naturally create through conversation, the more students will feel comfortable contributing in their sessions. Unfortunately, there are always going to be moments when there is only one tutoring session taking place, and both the student and the tutor feel exposed. We can easily fix this need for “privacy” in addition to a problem of “intelligibility” that may arise when the Writing Center reaches its desired noise level “by recognizing that thick, porous and soft materials absorb more sound than do materials that are dense and hard” (Hadfield et al. 173). Going back to furniture, these are the types of materials we would want to consider for our couches and armchairs, and even the office chairs. Another option is to “mask conversational level dialogue” with a machine that produces “white noise, a subtle, electronically produced background noise” (173). White noise would be a good way to create sound without disrupting sessions, given that it does not feel unnatural. Gentle background music, though slightly more intrusive, may feel more natural. A structural way to create privacy and intimacy would be to section off different parts of the Writing Center, preferably with glass to prevent the feeling of complete isolation from the rest of the center (Figure 4). Some experimentation will hopefully yield the perfect balance between openness and privacy.

A writing center should be noisy not simply to prevent tutors and students from feeling exposed, but to create a sense of liveliness throughout the center. Harris describes the ideal writing center as a “lively, active, frenetic place in need of a traffic cop and a bit of straightening up” (6). This seems a little dramatic, since we do not want to give off the impression that we’re overwhelmed and disorganized, but that is the level of energy we should aspire to. Our Writing

Center should be lively to reflect the fact that writing is an integral part of life on campus. Trinity College is “shaped by an accumulation of actual human experience,” and the Writing Center is “a place fit for other, newer experiences—a place far fitter than any impersonal and inflexible environment ever could be” (Hadfield et al. 168-169). We are the bridge between campus life inside and outside of the classroom, and in some cases, we even bridge a gap between campus and the real world. This results when we look at resumes, cover letters, or graduate school applications—pieces of writing that “often result in life changes, demonstrating concretely the role writing can play in life” (Shiffman 3). Moreover, the mere fact that we are a space that exists outside of grades and grounds itself in conversation, we create “a much more natural situation, one more akin to the ‘real world’ that students will eventually be writing within” (4). We should draw attention to the important role we play in students’ lives by making ourselves more of a prevalent, lively presence on campus.

One way to make our Writing Center more of a living space would be to open it up for use outside of tutoring sessions and the training class for Writing Associates. One way to do this would be by “making the space more friendly to those who wish to write instead of going just to get writing help” in order to “show writers that we understand the many facets of the process” (Howard and Schendel 4). A full-embodied writing center should not only facilitate “conversation about writing” but also “the physical act of writing itself” (4). If students were to think of the Writing Center as a study place, not only would it be filled with the energies of more writers, but it would also give more students a chance to see how our tutoring sessions work before signing up for one. It may be difficult to implement this, and to start, we would probably have to encourage tutors to come to the Writing Center outside of their shifts and bring friends and classmates to work on writing assignments. An even stronger way to integrate the Writing

Center into campus life would be to host campus events. A writing center at the European University Viadrina hosts a “Long Night Against Procrastination” and a “writing marathon” to draw students in (Girgensohn). I think it would be a great idea to host a similar event. We could provide midnight pizza and invite students to come in and work on all the assignments they have been putting off. Another thing to consider would be reaching out to other departments and groups on campus for event ideas to establish a greater presence in campus life. Our space must be more than aesthetically pleasing; it must have spirit. At the end of the day, we want to be able to say, “Our Writing Center—it is a living and beautiful space” (Girgensohn).

Our Writing Center has already come a long way in the quest to create a nurturing environment. Not long ago, we had a large, wooden conference tables that remained pushed together, “industrial white” walls, blue, plastic chairs, harsh overhead lighting and a rather sad couch (Figures 5-6). Now that the space has been re-vamped, it much more closely resembles the image of the ideal writing center that these various theories have pieced together. The small, square tables on wheels and rolling comfy chairs are perfect for promoting our flexibility in terms of catering to each individual student. Our new armchairs are much more inviting and provide a comfy, intimate study space. The large windows in the space provide a sense of openness and draw in a lot of natural light. The “institutional wall sconces” that were recently installed add warmth to the room. Even the choice of “silver sage” over “industrial white” walls makes a huge difference in the creation of a calming, comforting space (Figures 7-8). That being said, there is always room for improvement. Unfortunately, we do not have the means to start from scratch and build the “perfect” Writing Center that will put all other writing centers to shame. However, there are definitely some cheap, short-term ways to improve upon what we already have, and the rest can be taken into account in a larger, more long-term plan.

There are many small, short-term but significant improvements we could make to Trinity College's Writing Center. The interior appearance of our Writing Center could be greatly improved with student artwork from our Writing Associates and Coordinators, little wooden signs or stick-on letters with quotes about writing, comic strips, and fun words or illustrations on our white board. These details would not only make the room more attractive, but they would give it personality—a light-hearted, creative, lively personality. To add a comforting aspect to this personality, we could warm the room's atmosphere with fresh flowers, a coffee-maker and curtains. The addition of curtains would not only soften the light coming in but also absorb sound so that students feel less exposed in their sessions. We might consider purchasing a white noise machine or playing gentle background music to counter this feeling as well. I would also suggest either eliminating or moving the portrait of Allan K. Smith because the way it is positioned so that he is staring directly at tutoring sessions is not only unsettling but also suggests that we are being watched—by a patriarchal figure, nonetheless (Figure 9). This directly goes against our mission to create a space that depends on supporting and nurturing writers, a place free from distinct judgments of “right and wrong.” Finally, we need to consider making the Writing Center a living space. I love the idea of having an event like a “Long Night Against Procrastination” to draw students in. We could also have a lecture series about writing; we could invite professors from different departments to give talks about writing specifically for their departments. We could even reach out to the Career Development Center to do a workshop on cover letters, applications and resumes, or to Amnesty International to host their letter writing campaign. These are all relatively cheap and simple ways to give our Writing Center a strong and meaningful identity on campus.

Now looking at our Writing Center from a long-term perspective, there are much bigger changes that we could consider if given the opportunity. Our location in the English Department Building, though a nice addition to the community of the English Department, is not ideal for a writing center that hopes to attract all writers from all parts of campus life. To start, we are much too far from the center of campus, where the most integral aspects of campus life should logically place themselves. Our connection with the English Department is wonderful, but our placement in the English Department Building implies that we exist primarily to serve English majors and are not as well suited for all types of writing. We are also placed in the back corner of the building, making our center closed off and difficult to locate. We want our center to be open and visible and frequently passed by. Therefore, if we were to construct a new center in the heart of campus, we would probably want to consider the idea of partial glass walls to allow students to see the interactions inside beforehand. A good space to consider—either as an inspiration or for actual use—may be the space that is currently the Cave, which in a few months will no longer exist (Figures 10-12). In this new space, we would want to take into account all the same suggestions about wall décor, sensory atmosphere and liveliness as in our old space. Assuming this space were larger, we could leave more space between the tables and create more comfy study spaces with couches and armchairs. The old space in the English Department Building could then be one of our satellites to address the fact that our satellite spaces are poorly equipped for tutoring sessions. There is also an inherent structural problem of placing our satellites closer to the center of campus than our main “center.” These long-term plans should be kept at the front of our minds in case the opportunity arises so that we can make ourselves a more convenient and inviting resource to students.

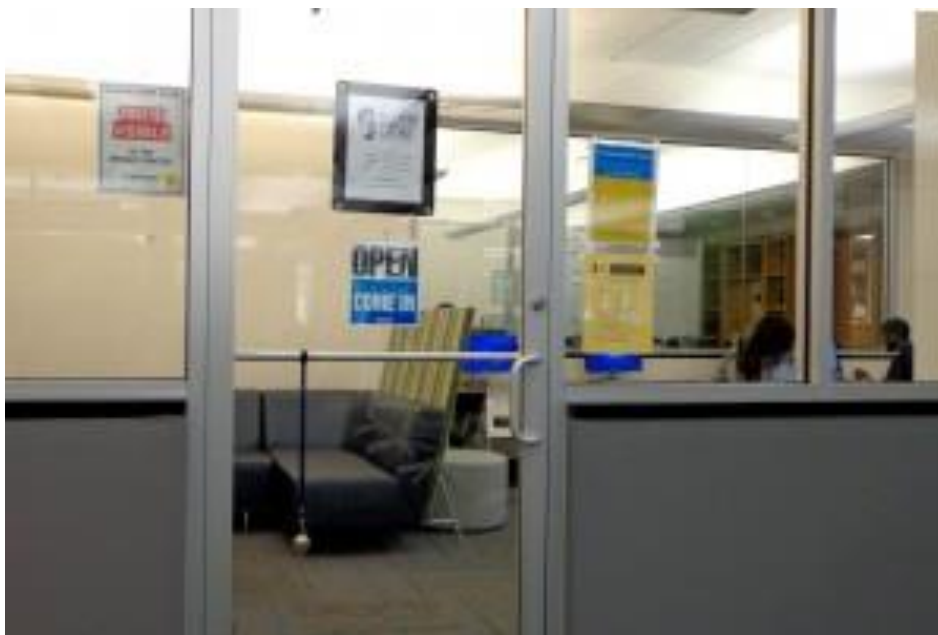
There are many ways to alter our space to better convey the message that we are a collaborative community which values the individual writer over the piece of writing. Some of these include simple physical changes such as wall décor, to make the space more friendly, and different devices to control background noise. There are also changes that can be made to affect our intangible atmosphere: the feeling that we are a living, breathing community that reaches across campus. We can change our identity as solely a tutoring space to a space devoted to all writing by hosting campus-wide events that connect with other departments and groups on campus. The most complicated changes involve moving our main center to the very heart of campus and starting from scratch. Unfortunately, as much as we like to isolate ourselves from the world of authority, rules, and rejection of new ideas, many of these changes depend upon a tight financial budget and approval from those in charge of various spaces on campus. However, it is essential that we take advantage of any opportunities that come our way because improving our space is essential to successfully communicating our identity as a collaborative, nurturing and flexible environment. Just as a young creative writers are taught to “show” instead of “tell,” showing that our space is a welcoming, lively resource for all writers on campus is the most powerful way of saying, “If you write, you belong here.”

Figure 1:



English Department Building Exterior
Photo taken by Tennyson O'Donnell

Figure 2:



Example of a Writing Center Entrance
Glushko and Griffin

Figure 3:



Use of the white board a colorful décor for a friendlier space
Glushko and Griffin

Figure 4:



Different sections of a writing center
Glushko and Griffin

Figure 5:



Trinity College Writing Center's old conference table
Photo taken by Tennyson O'Donnell

Figure 6:



A sad, empty corner with a sad couch
Photo taken by Tennyson O'Donnell

Figure 7:



New tables, chairs, wall color and lighting
Photo taken by Tennyson O'Donnell

Figure 8:



Our Writing Center in action
From the Writing Center page on Trinity College's website

Figure 9:



An otherwise comfy space guarded by Allan K. Smith's portrait
From Trinity College Writing Center's Flickr Page

Figure 10:



The Cave's Interior: a wide open study space

Figure 11:



A partial view of the Cave from the patio outside

Figure 12:



A partial view of the Cave from inside Mather Hall

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