# Writing Centers in Mexico: Specificities and Challenges in the Development of Academic Enculturation Initiatives

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## Abstract

Academic literacy is a key challenge at secondary and higher education levels in Mexico, where institutions face challenges in promoting writing skills among students. Against this backdrop, writing centers have emerged as initiatives to support students' academic training. However, there is still a lack of studies that analyze their organizational characteristics, pedagogical strategies, and specific challenges in the Mexican context in a comparative and descriptive manner. This absence limits the replicability of successful models and the strengthening of collaborative networks that promote academic enculturation in the country. Based on this, this study focuses on some of the centers that have emerged in Mexico and explores their creation, evolution, consolidation, and outreach strategies. With a qualitative approach, comparative design, and descriptive scope, this research analyzes three centers selected as paradigmatic cases through semi-structured interviews with their coordinators, complemented by a literature review and qualitative data analysis based on a categorical matrix. The results identify common patterns, differences, and specific contextual challenges. These findings contribute to the

development of a theoretical-practical framework to guide the strengthening of writing centers in Mexico. In addition, they can serve as guidelines for improving the sustainability of these initiatives and promoting collaborations that consolidate academic literacy as a path to academic enculturation (Carlino, 2013) in the country. This work may be relevant for academics, administrators, and education policymakers interested in strengthening writing skills.

*Key words:* writing centers, Mexico, enculturación académica

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**the Development of Academic Enculturation Initiatives**

Academic literacy is a critical challenge in upper secondary and higher education contexts in Mexico, as it is a challenging environment for many students who will be encountering texts that increasingly incorporate academic elements for the first time. Although writing centers (WCs) have emerged as key initiatives to address this problem, and the literature indicates that the first WCs were implemented in Mexico a couple of decades ago (Ayala, 2024), there is currently a lack of studies that analyze their organizational characteristics, pedagogical strategies, and specific challenges in the Mexican context in a comparative and descriptive manner. This absence limits the replicability of successful models and the strengthening of collaborative networks that promote academic literacy in the country.

\        For their part, the impact of WCs goes beyond the individual sphere of students; they function as catalysts for change in educational institutions by promoting educational policies oriented toward writing as a cross-cutting competency (Rengifo-Mattos & Ochoa-Villanueva, 2024) and also involve other educational actors such as academics, administrators, teachers, and tutors in these transformations. This is achieved through the creation of learning communities and the integration of writing into curricula.

However, their sustainability represents a challenge. Their consolidation depends on solid institutional support, the continuous training of their tutors and staff, and research that supports their impact and effectiveness (Molina-Natera, 2012). Collaboration between centers, such as that promoted by the Red Mexicana de Centros de Escritura (Mexican Network of Writing Centers, RMCE) since 2015, is essential to strengthen their role and share experiences that enable them to address these challenges.

Given the above, this research pursues the following objectives:

***a) General Objective***

Analyze the organizational characteristics, pedagogical strategies, and challenges of Mexican WCs in order to construct a theoretical-practical framework to guide the strengthening and sustainability of these initiatives at the secondary and higher education levels.

### b) Specific Objectives

1. Describe the organizational and operational characteristics of the WCs operating in Mexico selected for the study.

2. Examine the pedagogical strategies implemented by these centers to promote academic writing among students.

3. Identify the main challenges and collaboration strategies faced by these centers in terms of implementation, sustainability, and institutional acceptance.

### c) Research Questions

1. What are the organizational and operational characteristics of the WC that have emerged in Mexico?

2. What pedagogical strategies do these centers implement to promote academic writing among students?

3. What are the main challenges and collaboration strategies faced by WCs in terms of implementation, sustainability, and institutional acceptance?

## Theoretical Framework

**Writing Centers and Academic Enculturation**

Writing centers are academic spaces dedicated to developing students' writing skills through personalized tutoring and workshops. Their purpose is to foster autonomy in learning, consolidate critical thinking, and improve academic writing practices (Molina-Natera, 2012). These spaces integrate participatory methodologies and a student-centered approach, promoting both individual development and institutional transformation (Carlino, 2013).

In addition to offering writing tools, the centers play a crucial role in the process of academic enculturation, understood as the integration of students into the practices, values, and forms of knowledge characteristic of academic communities (Carlino, 2013). This approach transcends the teaching of skills by questioning and negotiating the explicit and implicit norms of disciplines and promoting more critical and conscious participation in the production of knowledge (Navarro, 2024).

Rather than acting as levelers, academic advisors serve as mediators who guide students in constructing meaning and articulating complex ideas (Molina-Natera, 2012). This support enables students to develop the skills necessary to appropriate specific discursive genres and actively participate in their disciplinary communities. As a sociocultural process, academic literacy requires ongoing guidance so that students understand the communicative and epistemological purposes of their disciplines (Carlino, 2013).

As mentioned above, academic enculturation involves not only technical skills, but also the internalization of academic norms and values. Tutors integrate models and practices that connect students' work with the real contexts of use in their disciplines, in order to strengthen their identity as active members of the academic community. Their dialogic approach, especially present in tutorials, encourages collaborative learning and critical reflection, which generate environments conducive to the exchange of ideas and the co-construction of knowledge, benefiting both students and tutors and teachers, in order to consolidate an institutional culture that values writing as a key tool for learning and research (RMCE, 2024).

In short, WCs are essential pillars for academic enculturation, as they facilitate students' transition to the discursive communities of academia through dialogic and participatory approaches that transcend the technical teaching of writing. Their ability to transform educational dynamics and consolidate an institutional academic culture positions them as key players in contemporary higher education.

This implies that CE should adopt a transformative approach, in which writing is used not only as a learning tool, but also as a means to democratize access to knowledge and foster a more inclusive dialogue. In this process, justice constitutes an ethical principle that guides writing teaching practices toward the construction of a more pluralistic and accessible academia (Navarro, 2024).

**Teaching Strategies in Writing Centers**

In Latin America, there is growing interest in studying initiatives that seek to facilitate the development of reading and writing skills among university students. The most common in the region are introductory reading and writing courses, WC, and writing programs that, through various practices, contribute to the aforementioned goal (Molina-Natera & López-Gil, 2020).

However, the emergence and development of these initiatives has resulted in a complex history and a heterogeneous set of proposals. Therefore, the diversity of writing centers and programs in the region currently warrants study (Molina-Natera, 2015).

With regard to introductory courses and writing programs, a distinguishing factor of most WCs is their focus on supporting students through personalized tutoring as a pedagogical strategy. Therefore, although many WCs offer different services, tutoring remains the most recognized in Latin America.

Since the end of the last century, it has been argued that the primary responsibility of a writing center should be one-on-one work with the writer (Harris, 1995). According to Harris, it is in tutoring that writers truly acquire the practice of writing and practical knowledge about their writing processes and about themselves. Therefore, it is important to distinguish the role of the tutor from that of the teacher and the dynamics of tutoring from those of the classroom, with their corresponding contributions.

With regard to the role of the tutor, Harris argues that, unlike teachers, tutors are figures of support, motivation, and mediation between what the tutee does and what they should do; between what they know and what they should know. In this way, tutors are intermediaries of academic enculturation, as they accompany tutees in the process of recognizing and distinguishing their reading and writing practices from disciplinary academic practices. With regard to the dynamics of tutoring, the author argues that it is the tutorial interaction that allows the tutee to play an active role, and points out the importance of conversation as a means of interaction that makes it possible to reflect on and practice different aspects of writing.

In this way, conversation enables the tutor to apply various scaffolding strategies, including asking questions. In other words, it is not the tutee who goes to the WC to ask questions, but rather the tutor who asks the tutee questions so that the tutee can discover for themselves the answers they need to improve their practice. In this way, the act of asking questions by the tutor to the tutee is a fundamental strategy for triggering and regulating cognitive processes, which eventually contributes to truly collaborative learning in which both are enriched (Calle-Arango, 2019).

Although these characteristics mean that tutoring continues to be the service most associated with WCs, it is also true that their work has diversified. Harris herself later acknowledges this: "centers have expanded to offer many additional services so that providing one-on-one interactions with writers does not define everything that writing centers can offer their institutions" (Harris, 2015, p. 10). In fact, in recent decades, this diversification of pedagogical strategies in WCs has also become part of the research agenda.

For the Latin American context, and in particular for Mexico, this statement is important in order to raise awareness that WCs—still unknown in many educational contexts in the country—are often also responsible for implementing writing activities throughout the curriculum, in addition to offering tutoring (Bazerman et al., 2016). Among these services and activities, we can identify those that seek to provide group support through courses, workshops, retreats, and groups; those that seek to provide individualized and personalized support, such as tutoring, advising, and consulting; and those that seek to impact a broad audience through resources and manuals (RMCE, 2024).

In this sense, analyzing the pedagogical strategies used in WCs in Mexico involves not only analyzing tutoring, but also its diversification based on technological development (López-Gil, 2015) and the services that complement it or are implemented in parallel, with the intention of also providing support to students. These services, like tutoring, are generally approached from sociocultural perspectives that recognize writing as a practice situated and mediated by specific contexts (Carlino, 2005). Thus, WCs have developed in different ways, so their approaches and pedagogical strategies also vary, making their study relevant.

**Main Challenges of Writing Centers**

WCs face various challenges in terms of their configuration, sustainability, institutional acceptance, available resources, and opportunities for growth. This has been a constant since their origins, which date back to Anglo-Saxon writing laboratories—which, in turn, were conceived as spaces for students with difficulties due to the remedial perspective with which they operated (Gavari & Tenca, 2017). Today, however, they are confronted with technologies such as generative artificial intelligence and the need to contribute to more just and inclusive societies

(Rafoth, 2024). Below are some of the most relevant challenges, according to the literature consulted.

When starting a WC, the challenges that usually arise revolve around three aspects: theoretical foundation, collaborative links, and obtaining the resources necessary for its operation. Once operational, it is essential to ensure the continuity, projection, and, if possible, growth of the center. Finally, it is necessary to design and implement mechanisms to evaluate its impact and adjust strategies, resources, and services in an ideally recursive process aimed at constant improvement and updating.

In terms of the management of WCs, it is desirable for those who lead them to have a broad and solid vision of academic literacy. However, the theoretical basis of these centers often includes proposals that are not always consistent or even contradictory, taken from writing or research manuals, guides for the production of certain disciplinary genres, or general research on teaching or learning to write. This reality reveals a certain lack of knowledge or difficulty in accessing specialized literature on the work and experiences of WCs (Molina-Natera & López-Gil, 2020).

This theoretical deficit is related to the recognized lack of opportunities, at least in Latin America, to train as a WC manager. The result is that there are few systematized experiences to address a series of complex tasks ranging from managing a budget or hiring and training tutors and staff in other areas, to researching and publishing, organizing events, providing counseling, and designing materials or assessments. The list can include more than 25 different activities, according to reports by Molina-Natera & López-Gil (2020), which represents an excessive workload for those who manage WCs.

This is important because the development of the person in charge of a WC "goes hand in hand with the development of the program itself and, in the near future, with the development of the community of writing centers and programs in our region" (Molina-Natera & López-Gil, 2020, p. 115). In addition, it should be noted that, often, the work of taking responsibility for a WC is not done on a full-time basis; therefore, the need for leadership capable of building and maintaining a motivated community of tutors or advisors with the appropriate profiles represents an additional challenge. In the case of peer tutors, it is also necessary to ensure that

they are willing to organize their academic career by devoting time to this work, that they understand and accept the conditions—which do not always involve monetary compensation— and that they can successfully complete their replacement cycles.

Another challenge is the creation of collaboration networks between WCs. Although it is common to consult information from already established centers, direct communication is rarely established to request support (Molina-Natera & López-Gil, 2020), which prevents the previous experiences of other centers from being leveraged and can generate feelings of isolation among those who operate them.

Resources are also a constant concern, and among the most important is having a physical space and/or virtual spaces. This need was clearly seen in Anglo-Saxon environments since the emergence of writing labs when, in the 1930s, it was considered essential to allocate specific places to serve those who were seen as insufficiently prepared. This was reinforced in the 1970s, when previous conceptions were being reformulated and language teachers sought spaces in universities other than classrooms to work on improving their students' writing skills and, in parallel, peer tutoring was integrated, which came hand in hand with the proposal for a change in roles in the classroom brought about by constructivist trends (Calle, Pico & Murillo, 2017). Unfortunately, in our country, it is not easy for higher education institutions to allocate space for establishing a WC, and even if such space can be provided, it is not common for it to meet the conditions for proper operation. In addition, interest and commitment from various actors are required, as Flores (2022) states:

> Building a writing center in any institution is a major challenge, since it involves numerous resources that are difficult to obtain and sustain without sufficient institutional support and the will of a committed team. (p. 6)

Another major challenge for an WC that is already in operation is evaluation, which is a complex issue because there is not always clear prior planning in which goals, mission, vision, and indicators have been established. In addition to this, it is difficult to determine the benefits that a center can provide, because they can occur at various levels that are sometimes difficult to specify and may be influenced by uncontrollable variables. In any case, designing and operating evaluation mechanisms requires time and resources. Therefore, when there is no

institutional demand in this regard, it can be tempting to skip the process; however, this can carry risks:

> […] the lack of requests for program evaluation, as is the case with half of them, may indicate a lack of recognition of the contribution that the program can make to academic quality management. It is up to program directors to define their program's mission and periodically review (at least once a year) whether it is following the path defined by that mission to achieve the vision for the center or program (Molina-Natera & López Gil, 2020, p. 115).

Finally, WCs face the challenge of making the community aware of them and fully understanding how they work, recognizing their services, and taking advantage of them (Flores, 2022). At the same time, the perception of these centers as spaces for students with difficulties, as punishment devices, or as places where they take care of what teachers do not have to do, cannot do, or do not want to do must be avoided. This is crucial, as the lack of institutional recognition and dependence on external support limit their sustainability and capacity for growth (Flores, 2022; Molina-Natera, 2012). In this sense, researching these complex challenges contributes to the construction of a clearer picture that allows for the consolidation and improvement of the WC.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The research adopted a qualitative approach with a comparative design and descriptive scope. This approach allows for the analysis and contextualization of the characteristics and strategies of a selection of WCs operating in Mexico. In qualitative methodology, this type of design focuses on analyzing and describing similarities and differences between specific cases or phenomena to understand patterns and contextual relationships (Creswell, 2014; Leavy, 2017). Its procedures include the systematic comparison of multiple cases or situations to identify common and divergent characteristics, providing a deep understanding of the phenomena studied.

### Procedures

- Case selection: Carefully identify the cases to be compared to ensure that they are relevant and provide meaningful information about the phenomenon under study.

- Data collection: Use qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis to obtain detailed information about each case.

- Descriptive analysis: Examine the data from each case individually to develop detailed descriptions, highlighting key and contextual aspects.

- Systematic comparison: Contrast the case descriptions to identify similarities and differences, explore emerging patterns, and contextual relationships.

- Interpretation of findings: Develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study based on the comparisons, in order to provide observations and findings that can inform related theories or practices.

This design is useful for exploring complex phenomena in specific contexts, allowing for a rich and nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play (Creswell, 2014; Leavy, 2017).

*d) Techniques and Instruments*

1. Literature review: An updated literature review was conducted to identify relevant theoretical frameworks and background information on WCs, literacy, academic literacy, and enculturation, as well as pedagogical strategies and sustainability models for centers in Mexico and Latin America.

2. Semi-structured interviews: Remote interviews were conducted with managers, coordinators, and directors of the selected centers in order to obtain relevant information. In centers that had changed managers, both the founding coordinator or director and the current authorities were interviewed. The script included the following categories of questions:

    a. Organization and structure
    b. Pedagogical strategies
    c. Challenges for sustainability
    d. Strategies for collaboration with other institutions

Based on the four categories, a questionnaire with ten open-ended questions was designed (see the instrument in the Appendix).

3. Comparative analysis: The data obtained were structured in a matrix of categories derived from the interviews to facilitate a systematic comparison of the selected cases.

**Population and Sample**

- Population: WCs operating at upper secondary and higher education levels in Mexico were considered.

- Sample: Three WCs were selected as paradigmatic cases by direct invitation, based on criteria such as their track record and permanence. The name of each entity studied, the higher education institution with which it is associated, the city, and the year of foundation of each are indicated below:

  - Centro de Aprendizaje, Redacción y Lenguas (Learning, Writing, and Language Center, CARLE), Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico, ITAM), Mexico City (2005)

  - Centro para el Aprendizaje de la Escritura Académica y el Pensamiento Crítico (Center for Academic Writing and Critical Thinking, CAEAPC), Universidad de las Américas Puebla (University of the Americas Puebla, UDLAP), Puebla (2007)

  - Centro de Escritura de la Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (Writing Center of the Popular Autonomous University of the State of Puebla, UPAEP), Puebla (2010)

**Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

The selected instances had to:

1. be recognized as WC, not as writing programs;

2. operate in Mexico;

3. be part of an educational institution;

4. have a minimum of two years of experience;

5. be operating at the time the research was conducted;

6. have participated in events or activities of a national or international network.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis was qualitative and was conducted on two levels:

1. Descriptive: The organizational characteristics, pedagogical strategies, specific challenges of each case, as well as their collaborative links were described.

2. Comparative: Based on the category matrix, common patterns and significant differences between the cases were identified.

## Results

**Features and History of CARLE at ITAM =**

### a) Organization

Founded in 2005, CARLE at ITAM is the result of the institution's vision regarding the importance of its students being able to demonstrate writing skills. Consequently, ITAM is convinced that, as an educational institution, it is its responsibility to offer students alternatives for developing these skills and putting them into practice throughout their studies, regardless of the program they are enrolled in.

Established on the initiative of Dr. Rosa Margarita Galán Vélez, current head of the Academic Department of Languages (DAL), CARLE was formed with the support of faculty members from that department, the director of Library Services, Catalina Jaime, and staff from other areas who contributed to the tripartite conception of this WC. It integrates learning, second languages, and writing, drawing on the experience gained at ITAM since the 1990s with the development of writing assessment tools and the reflection that this process entailed. It also drew on the fundamentals of media libraries, proposals for autonomous learning, writing movements across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines (WAC and WID, respectively), as well as the principles of academic literacy and literacy.

Unlike other language centers in the country, CARLE has had a visible space on campus since its founding. It also houses the Cervantes Classroom and the Shakespeare Classroom, interactive multimedia spaces that offer technological tools geared toward learning strategies, language learning, and writing.

Shortly after its establishment, a joint coordination was formed between Lilyth Ormsby, a key figure in the consolidation and networking of CARLE, and Gilmar Ayala. He focused his efforts on providing support with technologies, while Lilyth led the writing-related activities, such as working with peer tutors. This collaboration strengthened the WC. Currently, CARLE is coordinated by Samari García and Emiliano Ruiz. This department administers foreign language courses, study and learning technique workshops, and the subjects included in the Es ITAM writing program, founded in 2015. The DAL provides services to the entire university, interacting with virtually all areas and maintaining special communication with the bachelor's and engineering programs for the operation of the writing program. This program is taught in all degree tracks and consists of four courses distributed throughout the university curriculum. CARLE plays a fundamental role in all of the DAL's work, as it provides support to strengthen all of the areas covered by that department.

b) *Main Methodologies Used to Promote Academic Writing*

CARLE integrates a series of visions on learning, language learning, and the development of communication skills that respond to ITAM's need not only to evaluate the performance of its applicants and admitted students in English and Spanish as their native language, but also to provide them with opportunities to acquire and develop skills in these areas that will enable them to better navigate their education at the institution and their careers in particular. To this end, elements of the WAC and WID trends, learning-by-doing models and media libraries, proposals for learning autonomy, and the principles of academic literacy and literacy were brought together and integrated with the foundations of ITAM's educational model to ensure that its students develop the skills with the specific characteristics that the institution seeks to provide them.

With all of the above, CARLE offers peer writing tutoring, writing mentoring, thesis advising, advising with coordinators, materials and resources for learning other languages, workshops, and advising for learning, as well as workshops and advising on topics that cut across the writing of disciplinary genres specific to ITAM programs. Its users typically come to request support for writing for specific purposes, organizing ideas, preparing oral or visual presentations, research processes, thesis structure and citation, as well as to resolve grammatical questions,

prepare exams, papers, portfolios, or essays, consult materials and resources for learning other languages, and seek advice on learning strategies.

### c) *Collaboration and Outreach*

From the earliest plans that led to the founding of CARLE, there was an opportunity to engage in dialogue with all the entities involved in its creation and with ITAM authorities at all levels, who were receptive to the project and its scope and provided space, personnel, equipment, and technology. In addition to the above, the CE has maintained collaborative relationships with entities such as the Raúl Baillères Jr. Library Direction, the technological and IT services areas, University Extension, and the administrative area, among others, as these are the necessary links for the different tasks it performs.

For her part, even before the launch of CARLE, Dr. Galán had established contact with WCs in other countries and with research and writing associations in the United States and Europe, links that were strengthened during Lilyth Ormsby's tenure. In the field of writing in general, CARLE currently maintains contact with international associations for the study and teaching of writing and with the Red de Cultura Escrita y Comunidades Discursivas (Network of Written Culture and Discursive Communities, RECECD). In the field of writing centers, it has been linked to the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), whose summer institutes have been key to the development of CARLE; to the Red Latinoamericana de Centros y Programas de Escritura (Latin American Network of Writing Centers and Programs, RLCPE); and to the RMCE, in whose founding it participated. These contacts have generated benefits like the visits to CARLE by specialists such as Charles Bazerman, Daniel Cassany, David Russel, Paula Carlino, Suzanne Lane, Alberto Cairo, Giovanni Parodi, and Gregorio Luri, among others. Combined with the other characteristics and actions of this WC, these collaborations make this WC a benchmark in Mexico of international renown.

Some of the tasks that contribute to the esteem in which CARLE is held at ITAM are related to its contribution to completion rates through advising and tutoring for research projects and thesis writing. Likewise, this department adds value to the accreditation processes of the institution's programs, in which it is positively appreciated that there is a learning center with

support in writing and second languages for all majors, and that this occurs in a prominent and well-equipped space.

### d) Challenges and Strategies Implemented to Overcome Them

Throughout its history, CARLE has faced various challenges that affect different levels of its operation. Among these are some that are common to all learning centers, such as ensuring that the university community—especially faculty—accurately identifies the support it can provide and adequately guides potential users. Other challenges include the selection and training of tutors, as well as the establishment of mechanisms and agreements for the remuneration of their work. In addition, CARLE's coordination has dealt with the uncertainty generated by the dynamic and organic nature of a learning center that responds to the needs and demands of students, which are dictated by the academic requirements they face. This creates a link between numerous areas of the institution and CARLE, mediated by students and their requirements.

A very particular challenge was to adopt and adapt materials and strategies from other contexts so that they could work in the reality of ITAM. This involved adapting resources generated in educational systems geared toward more general training so that they could be useful in one that aims at professionalization and in which, contrary to the norm, the goal is to promote autonomy in learning.

Another challenging experience for CARLE came with the emergence of the Es ITAM writing program, which launched 32 curricular writing courses to serve all majors, prompting the WC to begin receiving requests for support that went beyond cross-cutting issues and focused on writing in and for specific disciplines. This initiative marked a revolution because, in addition to an increase in the number and diversity of requests, it generated reflection on the definition, functions, and strategies of CARLE in relation to those of the writing program, the synergy between the two entities, and users' expectations for writing in the disciplines.

Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, CARLE experienced the same effects as other WCs and migrated to virtuality. Currently, it faces a challenging scenario with the emergence of new technologies that lead CARLE to question, among other things, the role of writing skills in this context, recursive and predictive writing, and new media. All this comes together with a change

in coordination after Lilyth Ormsby ended her nearly 20-year tenure at the helm of the WC in 2024.

One of the strengths that CARLE has been able to draw on in the face of adversity is that, since its inception, it has had links that have allowed it to learn about and take advantage of teaching experiences and technological resources from other parts of the world to try out paths that, although it has sometimes been necessary to reorient, have given it a panoramic view of alternatives that could be tested. Another feature of CARLE that has helped it face challenges is the role it plays at ITAM in evaluation and accreditation processes. It has designed instruments that are applied to applicants and students in order to assess their level and progress in writing, but it has also formulated strategies to influence that progress, which, as we have already mentioned, is viewed positively by the bodies that evaluate and accredit the institute's programs.

These initiatives and actions have kept alive the initial support that university authorities have given to CARLE since its inception. Thanks to this, it has been able to count on resources not only for its operation, but also for networking and updating coordination, which is undoubtedly essential for its sustainability and relevance.

**Characteristics and History of the CAEPAC at UDLAP**

*a) Organization*

The CAEAPC at UDLAP was formally founded in 2007. Its creation was inspired by the initiative of Dr. Martín Sánchez, who began working in a makeshift space in 2005 to address students' writing needs. This project arose after an analysis of the information available from WCs at U.S. universities, where successful models were observed. However, the conceptualization of the CAEAPC dates back to 2000, when the first reflections on the need for a space dedicated to strengthening writing skills began.

When it was institutionalized between 2011 and 2012, the CAEAPC was provided with a physical space, furniture, and formal support from the university. It is currently under the direction of Learning Resources, part of the Academic Support Dean's Office. Its physical location is designed to offer workshops, counseling, and various activities, with modern technological tools to support its work.

The CAEAPC is associated with the First Language area of the Department of Letters and Humanities and is part of a group of three learning centers coordinated under the Learning Resources Department. In addition to the CAEAPC, this group includes the Language Learning Center, whose model was inspired by the WC, and the Mathematics Learning Center, which also adopted elements of the CAEAPC model. The integration of these three centers reflects the institutional commitment to strengthening students' fundamental skills in different areas of knowledge.

### b) Main Methodologies Used to Promote Academic Writing

The CAEAPC is fully aligned with UDLAP's institutional goals regarding the promotion of academic writing and critical thinking, which is reflected in the support and resources it receives. Its positive impact on reducing failure and dropout rates underscores its relevance as a strategic component within the university.

The center's pedagogical approach is based on personalized support and the integration of writing with broader academic and cultural experiences. This approach fosters a collective vision of writing, which is understood as an iterative and reflective process in which students develop their skills through constant dialogue, feedback, and practice.

Over the years, the CAEAPC's theoretical framework has evolved from academic literacy to academic literacies, incorporating contemporary concepts and methods. This evolution has allowed the center not only to strengthen students' writing skills, but also to link them to critical thinking and community action. In this way, it has established itself as a space that transcends the technical teaching of writing to form reflective and committed citizens.

### c) Collaboration and Outreach

The CAEAPC is not only linked to the institutional organizational chart and the other two learning centers at UDLAP, but also maintains a direct relationship with the First Language area, which coordinates the compulsory courses in Academic Writing and Academic Argumentation. Its key collaborations include participation in the RMCE and the Red Mexicana de Integridad Académica (Mexican Academic Integrity Network, RMIA), which has strengthened its links with national academic networks.

Internationally, the CAEAPC has cooperated with institutions such as the Kunzenburg University of Education in Freiburg, Germany. In 2022, Dr. Gerd Bräuer, an academic at that university, visited UDLAP to give a lecture entitled "International writing center work. Opportunities to learn from each other." In addition, during the process of founding the center, they received a visit from Dr. María Cristina Martínez, then president of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chair MECEAL Network at the Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia, whose advice was fundamental to the development of the project.

Over the years, CAEAPC has shared its experiences at international conferences and meetings, analyzing its impact on the academic community and establishing collaborative links with various writing centers and programs. In addition, the UDLAP center has organized important events: in 2019, the meeting at which the RMCE was formally founded; then, from March 21 to 22, 2024, the meeting "Challenges of Academic Integrity in Today's World," as well as the UDLAP National Meeting of Writing Programs and Centers, which was held from May 29 to 30, 2024, with the theme "New Challenges of University Academic Literacy in the Age of AI."

### d) Challenges and Strategies Implemented to Overcome Them

The CAEAPC has faced various challenges since its creation, both in its early days and throughout its development. Among the initial obstacles were the lack of adequate infrastructure and solid institutional support. In its early years, the center's activities were carried out in makeshift spaces and with minimal resources, which made it difficult to consolidate it as a formal project. It was necessary to demonstrate its positive impact on institutional indicators, such as the reduction of student failure and dropout rates, in order to gain the support of the university. This gradual process included the provision of physical space, furniture, and basic tools, as well as the formal integration of the center into the academic organizational chart in 2007.

Over time, new challenges have emerged related to current perceptions and dynamics. One of the main challenges is the perception of writing as a minor skill, which makes it difficult to assess its importance in academic and professional training. In addition, the growing use of artificial intelligence tools has raised ethical and pedagogical challenges, as it has led to excessive dependence that can weaken the autonomous development of writing skills in students.

Another recurring challenge is the limitation of physical space. As the center expands its services and gains popularity among the university community, its current infrastructure is insufficient to meet the growing demand. Despite these difficulties, the CAEAPC has adopted proactive strategies, such as raising awareness among students and teachers about the importance of writing, incorporating modern technological resources, and constantly seeking improvements to its facilities.

The challenges faced by the CAEAPC have been addressed with a combination of strategies that have allowed it to establish itself as a successful model within the university. In its early years, the lack of infrastructure and institutional support was overcome by demonstrating tangible results. The center had a significant impact on reducing student failure and dropout rates, which fell by more than half. This achievement not only justified the investment in its formalization and integration into the academic organizational chart in 2007, but also strengthened its recognition within the university community.

To address the perception of writing as a minor skill, the center has implemented awareness programs aimed at both students and teachers. These initiatives have sought to highlight the importance of writing as a cross-cutting skill, essential for academic and professional development. At the same time, efforts have been made to integrate writing with cultural and academic experiences that underscore its relevance in real-world contexts.

Regarding the growing use of artificial intelligence tools, the CAEAPC has adopted a thoughtful approach, promoting their ethical and responsible use. This includes specific workshops that combine technological literacy with the development of critical skills, so that students learn to complement, rather than replace, their writing process with these tools.

Finally, institutional support has been key to addressing the limitation of physical spaces and resources. The university has responded with technological upgrades and the provision of modern equipment, such as high-definition cameras and digital learning tools. In addition, the center has constantly sought to justify new investments by demonstrating the value of its services in terms of academic and social impact. These strategies reflect a dynamic and adaptive approach that allows CAEAPC to respond effectively to contemporary challenges and continue to fulfill its educational mission.

**Characteristics and History of the UPAEP Writing Center**

   *a)  Organization*

The UPAEP Writing Center (CE UPAEP) was founded in 2010 by Dr. Abigail Villagrán Mora. From its inception to the present, it has experienced several milestones, which are explained below. First, its place in the institutional organizational chart has changed over the years, belonging to different deanships and departments. Second, its relationship with the writing program that emerged in 2007, that is, before the writing center, has changed; however, in 2011, the program was canceled. This forced the center to rethink its role without any connection to a program. It was not until 2023 that a writing program was reestablished, this time as part of the CE UPAEP.

Third, the allocation of its own space has marked important periods for the CE UPAEP. The first occurred in 2018 and the second when it relocated in 2024. Both moments are considered milestones because the characteristics of each of these spaces have opened up different possibilities.

Finally, a fourth milestone was the support obtained by the project leader for her doctoral studies, where she developed research that provided a basis for the participation, organization, and contributions of the CE UPAEP tutors as a community of practice.

Three factors have made the persistence and development of CE UPAEP possible: 1. institutional processes such as the university's international accreditation and changes in the center's position in the organizational chart; 2. the agency of the center's promoters, managers, collaborators, and tutors; and 3. the support of the authorities. In this regard, it was observed that many actors were involved in the consolidation of CE UPAEP, including vice-rectors, deans, coordinators, managers, tutors, the head of WC (coordination and management), and external academics (advisors).

In the institution's organizational chart, the WC is one of three centers within the Language and Culture Studies Department, which belongs to the Academic Vice-Rector's Office. The three centers are the WC, the Centro de Aprendizaje de Idiomas (Language Learning Center, CAI), and the Centro de Desarrollo de Competencias Globales (Global Skills Development Center, CDCG). On the other hand, since 2023, the WC has coordinated the writing program taught at

the undergraduate level, both in person and online, on both campuses of the university, as well as at the graduate level. Physically, the CE UPAEP is located on the Central Campus.

### b) Main Methodologies Used to Promote Academic Writing

At CE UPAEP, various activities and services have been offered over the years. The current offering includes self-directed (asynchronous) courses; cultural activities to change perceptions of writing within the institution; tutoring, which has been the main and most consistent service; and the recent restructuring of the writing program.

In terms of the pedagogical approach, a distinction is made between the pedagogical basis of teaching writing and that of writing tutoring, which emphasizes the support provided to writers by tutors. In this sense, the perspective with which tutors are trained is key for CE UPAEP and is distinguished by being an informal and non-school-based approach, based on the community of practice model and cultural adaptation or enculturation.

With regard to the relationship with the university, different stages are recognized and the relationship has been changing. It has been necessary to convince the authorities of the merits of the project, with the support of various promoters of the center; there have also been points of agreement that have facilitated a cordial and effective relationship. A key strategy for institutional recognition was to align the writing center project with the international accreditation process. In this sense, the head of the CE had to be very involved in the committees and in teaching workshops for teachers. In the interview, it was recognized that accreditations are important for an institution because they require universities to transform their processes and systematize them in order to make decisions and demonstrate changes.

### c) Collaboration and Outreach

Since its inception, the CE UPAEP has sought to collaborate with entities and organizations both within and outside the institution. Within the university, joint work with the Institutional Effectiveness area, which is in charge of international accreditation, has been key. Similarly, the relationship with those responsible for teacher training and curriculum innovation, and with academic authorities, such as academic program directors—in which writing plays a central role—has been important. In order to promote work with tutors, it has been necessary to approach the areas of social service and scholarships; for issues related to technology and

communication, the area of technology and internal communication. The relationship with these bodies within the university has required time and effort.

Outside UPAEP, relationships have been consolidated with higher education institutions such as the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) Cuajimalpa and the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO). Similarly, CE UPAEP has been key to the growth of the RMCE, of which it was a founder, and the RLCPE, which it currently chairs. Finally, joining the IWCA has been essential for obtaining mentoring for the academic growth of the center's team, as well as for collaborating with peers and publicizing the activities of CE UPAEP internationally.

### d) Challenges and Strategies Implemented to Overcome Them

The challenges to the sustainability of CE UPAEP that were mentioned were as follows: 1. the need for constant reinvention, 2. contingency and change, 3. training replacements to lead the CE and ensure the sustainability of the roles of those involved, 4. the development of research and collaboration, and 5. the influence of artificial intelligence on writing and tutorial processes.

The strategies implemented to overcome the challenges to the sustainability of the CE UPAEP are explained below. With regard to the need for constant reinvention, it has been crucial for the center to constantly return to fundamental questions such as who are we, whom do we serve, and what do we serve for? This recursive process, in turn, has an impact on how contingency and change are better addressed. In other words, it allows for planning and, if necessary, the proposal and rethinking of the center and its place in the institution, the organizational chart, the institutional discourse, and the community. Rethinking has also contributed to updating the community's conceptions of writing.

With regard to the replacement of the head of the WC and the sustainability of the roles of those involved, it is important to reach a point of consolidation, but not of stagnation, either for the center or for the actors. In other words, consolidation should not prevent change because, although the consistency of those involved can be an advantage for the center and the person in charge, it can also become a disadvantage that hinders the growth of the institution and the team involved.

Finally, with regard to the development of research and collaboration, it is essential to maintain networks that contribute to the recognition of writing centers and programs. It is also important to strike a balance between research, teaching, and management functions, as well as to seek to have an impact both within and outside the institution. Similarly, this allows, on the one hand, to take advantage of opportunities and, on the other hand, to collaboratively address issues in different educational contexts and in the current era, such as the influence of artificial intelligence on writing processes and on support, teaching, and evaluation processes.

**Representative Features of Each Writing Center**

### a) CARLE (ITAM)

One of the outstanding features of CARLE is that it crystallizes ITAM's recognition of the fundamental role of writing in academic and professional training processes. In addition, it institutionalizes the institution's commitment to proficiency in a second language, which is as important as mastery of the mother tongue. With these elements, it has developed a program that integrates resources and support for learning, writing, and other communicative processes, as well as language learning, all aimed at facilitating and strengthening the university experience of its users.

It has also ventured into offering workshops and counseling on cross-cutting topics, as well as specific topics for writing in disciplinary genres. These activities are relevant for interaction with academic programs, but also for synergies with the writing program. Finally, one aspect that has given CARLE its identity is its innovative spirit, which has led it to design original materials for learning, writing, and languages. Thanks to this innovative drive, this WC has cutting-edge technologies and platforms to promote multimodality, allowing its users to access varied and up-to-date resources for the development of their work.

### b) CAEAPC (UDLAP)

The CAEAPC offers a wide range of services designed to strengthen the writing skills of the university community. These include personalized counseling, which benefits more than 3,500 students per year, and a variety of thematic workshops on academic writing, including topics such as writing, argumentation, citation, and ethical use of information. In addition, the center promotes the habit of reading through reading clubs, where participants attend

voluntarily to enjoy and analyze literary works, and through the "Book of the Semester" activity, which links reading with dialogues with authors, both of which are part of the Reading Promotion program. It also encourages the "Dialogue with Readers" discussion group, where the author of the book of the semester is invited to interact with the entire reading community.

In 2025, work is underway to implement writing labs, spaces dedicated to fostering collaborative work among students in order to strengthen their ability to construct and revise texts in groups. CAEAPC services are not only aimed at students, but also at the university's administrative and security staff, demonstrating its commitment to the entire academic community. These comprehensive activities consolidate CAEAPC as an inclusive and dynamic space, key to the academic and cultural development of UDLAP.

### c) UPAEP Writing Center

The key differentiators of the UPAEP Writing Center have been the certification of peer writing tutors at levels 1 and 2; the idea that tutors are a community of practice who build the practice; and the creation and participation of the UPAEP Writing Center in both the national and regional writing center and writing program networks. The following table shows a comparative summary of the main features that define each writing center analyzed.

**Table 1: Basic Information on the WCs analyzed**

|  | ITAM | UDLAP | UPAEP |
|---|---|---|---|
| Educational level | Higher education (undergraduate and postgraduate) | Higher education (undergraduate and postgraduate) | Higher education (undergraduate and postgraduate) |
| Year of founding | 2005; since the 1990s, there had been reflection on the importance that should be given to writing. | 2011-2012; it has been conceptualized since 2000 | 2010 |
| Responsible parties | Initiative and general management: | Initiative by Martín Sánchez Camargo | Abigail Villagrán Mora |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Rosa Margarita Galán Vélez<br>Academic and technological coordinators: Guadalupe Chabaud<br>Lilyth Ormsby (until 2024)<br>Gilmar Ayala Meneses<br>Eduardo Segovia<br>Jesús Morales Enciso<br>Currently coordinated by Samari García y Colomé Góngora<br>Emiliano Ruiz Parra<br>Renata Martínez Gaytán (technologies) | Sergio Reyes Angona<br>Currently directed by Miriam Yvonn Márquez Barragán |  |
| Position in the organizational chart | Governing Board-Rector's Office-Vice-Rector's Office-Academic Division of General Studies and International Studies- DAL-CARLE | Dependent on the Learning Resources Directorate, under the Dean of Academic Support, and associated with the First Language area of the Department of Literature and Humanities. | It is one of three centers belonging to the Language and Culture Studies Department, which is part of the Academic Vice-Rector's Office. It is responsible for the Writing Program. Physically, the CE UPAEP is located on the Central Campus. |
| Services | Peer writing tutorials<br>Writing mentoring<br>Thesis advising<br>Advising with coordinators Materials | Personalized tutoring sessions<br>Academic writing workshops<br>Reading clubs | Tutoring<br>Academic writing workshops<br>Cultural activities related to reading mediation |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | and resources for learning other languages Workshops and advising for learning Cross-disciplinary workshops for writing in academic genres | "Book of the semester" project Writing labs Activities for administrative and support staff | and creative writing, and activities for administrative and support staff Self-directed (asynchronous) courses Writing program |
| Networks and alliances | IWCA Red de Cultura Escrita y Comunidades Discursivas (RECECD) RMCE RLCPE European and American associations for the study and teaching of writing | Red Mexicana de Investigadores sobre Integridad Académica (REDMIIA) Collaboration with the University of Education in Freiburg (Germany) Initial advice from Dra. María Cristina Martínez (Cátedra UNESCO MECEAL, Colombia). | RMCE RLCPE IWCA National Reading Rooms Programme UPAEP Academic Centre for General Education |

**Comparative analysis**

### a) *Organizational and Operational Characteristics of the Centers*

Although the three WCs analyzed have managed to consolidate their position within their institutions, their trajectories reflect different levels of institutional support and degrees of adaptation. While ITAM's CARLE was born with solid institutional backing, including a well-equipped physical space since its founding in 2005, UDLAP's CAEAPC had a more gradual start, initially operating in makeshift spaces until it achieved formal integration in 2007. For its part, the UPAEP CE has undergone multiple restructurings in the institutional organizational chart and relocations, which has required constant efforts to maintain its continuity and legitimacy within the university.

In terms of its location within the institutional structure, CARLE is affiliated with DAL, which enables it to coordinate with various bachelor's degree programs and language courses.

In contrast, the CAEAPC is linked to the First Language area within the Department of Letters and Humanities, which directly associates it with the teaching of academic writing in the curriculum. In turn, the CE UPAEP is part of the Department of Language and Culture Studies, within a structure that encompasses writing, language learning, and global thinking.

### b) Teaching Strategies Implemented

The three centres share personalised tutoring as a core strategy, but the way in which they integrate it into their teaching model shows certain variations. At CARLE, tutoring is combined with writing mentoring and specialized advice for thesis students, in order to facilitate the transition to academic writing; they also provide support with learning resources and second language proficiency. At CAEAPC, tutoring is also part of a comprehensive support process, where writing is linked to critical thinking and community action. At CE UPAEP, tutoring is provided by a community of practice, in which tutors collectively develop their knowledge, i.e., it is a more de-schooled and adaptive approach.

In addition, each centre has developed complementary strategies to strengthen the teaching of writing. While CARLE is distinguished by its integration of workshops for writing disciplinary genres, CAEAPC has implemented reading clubs, writing laboratories, and workshops on the use of artificial intelligence in academic writing. CE UPAEP, for its part, has opted for self-directed courses and cultural activities to change the perception of writing within the university community.

### c) Collaboration and Institutional Networking Strategies

Networking with other academic institutions and international networks has been a key factor in the consolidation of these centres. CARLE has established relationships with institutions in the United States and Europe and has participated in networks such as IWCA, RLCPE and RMCE. Its role in ITAM's institutional accreditation processes has strengthened its legitimacy. In the case of CAEAPC, its participation in RMCE and REDMIIA has allowed it to consolidate its presence at the national level, while collaborating with foreign universities such as the University of Education in Freiburg, Germany. On the other hand, the CE UPAEP has played a prominent role in the RLCPE and the RMCE; it has also established links with national institutions such as the UAM Cuajimalpa and ITESO.

### d) *Main Challenges for Sustainability*

The three centres have faced challenges in ensuring their long-term sustainability, albeit at different levels. While CARLE has had to adapt to the incorporation of the Es ITAM programme, which generated new demands in the teaching of disciplinary writing, CAEAPC has had to negotiate constantly to secure adequate space and demonstrate its impact on reducing failure and dropout rates. At CE UPAEP, the need for frequent restructuring has required constant efforts to legitimize its position within the university and ensure its continuity.

Another common challenge is the incorporation of emerging technologies and the impact of artificial intelligence on writing instruction. While CARLE has strengthened its digital and teaching resources, CAEAPC has developed specific workshops to promote critical and ethical use of these tools. For its part, CE UPAEP has addressed the issue from its community of practice model, reflecting on the role of artificial intelligence in writers' autonomy and in the dynamics of tutoring.

## Conclusions

**Main Findings**

The centers reported have achieved remarkable continuity over the last twenty years, due to the concurrence of the following elements:

1. Institutional support. Although the emergence of a center depends largely on the intention of a promoter and/or person in charge, its development and consolidation are not possible without a network of diverse educational actors, from institutional authorities to tutors. In this regard, those responsible for the centers refer to the support of institutional authorities as a fundamental factor in achieving consolidation.

2. Relationship with the institution. Another aspect reported is the important relationship between the consolidation of the center and its alignment with institutional processes and goals. Two trends were identified that define the focus of the centers: the first has to do with alignment with the institution and its international accreditation processes, institutional indicators, such as retention and terminal efficiency, among others; the second trend has to do with attention to the identified needs of the student population from the center.

3. Pedagogical approach. The coherence of the center is built on its relationship with the institution, as well as its pedagogical foundation and daily practice. This practice can be oriented toward the mastery of critical and thinking skills, or toward competencies and a profile determined by the institutional culture and/or an educational model.

4. Physical space. In all three cases, having a physical space in which to hold the tutoring sessions and organize the activities has been crucial to their positioning within the institution. The stability of the physical space where the center is located is an aspect that the three universities have achieved in different ways. In this sense, the physical space of the centers adds a symbolic and material dimension to the institutional paradigm from which the centers are conceived.

5. Continuity. The continuity of the person or persons in charge of the center is another important variable, since the same person can maintain the vision, approach, and growth perspective, incorporating new members into the same model. On the other hand, a direct change of leadership—a "passing of the baton"—has advantages in terms of the transfer of experience and knowledge, while gaps or absences in leadership represent a loss of continuity. This impacts collaboration within institutions as well as external links, such as networks, universities, specialists, resource providers, etc.

6. Centrality of tutoring. The three centers have personalized tutoring as their key service, focused on student development. However, all centers offer different services complementary to tutoring, and these recurring activities shape a specific center model: from academic writing alone to written culture in a broad sense.

**Relevance of the study**

Based on the observations, the study contributes at different levels. Initially, it reveals the principles that guide the practice of a center, which, in turn, highlight the aforementioned tension between an academic enculturation approach that seeks to integrate students into an established discourse, trying to adapt them to conventions and norms (Navarro, 2024), versus another that we could provisionally call inclusive, in the sense that it seeks to provide students with tools to develop more diverse skills linked to other areas of life, by incorporating their aspirations and legitimising their vernacular practices. The centers analyzed are placed at

different points on this continuum, which could be observed through the services they offer and the weight they give to each.

On the other hand, this research focused on factors worthy of further exploration, such as the relationship with the institutional organisational chart, the permanence or replacement of those responsible for the centers, and the importance of physical space for the continuity of the project. Although the existence of a specific, fixed location that is recognisable to the community may be taken for granted or considered common sense, the testimonies of those responsible for the centers highlighted its physical and symbolic importance.

A third aspect that can be highlighted is the originality visible in the trajectory of each centre analysed, which is necessarily linked to the context: geographical, economic, institutional culture and even personal histories. For example, at least two of the WCs refer to the existence of writing programmes that operate in parallel to the centre itself, which adds to the interest in delving deeper into the interaction between the two models.

All of this points to the need to explore the cases of Mexican centres in greater detail.

**New research perspectives**

Based on the above, some lines of research are opened up that could broaden the panorama of WCs in Mexico and the understanding of the factors that have a positive (or negative) impact on their formation, consolidation and permanence. In this regard, it is advisable to continue describing other centres with different ages, approaches and operating models, in order to analyse in depth the narratives of each reported case using hermeneutic-interpretative methodologies and to focus on the factors identified here.

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**Appendix: Instrument**

a. Organization and structure.

    i. From its founding to the present, what have been the main milestones of the writing center? When did they occur?

    ii. How did these milestones become possible?

    iii. Who were/are the main promoters of the center? (academics, authorities, etc.) Who were/are responsible for the project?

    iv. Where does the center fit into the institution's organizational chart? Where is the center physically located within the institution?

b. Teaching strategies.

    i. What activities and services have been offered and are currently offered?

    ii. What characterizes the center, distinguishing it from others in terms of the activities and services it offers?

    iii. What pedagogical approach has it taken?

    iv. What has been the center's relationship with the institution in terms of institutional discourse, principles, demands, and needs?

c. Challenges to sustainability.

    i. What challenges has the center faced? How has it addressed them?

d. Strategies for collaboration with other entities.

    i. With which key entities within and outside the institution have you collaborated?

    ii. How has this collaboration been key? With which networks, associations, or other key organizations outside the institution have you collaborated? How has this collaboration been key?