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# Stronger Together: Nonsummativity and the Grand Valley State University Knowledge Market

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### **Stronger Together: Nonsummativity and the Grand Valley State University Knowledge Market**

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This article discusses the history, purpose, and services that make up the Grand Valley State University Knowledge Market. The Knowledge Market is made up of faculty and staff directors leading four unique groups of specialized student-consultants who collaborate with their peers. While each service has a unique specialty, The Knowledge Market unites to guide students through the collective academic processes of researching, writing, speaking, and developing visual aids. The Knowledge Market is partnered with the university library in mission, service, and location. It provides a unique and replicable model that can be applied at a variety of campuses who have a need and desire for the communication center to synergize with the similar campus services and the bedrock of campus communities—the university library.

*Keywords:* communication centers, university libraries, collaboration

The library is the intellectual and locational hub of many campuses. These revered spaces function as a community space for inquiry and the free exchange of ideas allowing for the transcendence of the physical and disciplinary boundaries that divide departments, faculty, and staff. Academic libraries strive to provide access to space and resources in the pursuit of learning, teaching, and supplying information literacy skills that are crucial in college and for citizens in a participatory democracy (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015). From research centers and technology providers to group meeting spaces and exam-cram havens, students value libraries. Clearly, libraries are critical and central to campus environments.

Meanwhile, the communication center is, as Dr. Kathleen Turner noted during her 2014 keynote address to members of the National Association of Communication Centers, “centered on our

campuses” (p. 2). This statement is interpreted as the communication center *is* the communication-center of our campuses. Communication is necessary, ubiquitous and, therefore, inescapable (Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2010). Therefore, communication centers can assist students to be more effective communicators now, in the future, and in all aspects of their lives. Use of the center is associated with improved retention rates (Yook, 2012), critical thinking (Atkins-Sayre, 2012), empowerment (Brown & Leek, 2016; Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2012), and communication anxiety management abilities (Dwyer, 2015). It can be said with confidence that communication centers are valuable assets to campus communities and the students who comprise them.

We know that both libraries and communication centers are spaces that aid students in multiple and various ways, not the least of which is collaborative learning.

Whether in the form of libraries providing group study and learning locations or consulting centers housing peer-to-peer learning opportunities, collaboration makes these spaces unique. In fact, the American Library Association's *Democracy Statement* (2012) and the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* (2015) state that communication and collaboration via conversation are cornerstones of academic inquiry. Given the multiple and various potentials for cooperation inside of these both sets of hallowed halls, it makes sense that organizations that share similar collaborative goals unite in the library and capitalize on the synergistic opportunities that exist.

One collaborative endeavor at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) that brings consulting services together with the university library is known as the Grand Valley State University Knowledge Market (GVKM). The GVKM is both a space within the library's common area and an intangible entity resulting from the cooperation between the Writing Center (WC), the library's Research Center (RC), the Data Center (DC), and the university's communication center known as the GV Communication Center (SL). Each service maintains a unique list of clients seeking service-specific assistance. However, some clients use each service for the same course, project, or assignment. This article discusses the GVKM as a collaboration between consulting services and the university library. Specifically, the focus is on how and why collaboration exists between the communication center, similar tutoring services, and the university library. Below is a brief history, justification, and spatial design of the GVKM, an explanation of the GVKM's services and collaborative endeavors, a discussion of the GVKM's implementation and assessment of unique

academic programming, as well as a discussion of how other communication centers can use the example of the GVKM to advance the relationship between local communication centers and university libraries.

### **Introducing the Grand Valley State University Knowledge Market**

**Background.** GVSU is a large, public, comprehensive, and coeducational institution in Allendale, MI. With a focus on teaching and learning, as opposed to research, student achievement in the classroom is paramount to the university's standards for success. In an effort to continually evaluate and improve achievement, Lee Van Orsdel, former Dean of University Libraries, reached out to popular employers of GVSU graduates to inquire about alumni strengths and weaknesses in the workplace. As is common in similar inquiries (Ammerman Experience, 2016; Ortiz, Region-Sebest, & MacDermott, 2016), she found that employers desired stronger oral and written communication abilities, problem solving skills, and fact-finding capacities. Van Orsdel, who was preparing to design a new university library during this time period, was determined to incorporate ways to address these desired abilities into the library's planning. The only question: "How?"

Grand Valley State University's new library, funded largely by donors, was tasked with re-envisioning how University Libraries could support and advance student success. Neither the university or the donors had an interest in building just another *book box*. Instead, they aspired to create a space where students could engage intellectually with each other in pursuit of the social construction of knowledge. Taking both this internal desire for engagement and external desire for stronger skills into consideration,

the decision was made that a suite of peer learning services—designed to cultivate the research, writing, and speaking skills students need to be successful after graduation—would anchor the library and set the tone for a student-centered learning space (Schendel, Garrison, Johnson, & Van Orsdel, 2013). As a result of this decision, the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons opened in June 2013, with Knowledge Market services starting up that fall, and a new Knowledge Market space opened simultaneously at Steelcase Library on GVSU's Pew Campus in downtown Grand Rapids, MI.

**Logistics.** The Knowledge Market is housed in the library next to the central walkway on the main floor. The location was selected to encourage serendipitous learning. For example, a student who has just been assigned a presentation is likely to walk past the GVKM and see a consultant who could help. The space is part of a large and open student study area where students can work on their assignments in the space with or without consultants and ask for assistance when needed. Consultants are visible in brightly colored vests with the name of their specific service indicated in large letters (e.g. SPEECH). The GVKM space has a small desk near the walkway staffed by a receptionist wearing a yellow vest that says, "ASK ME." The receptionists are research consultants who rotate in the role, trained in asking clarifying questions about the students' projects so they can select consultants from one or more services to best meet students' needs.

Consultants from all services sit together in a designated area on comfortable couches just beyond the reception desk. This spatial design is preferred because the receptionist can quickly access the appropriate consultant(s) and introduce them to the client with ease. Additionally, the

comfortable setting is designed to promote a casual, judgement-free environment from the moment clients come into contact with GVKM staff. Once clients and consultants are connected via the receptionist, the pair moves to one of two locations. Writing and research consultants typically sit side-by-side at a table in an open study area adjacent to the staging area. The space is atypical in a traditional library in that open conversations are encouraged. Speech and data consultants typically use private rooms just beyond the open study area. These rooms are equipped with seating and writing surfaces, a white committee, and appropriate technology for the service. The two speech rehearsal rooms include a standard classroom computer station, projector, and wall mounted camera are included for simulating a classroom setting during presentation rehearsal. The Data Inquiry Lab, which is fully housed in a room within the general space, includes a large LCD display, multiple computer interfaces, and cutting-edge technology for the collaborative creation of visual representations that depict and clarify big-data outputs and findings. The overall GVKM space is comfortably large and navigating the entire space is quick and painless during the most crowded hours. For the downtown Pew campus, the same spatial description remains accurate with the exception of the DC but currently operates in about half of the space when compared to the main library.

As you can see, a great deal of thought and purpose led to the development of the GVKM. It was formed specifically to improve student success while at the university and increase alumni success beyond graduation. While having a purpose and layout to facilitate fulfilling that purpose is vital, the services, the staffs, and the collaboration itself determine overall success or failure.

### **Grand Valley State University Knowledge Market Services and Collaboration**

As noted above, the GVKM is comprised of four peer-to-peer consulting services. Each service is similar in that they provide peer collaboration, employ the Socratic approach to consulting, focus on developing larger skills (e.g., speaking ability or reduced speech anxiety) as opposed to focusing solely on single assignments, and balance descriptive and prescriptive feedback when working with clients. While these commonalities join the services together, each one has their own unique and specific purpose. The Writing Center describes their services as being able to "...assist you with any writing project, at any stage of your writing process. The center's well-trained peer consultants can help you to brainstorm ideas, organize content, integrate research, polish a draft, and correctly document sources" (Welcome, 2018). The Research Consultants are "...ready to help you improve your library research skills" (Research Consultants, 2018). They specifically list database navigation, understanding peer-review, primary/secondary sources, and annotated bibliographies among their areas of focus. The communication center works "...with clients on all elements of the speechmaking process including: topic selection, organization, supporting materials, and most importantly, practicing delivery. Sessions can be scheduled to help with in-class speech assignments, as well as other academic or nonacademic presentations" (Speech Lab, 2018). Finally, the Data Inquiry Lab is designed, "to help you with data analysis and visualization" by assisting clients with cleaning, analyzing, and visualizing data by using a variety of advanced statistical software packages (e.g., SPSS, SAS, R) (Data Inquiry Lab, 2018).

**Unity from Difference.** These services fit together like pieces of a puzzle to aid student success. To explain this fit, consider the example of a student enrolled in a communication research course. Let's call our student Pat and our course COM 275. The COM 275 course is designed to walk students through a realistic simulation of the research process. Students are asked to establish a preliminary research area, create an annotated bibliography of appropriate literature, compose a literature review with a refined research question, and establish a methodology to address the question. In other words, students will create a research proposal by the end of the term. Their proposal should use APA style and include a 10 minute, conference-style oral presentation. Pat, a newcomer to the research process, feels overwhelmed and visits the GVKM for assistance. After speaking with the receptionist and answering a few questions, Pat is advised to meet with a member of each service to develop a semester long plan to maximize the ways in which the GVKM can aid Pat in the course. First, Pat will meet with a Research Consultant to brainstorm research areas and later to locate, evaluate, cite, and summarize potential sources for the annotated bibliography. Second, Pat will begin the literature review by taking the annotated bibliography to the Writing Center to discuss introductions, moving from a list to a narrative design, and APA formatting. Once research methods are discussed in COM 275, Pat can return to a Research Consultant, Writing Consultant, or both to establish and write up the remainder of the proposal. Next, Pat can bring the proposal to a meeting with a communication consultant and a Data Consultant. Together, they can brainstorm ways to transform the paper to an oral presentation, as well as to identify data that can be represented visually. Last, Pat can return to work on data

visualization before finishing the course with a final trip to the communication center to tie together content, visual aids, and the effective delivery needed to create the final conference style presentation. While not all students and/or courses will fit this pattern perfectly, academic work is rarely composed of neatly contained processes. Therefore, the potential for multiple services collaborating with clients across multiple assignments and projects is immense.

**Advisory Committee.** The collaboration described above does not happen by accident. The directors of each service make up the Knowledge Market Advisory Committee. The committee meets regularly to discuss GVKM services, spaces, staffs, and any issues that might arise. The group is also charged with providing advice for and making decisions about outside services who wish to either collaborate with or join the GVKM. Additionally, the committee produces annual reports documenting services, statistics, accomplishments, and more. Finally, and most important to collaboration, the committee plans and conducts two group trainings each year that include the entire staffs of each service. To begin the academic year in the fall, the training includes a tour of the library for new consultants and is led by returning consultants. Directors open this training by introducing themselves so that consultants are aware of who they are and which service they represent. For both fall and spring trainings, consultants are encouraged to sit with someone from a different service in order to promote communication between staff members. In these small groups, consultants complete a brief group project. Additionally, each training meeting includes a general training that applies to all consultants regardless of their unique service membership. These trainings have covered topics including

dealing with hostile or abusive clients, privileged language on campus, and the importance of accurate pronoun use with clients and coworkers.

**Assessing Services.** The idea of and strategies for collaboration between the communication center, university library, and other consulting services discussed above might seem ideal, but the question must be asked: “Does it work?” Put simply, “Yes.” Each individual service and the library maintain their own records of appointment numbers and client feedback. Currently, there is no separate collection of appointment numbers and client feedback documenting those who have worked with the three original GVKM services. In order to understand this specific group, client records from all three services were pored over looking for common clients across services. Moreover, the search identified common clients who visited the GVKM to work on material specifically from the same course during the 2017-2018 academic year. After hours of work, 33 names were identified as clearly fitting the criteria described above. A brief online survey and questionnaire was created to assess these selected clients’ experiences at and satisfaction with the GVKM’s collaborative efforts.

Of the 33 clients contacted, 19 responded to the survey. When asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the GVKM as a whole, 12 respondents, the majority, noted they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their experiences. The same number of respondents noted that the reason they worked with all three services was the result of a recommendation to do so from an individual consultant. Respondents were then given an open-ended opportunity to discuss how collaborating with the GVKM empowered them as students, or share that they were not empowered. No respondents

stated they were not empowered through their experience. The most common responses related to increased empowerment centered on a single concept: increased confidence. Confidence is one variable that constructs the concept of empowerment (Brown & Leek, 2016). Students who use the GVKM report being more confident about the work they submit and/or deliver. This is consistent with individual program assessments for the three services, which have found that upwards of 97% of students feel more confident about their products after working with a GVKM consultant.

The GVKM is made up of four separate and unique peer consulting services that share a common philosophy and general purpose that allows them to effectively collaborate with one another. This unique-but-unified design has been, and continues to be, groomed by the Knowledge Market Advisory Committee through shared goals, planning, and training. However, the collaboration is not limited to the physical confines of the university library. The GVKM has taken their show on the road, or hallways as it were, to imbed consultants in the classroom.

### **Knowledge Market Fellows Program**

Each service that makes up the GVKM has experienced success across a number of levels. The WC is consistently considered one of the most useful and well-used student resources on campus. The RC is a unique service to GV that has seen its staff and reach grow rapidly. The SL has more than doubled the number of student appointments over the past four years and produced respected research. The DC is a new service but has already found its place within the larger GVKM. These successes reflect the work done in either individual service spaces or shared GVKM space in the library. Seeing these largely individual

successes, the Knowledge Market Advisory Committee wanted to explore options for success as a collective entity that would benefit additional students. After considering various options, the directors developed the Knowledge Market Fellows Program designed to take the collaborative services of the GVKM into the classroom.

Generally, the Fellows Program uses a model borrowed from the WC that identifies courses that could clearly benefit from the GVKM's collective services. The test-course for this program was a public relations course that required students to conduct secondary research, use that work to write a PR strategy plan, and orally present that plan. A different section of the same course with the same instructor that used a traditional design was used as a control for comparison. In the experimental case, RC consultants were able to assist with navigating existing literature, WC consultants supported the process of writing the plan, and SL consultants collaborated on the oral presentation of that plan. DC consultants did not participate in this program due to staffing issues. The participating embedded consultants were present in every, or nearly every, class meeting in order to make themselves available whenever needed. Following the test course's completion, an assessment of the program's benefits was conducted. Values for the variables of subject knowledge and empowerment were compared between the two courses. Surprisingly, results indicated that the program was not helpful in terms of increasing students' subject knowledge or learning empowerment when compared to the control course (Brown, Torreano, Lane, & Gregory-Hatch, 2018). Further investigation found that the constant presence of consultants became distracting. Given these findings and not willing to completely scrap the program, the advisory

committee redesigned how the consultants would be embedded in the classroom and tested a new model.

The new Fellows Program design used a workshop model that reduced consultants' time in the classroom to one or two class meetings where they led service specific workshops and offered guidance and feedback. This abbreviated presence was applied in an effort to avoid students being over exposed to, and distracted by, consultants. Following the completion of this communication research course, the same assessment was once again conducted. This time, findings suggested the workshop model produced significantly higher values for subject knowledge and student empowerment than either the control or first experimental groups (Brown et al., 2018). Having found an effective design for the GVKM Fellows Program, the advisory committee is now prepared to identify courses that fit well this new programming, inform faculty of the opportunity to take part in the program, and celebrate this new, out-of-the-center collaboration between the campus community and the GVKM.

### **Your Center and Your Library**

GVSU's Communication Center is fortunate and unique in terms of the immense potential for collaboration. This position is the result of having outstanding peer consulting services with which to collaborate, as well as physical and administrative support for the GVKM. Finding willing and engaged partners can be a difficult task but most of us have, at least, a writing center counterpart. Additionally, we all have libraries with which to collaborate and deans who covet opportunities to shine a positive light on their college. So, then, how can these collaborative possibilities become beneficial realities?

Below are five approaches that may be helpful as you seek to maximize your center's collaboration with the university library and other consulting services on campus. The guidance to *find mutual benefits* and *create personal relationships* are for those who do not actively have a center or do not collaborate outside the center. The suggestions to *nurture open communication*, *collaborate in name and practice*, *be patient*, and *share ownership* are for those who wish to begin, increase, and/or improve their collaborative relationships.

**Find Mutual Benefits.** If you are a faculty or staff member at a college or university, chances are you feel overworked and underpaid. It's likely that you play ten roles but only have time for five of them. You are not alone. Since new collaborations often come with new responsibilities, meetings, deadlines, and work, do not assume that those you approach with collaborative opportunities will be as excited and ready to commit as you. Do some research, determine your best potential collaborator, and learn more about their roles and responsibilities on campus. Is there a way that a new partnership could fit with what they already do? Better yet, is there a way that the collaboration could make their professional life easier or more manageable? For example, if you would like your communication center to collaborate with the writing center you could explore options that would benefit both centers and both directors. Can parts of training be combined and responsibilities for that training shared? Does one center have expertise that could benefit the way the other center trains or functions? Would it make financial sense to share the cost of anything from promotional items and scheduling software to equipment and new space?

When collaborating with the university library, continue to look for mutual benefits for individuals and for the larger program. On one hand, the communication center might benefit from the library's space and technological resources. On the other hand, the library might benefit from the increased foot traffic and ability to help students in the place they use to study. Both libraries and student services such as communication centers show their value to campus administration through showing how they support student success. This display of value is especially important since libraries and consulting services are often in the front of the line for campus budget cuts. In other words, there is strength in numbers.

In any case of selling the idea of collaboration, do not overlook the more basic human benefits associated with the feelings of success and deeper meaning. The National Association of Communication Centers (NACC) provides a national conference and platform from which to share research. Doing so can result in increased national awareness and prestige of your program, and by default your collaborator's program. At the same time, you and your collaborator are bolstering your institution's credibility and becoming more valuable to the organization. Clearly, collaboration between the communication center and other consulting centers and/or the university library has mutual benefits for services, programs, institutions, and individuals.

**Create Personal Relationships.** The discussion of mutual benefits above is greatly aided by, or predicated on, the development of personal relationships with collaborators. In some cases, you will be the person reaching out to others to begin collaborative relationships. In other cases, you will be placed into a collaborative

relationship. For the former, a personal relationship can be the difference between the success or failure of the collaboration. For the latter, it can be the difference between an enjoyable and fruitful collaboration or one that is tiring and unsuccessful. In either situation, it is recommended that you get to know your collaborator beyond the official, *on paper* capacity. While collaborations can lead to friendships, that level of intimacy is not required. However, interpersonal familiarity will allow you both to assess the other's strengths, needs, special skills, and abilities. Understanding these characteristics will aid in the division of labor and responsibilities in your new collaborative relationship.

**Nurture Open Communication.** As communication scholars and professionals, there is an assumed expectation of high-quality communication skills as a requirement of our positions. However, anyone who has spent a single semester as part of a communication department knows this high expectation is not always met. In the case of personal and collaborative relationships, quality and open communication between collaborators is crucial. As mentioned above, you want this new venture to create as little new work and as few new responsibilities as possible. While communication in the form of regularly scheduled meetings and responding to emails might seem like a hassle at first, they are typically a better alternative to the work that can result from poor communication. Misunderstandings, bypassing, and general confusion can strain even the strongest relationships. Avoid these pitfalls by taking the time to establish communication patterns and set expectations early on in the partnership. Making quality, open communication a norm in your collaborative relationship is a sound investment of your time and effort.

**Collaborate in Name *and* Practice.**

All of us have been involved in both meaningful and trivial relationships. One predictor of which type of relationship yours might become is the amount of time you spend with your partner. While collaborations between the communication center directors, other consulting service directors, and university librarians do not require the same attention you might give a life partner, you do still need to physically interact beyond meetings. Joint staff trainings, attending university events, such as orientations and tabling events, as a team, and coauthoring reports and/or research can increase your dyadic (or more) effectiveness and strengthen your interpersonal bond.

Once you have established a connection with your counterpart, it is time to focus on the staffs. Undoubtedly, the two staffs will have different specializations. However, it is likely that they share a number of occupational, theoretical, and philosophical commonalities, as well as the shared experience of being a student-consultant. Bringing staffs together for trainings and outings is invaluable when building cooperation. This time and effort will pay dividends as clients meet with members of multiple services on single projects, much like the process at GVKM that sees students researching with library consultants, writing with writing consultants, and preparing to speak with communication consultants. While each service will always have their unique skillsets and clientele, preparing to collaborate is what separates simply being housed or promoted together from truly working as a team.

**Be Patient.** While all of the suggestions above are important and seem simple enough on the surface, give this process an ample amount of time to work.

Identifying your potential partner and gaining an understanding of their role, responsibilities, and needs can take a semester or even a full academic year. The time needed to develop interpersonal relationships vary widely from one to the next just as the process of establishing a system of open communication with another person or group depends on the attitudes and communication styles of those involved. Even after a relationship with a partner is established and quality communication is present, assessing and selecting best approaches to collaboration will be different from institution to institution. If time is of the essence in your situation, necessity could prevent you from following this advice. If time allows, let the partnership develop at its own pace. Additionally, the trial and error process, which will be invaluable to finding your own most effective practices, is typically slow going. It takes time to try and evaluate a variety of approaches to any action, process, or relationship. Be as patient as possible.

**Share Ownership.** Another reason to avoid rushing the collaboration process is that it can result in leaving one party feeling unequal to the other. The person or entity moving at a faster speed controls the relationship. In all situations, share ownership of the decision-making process as equally as possible. This can result in consensus building, or collaborative problem solving (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d.), and can be the difference between a true partnership and a performative partnership that exists only on paper. Establishing a sense of equity from the beginning of the relationship is important and can be aided by the use of a memorandum of understanding (MOU). The MOU should clearly note agreed upon terms for issues relating to space, technology, wages, hours of operation, and any other

area that applies to your unique partnership (business Dictionary, 2018). While it may feel as though a contract such as a MOU can set up a relationship that is impersonal and arbitrarily bureaucratic, these ground rules actually set up the relationship for success by creating clear boundaries and expectations.

## Conclusion

As communication centers continue to grow in number and importance, it is easy to forget that they are, in fact, relatively new additions to college and university campuses. NACC, a number of dedicated researchers and scholars, and scores of peer consultants have built an outstanding collective reputation for communication centers. This reputation, along with passionate work and specialized skills, allow communication centers to stand on their own as the *center* of communication on campus. However, entities like the university library have existed for all of modern academic history. Tying communication centers to such a critical component of higher education is advantageous in terms of the center's visibility, accessibility, and resources. Simultaneously, partnering with communication centers helps libraries expand their service profile and increase foot traffic. Applying the principle of nonsummativity, or the notion that the sum is greater than the whole of all parts, this collaboration opens the door for services and libraries to advance in ways that would not be possible by working independently of one another.

The opportunities for collaboration between communication centers, consulting services, and the university library are vast. GVSU's Knowledge Market provides a unique but practical, replicable, and scalable model for collaboration. Each center and institution is unique, but, across the country,

students' need for improved communication skills as well as larger academic guidance and partnership remain the same. Whether two organizations or multiple organizations, in a set location or in the classroom, collaboration allows us all to achieve more together.

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