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Interdisciplinary Writing Center Collaborations

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Interdisciplinary Writing Center Collaborations

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Abstract This article discusses approaches and attitudes toward writing center outreach amid misconceptions surrounding writing centers across many college campuses. Through the experiences of one land grant institution, the authors advocate interdisciplinary cooperation across campus to combat faulty perceptions of writing centers' offerings. Students and faculty alike benefit from a new understanding of the writing center's mission to strengthen students' writing and processes.

Introduction

Like many writing centers, the University of Rhode Island (URI) writing center mission is to assist all writers, at all levels, disciplines, and stages of writing. During Academic Year (AY) 2013-2014, positive catalysts for rethinking our idea of a writing center, including a newly achieved budget line and staffing changes, allowed the Interim Director, J. C. Lee, and Assistant Director, Nancy Caronia, to actively seek and respond to faculty concerns about writers. These interdisciplinary interactions strengthened alliances and created new campus-wide connections. This essay shares our experience of aligning the writing center into a campus-wide resource for students and faculty. We recognized the foundation of tutoring and writing assistance as a discursive practice that actively framed the center's mission. We enhanced visibility by expanding services to the university community through outreach, communication, and collaboration with faculty, and campus-wide workshops. These changes shifted perception, promoting the center's mission and increasing awareness of its offerings across campus. This paper will discuss the need and implementation for collaborative, interdisciplinary changes across the campus.

Rethinking Past Efforts

As we shifted and re-centered, we realized that we inherited misconceptions about the mission and work of a writing center that plague many campus centers--including those who view the writing center as a place of remediation or a fix-it shop for poorly written papers. In his landmark work "The Idea of a Writing Center," Stephen North expressed his frustration at the "[i]gnorance" of those who "do not understand . . . what can happen, in a writing center" ("Idea" 433). North originally wanted autonomy for writing centers ("Idea" 438; 446), but later on, he

advocated a “carefully distanced relationship between classroom teachers and the writing center” (“Revisiting” 16). He admitted that this notion may create “as many new tensions as new opportunities,” but thought the method both promising and necessary (“Revisiting” 16). In the twenty-first century, writing centers are being tasked with even more interdisciplinary responsibilities while tackling the same misconceptions about its role. In an interview with Elizabeth Threadgill, Muriel Harris points out writing centers have become “resource centers for teachers and students” (Threadgill 20). At URI, such expectations led to an ever more complicated, if more expansive, relationship between the writing center and campus-wide departments.

As a writing center, we engaged with these complexities in an effort to rectify widespread misconceptions that it was a place of remediation. We re-positioned ourselves as a campus-wide resource for students, instructors, and disciplines. Like Elizabeth Boquet and Neal Lerner, we embrace the notion that “[t]here is no separate but equal” when it comes to classroom and non-classroom teaching (186). Difficulties changing this discursive rhetoric often begin with faculty expectations of tutoring sessions. Shannon Carter explains, “The writing center is made up of a series of rhetorical spaces in which tutors and students attempt to negotiate academic projects assigned by and evaluated by individuals who are not directly associated with/involved in the writing center’s daily activities” (136). Interdisciplinary outreach helped us to decrease the distance between faculty expectations and tutoring; we focused on students and faculty as separate need-based groups with overlapping aims to create better writing.

We addressed the misunderstanding of the writing center’s mission because, during AY 2013-2104, the URI Writing Center had financial support for the first time. With our new funding, we hired more tutors to work more hours, which included collaborative workshops and outreach with both students and faculty that increased awareness and understanding of the writing center. Our endeavors were most successful at the individual level, where we fostered connections with faculty members across disciplines. In this regard, we propose an Idea of a Writing Center as a space with a secondary mission: interdisciplinary campus-wide collaboration countering widespread misconceptions of writing centers’ work.

Outreach

North originally disliked outreach, describing such efforts as “public relations,” which he worried would lead to other departments co-opting the writing center (North, “Idea” 445). Later reflections by North acknowledged his early “romantic idealization” (North, “Revisiting” 9). It is common in academic spheres for outreach and public relations to be viewed as selling out, and as a result, discussions of outreach are muted amid the larger conversation of writing center theory and practice. This lack of discourse is evidenced by the presence of only one article that is indexed by the search term “outreach” in the *Writing Center Journal’s* online archives. Still, outreach is essential if we are to rectify misunderstandings about writing centers and attract a wide base of students to our services. Since the students who visit the center come from across the disciplines, they informed our efforts at fostering collaboration and interdisciplinarity across campus. We engaged in outreach endeavors that promoted the center as a campus-wide resource.

Since URI’s writing center is under the aegis of the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, but is physically located in the university’s Academic Enhancement Center (AEC), we realized a need

to change perceptions. Our location perpetuated the inaccurate view of the center as a fix-it shop, since the AEC serves as a campus-wide resource for assistance with time management, learning strategies, and subject specific tutoring. Whether students visiting the AEC are referrals from instructors or counselors, the AEC exists as a location for intervention, and remediation, by design, and this difference in designation was one that we worked to address through class visits and tours of the writing center, email and face-to-face communication with faculty members, and workshops focused on specific topics of interest to student writers.

Our efforts to create the distinction between the writing center mission and the AEC objectives increased an understanding of who we are and what we do. We chose to use a campus-wide awareness campaign through event promotion and offerings. We posted upcoming events to university calendars, emailed faculty and students through list-serves and our new WOnline scheduling system, and distributed flyers. We were aware, as Kevin Davis suggests that writing center tutors are more aware than most of how students “share ... a lack of confidence, a fear of the audition, a distaste for being judged” (67) as *bad* writers in need of being fixed through remediation. We had our undergraduate tutors do outreach across the campus’ public spaces to field queries and hand out information as part of their weekly hours. Their knowledge and understanding of the undergraduate mindset was also assisted our tutors in gaining professional development experience. As Kathleen Welsch suggests, “Administrators need to be educated about the two groups of students who benefit from a writing center: those who walk through the door for assistance and those who work on the front line providing the assistance” (7). Such efforts parallel other programs, including the University of Wisconsin at Madison, whose center offers “Co-Teaching,” “Group Meetings,” and “Orientations” at both the classroom and the campus-wide scales (“About Writing Center Outreach” n. pag.). We adopted Carter’s notion of “different rhetorical spaces for different rhetorical purposes” in order to communicate with the various groups of the campus and give our tutors professional development experience (150).

Interdisciplinary Faculty Work: Campus Visits

To work toward university-wide collaboration, our writing center has always offered classroom visits, which are geared to attracting students to the writing center, as North originally suggested (“Idea” 440-441). This year, directors Lee and Caronia worked with instructors and students, modifying the objectives of the class visits/tours to cover a broader range of disciplines than previously targeted. Students from all disciplines seek writing tutoring, but historically, the largest population of tutees has been first year writing students, whose composition instructors directly encourage their attendance. We encountered misconceptions, which prompted us to increase campus visits outside of our department. Through inviting conversations with faculty, which began in e-mail and continued during class visits—or vice versa—we familiarized interdisciplinary faculty with the writing center. The more we communicated directly and worked with faculty, the more they understood what a writing center actually does. With this base of understanding, instructors would be more likely to encourage their students toward the center as a supportive and welcoming resource, rather than as remediation, punishment, or editing service.

Typically, our staff conducts between 70-80 tours and visits during the first two weeks of every term. Writing and Rhetoric courses comprised the majority of these visits/tours, which were developed through the department’s faculty meeting, the week before classes began. We also

attended the new faculty orientation, which garnered some new classroom visits and new alliances in the Kinesiology and Communications departments. Throughout the academic year, there was a visible increase in faculty who found out about the center through word of mouth, the writing center webpage, and email contact, which enabled the center to visit or conduct tours for students and faculty in Communications, Computer Science, Economics, English, Gender and Women's Studies, The Honors Program, Human Development and Family Studies, Kinesiology, and Sociology. The writing center used the faculty lists from these visits to develop a list of instructors who wanted to hear more about the writing center's offerings or to develop a collaborative connection through writing consultancies or workshops. One benefit was that the tutors increased rhetorical and instructional skill across tasks. Welsch remarks that graduate assistants and undergraduate tutors, "learn ... a great deal about producing an effective message" when they "creatively consider the concerns and interests of specific audiences" (3). Our tutors' benefit was also the Center's; these visits/tours enabled us to create alliances—through extended email correspondence, workshops, and consultations—with faculty who were confused about what the writing center offers and what a tutor does in a 45-minute session.

Interdisciplinary Workshops: In Class and on Campus

We understand that the ideal of a writing center is one where the tutors focus on collaborative, "non-evaluative" strategies that, as Harris argues, "offer ... writers the opportunity to write, think, and talk with someone who [will] help ... the writer use language to develop ideas, to test possibilities, to re-see and rethink" (110). We also understand that limiting those collaborations to individual sessions would not move us toward our Idea of a Writing Center as a resource for *all* members of the campus community. In this regard, we brought tutor expertise into the classroom, taking advantage of direct communications from instructors as the impetus for shifting our presence. Many of the instructors who reached out to us did so in the hope of altering our class visitation goals, after hearing about our offerings or concerns about students' overall abilities to write. The latter queries led the directors, Lee and Caronia, and then-graduate tutor Diane Quaglia Beltran to develop a series of in-class workshops and in-class writing consultancies for interested instructors. Tutors volunteered for such opportunities, and they worked with Lee and Caronia to prepare for additional responsibilities.

In-class workshops were developed collaboratively between instructor and tutor, to suit the course's writing expectations. For example, Quaglia Beltran worked with the directors to design and deliver a literature review workshop for a graduate-level engineering course. Lee and Caronia collaborated with participating instructors and tutors to do narrow aims for a specific lesson, then worked with tutors to develop appropriate workshops and activities, and attended such workshops to lend support and to facilitate conversation as needed. Throughout this process, open communication between tutors, instructors, and writing center directors developed and refined presentations for an increasingly expanded tutee population.

In addition to collaborative workshops, we developed out-of-class, interdisciplinary events on popular topics such as multimodal composition, plagiarism, and style. Known as "Nitty Gritty Writing Time" (NGWT), these had some advantages over the typical tutoring appointment. Harris argues, "Planned appointments are, of course, a more organized way to work, but they also have less immediacy. For this reason, some writing centers are situated in libraries or residence halls, to take advantage of the ability to be at the right place at the right time" (111).

Since our writing center is located in the AEC, away from libraries or residence halls, our workshop events were held outside of the writing center, and we invited a wide and diverse student audience. In this way, we not only extended our reach and presence, but also our visibility on campus, and thus where and how we are seen. In addition, some workshop attendees made subsequent appointments for one-on-one tutoring. Holding workshops in spaces such as the Multicultural Center, LGBTQ center, and Academic Cultural Exchange helped us forge alliances across departments and programs. Workshops also gave students alternative exposure to tutors and writing center offerings.

These programs were successful, limited only by the restrictions on workshops we were able to offer; our funding was new, and our tutors' time was committed primarily to tutoring. Most important, these workshops reinforced the writing center as a resource and extension of the classroom, while initiating and strengthening alliances with instructors outside of our home department. We were able to add these instructors to our list-serve, and many later requested class visits and helped us announce events, both of which lead us to believe that in-class workshops can help address misunderstandings—for both students and faculty—about writing centers' missions, abilities, and offerings.

Conclusion

We learned that we can best help students when we meet with faculty to rectify misconceptions and work together to depict the center as a safe place for writers at all stages of writing development. At URI, we encouraged independence among peer tutors, fostering their abilities and strengths. When our tutors visited classrooms, offered workshops, or took on the role of writing consultant for a specific class, they not only gained professional development skills, our tutees benefitted from peer tutelage and were more likely to return to the writing center. Addressing misconceptions that saturate instructors' and administrators' approach to the writing center is now, and may always be, a long-term goal with which we must continually contend if we are to help students work through their fears about writing.

It must be noted that the changes and additions made throughout the academic year were largely due to the financial support of The Office of the Provost, who recognized that students needed a collaborative, non-evaluative space to work through their writing processes. The infusion of financial support allowed us, for the first time in our writing center's history, not only to pay undergraduate tutors, but also to have them work more hours, both in the writing center and outside, helping them to become more proactive in running events and facilitating outreach.

Of course, the work is not done. In the span of one academic year, we were unable to convince an entire campus population that writing centers are important, that they are not remedial spaces but places for all writers at all levels of skill and study. Toward the spring's end, one tutor overheard an undergraduate tour guide point to the building that houses the center, informing students that it was "where you can drop off papers." Changing views takes time and requires long-term planning, campus wide cooperation, and the continuity to allow both to develop.

It is remarkable that in the short space of one year, we were able to forge an alliance of compatriots from across disciplines, all invested in assisting students to become better writers. One person at a time, we explained what we do, asked instructors what more they would like us

to offer, and worked with the faculty and administration to develop useful and productive offerings that attracted students to the center, not to have their work “fixed,” but to build partnerships that would develop writing processes and skills over time. In one year, we built a network that can grow and strengthen a campus culture that supports the writing center and its work of making better, more productive writers. The URI Writing Center is now poised to realize its mission to its fullest.

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