

Abstract The Community College of Philadelphia Writing Center administration visited university writing center in the Philadelphia area to gather information on the content and delivery of writing services at other colleges as a way to expand and enhance the performance of its own Writing Center. The experiences of other colleges hold important implications for managing the operations and services of The Learning Lab Writing at Community College of Philadelphia.

As a way of achieving and maintaining a diversity of high-quality services for its population, The Learning Lab Writing Center administration during Spring, 2007, embarked upon a fact-finding venture involving the visitation of university writing centers in the Philadelphia area. These visits aimed to gather comparative information on the content and delivery of writing services as a way to expand and enhance the performance of The Learning Lab Writing Center. Five regional university writing centers were identified, based primarily upon their membership in The Philadelphia Writing Program Administrators (PWPA) consortium, comprising nearly two dozen colleges and universities in the greater Delaware Valley. The five selected university sites—Arcadia, Drexel, LaSalle, Temple, and West Chester—represented both urban and suburban campus experiences, corresponding generally to the variety of post-secondary learning environments encountered by Community College of Philadelphia students at one point or other in their academic careers. For each visit, arrangements were made to interview the particular writing center administrator and to tour and observe the facility, taking notes on pertinent

An Effort to Product High Quality Services to Support Students' Writing

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features of writing center operations and services.

Across the five writing centers, administrators generally faced a two-pronged responsibility: first, for providing the appropriate range and content of services to meet student need and/or demand; second, for managing systems answering to institutional imperatives, such as funding, staffing, and record-keeping. Not surprisingly, where a university invested robustly in its writing center operation, students enjoyed a greater number of and accessibility to writing-supportive opportunities while, for reporting purposes, administrators could track the costs and benefits obtained. On the other hand, where a university provided only a modest or small-scale writing support service, perhaps not merely for budgetary reasons, some less tangible virtues of “being small” were observed.

By far the most thoughtfully developed and richly endowed of the five writing centers was at Temple University. In addition to a spacious facility featuring multiple venues for student support—individual tutoring tables, computer usage stations, side classrooms for groups, conference areas—the Temple Center’s administrative and managerial structure revealed a serious institutional

commitment to the enterprise of tutoring for writing. A director and assistants, one of whom was responsible for collecting, processing, and reporting on data generated by the Center's professional activities, were themselves supported by a staff of receptionists and student workers who interfaced with student users of Center services. Further, the selection of student services—drop-in sessions, appointment sessions, e-mail sessions, and read-ahead service—indicated the Center's efforts to convenience students' schedules and learning styles. As for advertising/publicity, the Temple Center surpassed comparable institutions in presentation and tone. The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) handout offered a one-page summary of Center services in an attractive, eye-catching arrangement, including a Writing Center logo; a centrally positioned web address; a sidebar posting of Writing Center hours, phone, and fax numbers; and a Question and Answer format with contrasting bold lettering. The text itself struck a casual, friendly tone, addressing the reader with the second person "you" and using contemporary idiomatic phrasing as in "Check out our website . . ."

Of the remaining writing centers, Drexel, LaSalle, and West Chester had also published information sheets or brochures describing writing support services. Drexel's one-page flyer listed all pertinent information about the Writing Center in a more formal approach addressing the reader as "Dear Student" and proceeding in a series of third-person statements naming typical situations in which students use the Center's services. LaSalle produced (1) a tri-folded brochure spreading facts and information across six panels of the

document and (2) a two-sided glossy card in LaSalle's school colors addressing the student and summarizing Sheekey Writing Center services. The other side of the card invites students to make online appointments at any time using the "TutorTrac" system. Handouts on writing topics were available through a link to the Writing Center from the LaSalle website. Somewhat similar to Temple's information sheet was West Chester's "The Writing Center" listing "Five things you should know about the Writing Center" on one side and explaining how the Center can help with the writing process on the other. Other documents produced by West Chester include (1) a "Tip Sheet" defining and illustrating the uses of punctuation marks and (2) a sheet detailing the process of online tutoring through the Writing Center. In general, all five institutions provided access to information about writing and other learning support services on their respective websites.

While Arcadia's Writing Center was physically the smallest and most modest of the five facilities, the University had invested great effort to inculcate a "profession" of tutoring in writing for the training of writing tutors. The document titled "Arcadia University Writing Center Consultant's Handbook" comprised a twenty-six page discussion of Writing Center history, philosophy, and pedagogy for Arcadia writing tutors (called "consultants"). The document's use of terms such as "client" for student writer, "conference" for tutoring session, and "dialogue" or "conversation" for what transpires between the writing tutor and student projected a decidedly more personal, almost transactional, relationship in the writing process. On the last page of the Handbook, the

Writing Center director provided contact information, including home address, home phone, and personal email address, thus confirming the University's commitment to the interpersonal culture envisioned for Writing Center services.

The experiences of the five university writing centers hold several implications for managing the operations and services of The Learning Lab Writing Center. As for scheduling, the practice of limiting tutoring sessions to approximately thirty minutes promotes a targeted response to the student's writing, thus discouraging a temptation to proofreading that can arise in an extended session. Student access to online appointment making works well where (1) having a large support staff permits a division of labor among the duties of appointment processing and assigning of tutors; recordkeeping; in-person student reception, and so forth; and (2) having a large tutoring staff allows tutors to specialize in serving students using one or another mode of contacting the writing center for assistance. As for publicity/advertising of services, a variety of formats for establishing a higher campus profile are suggested across the five writing centers. Through continued website development and creative production of printed materials, such as brochures and information sheets, a more prominent presence for writing support services can be achieved. As for tutor training, the Arcadia and Drexel models in particular offer interesting alternatives to current practices of the Learning Lab in orienting and cultivating writing tutors.

In general, current services and practices of The Learning Lab Writing Center respond to the needs and demands of the College community. With the overwhelming majority of

visitors to the Center seeking tutoring help with writing for English and content course work, administrators' first priority has been to achieve and maintain appropriate staffing throughout the day and evening and on Saturdays. At times of peak demand and/or when staff absences have occurred, there have been occasional delays in serving students seeking tutoring. It appears that the experiences of the university writing centers with providing online tutoring, online appointment making, and "read-ahead" services offer a viable alternative to current Writing Center practices of providing virtually all services in an on-site, in-person format. It must first be observed that The Learning Lab Writing Center has indeed offered online tutoring opportunities for several semesters through Yahoo mail and GroupWise. However, a relatively small number of students have availed themselves of these venues. If the College and the Learning Lab Department concur that an enhanced online writing service should be attempted, The Writing Center's first objective in seeking to strengthen its online tutoring presence should be

To study how to inform and attract more students to the availability of online writing tutoring to the College community.

As a co-requisite to the above, the second objective should be

To estimate the impact on staffing of prospective increases in student demand for online tutoring and to project budgeting for and scheduling of tutors' time to meet increased demand.

As for online appointment making, such an innovation would represent the first departure from standing Learning Lab practice of requiring students to make in-person appointments. If The

Writing Center were to institute online appointment making, one obvious question would be why not to initiate a Department-wide option of online appointment making for students seeking content-course tutoring at the Lab's three main campus and satellite campus locations. Since an answer to this question would involve considerations beyond and outside the limits of this report, consequently, for The Writing Center as an enterprise independent of other Learning Lab services, the third objective should be

To explore the potential of online appointment making as a means of expanding student access to Writing Center services and to assess the impact on staffing and budgeting to manage and control the processing of online appointments.

In the matter of "read-ahead" services in which tutors would receive students' texts in advance of online tutoring or an in-person appointment, the adoption of such a procedure would introduce the new practice of staffing and budgeting for work done most likely off campus and after hours when tutors' time would be unsupervised. Nearly identical to the third objective would be the fourth objective, namely

To explore the potential of "read-ahead" services as a means of expanding student access to Writing Center services and to assess the impact on staffing and budgeting to manage and control the processing of "read-ahead" arrangements.

A final recommendation concerns tutor training and preparation for service in The Writing Center. Current Learning Lab practice is to provide tutor orientation for all new and returning tutors close to the start of each semester and to determine ongoing training on an

individual or group basis or as the need arises in the course of tutors' work with students. As witnessed at some of the university writing centers, administrators have engaged an enculturation process in which tutors "learn" how to perform in a community of writing consultants sharing certain defining academic and humanistic values. With a campus population of 3,600 students, Arcadia's adoption of this approach to tutor training is well suited to a smaller community characterized by greater homogeneity. At CCP, however, the number and diversity of faculty members whose courses have writing requirements make agreement on a shared philosophy problematic at best. Realistically, training strategies for tutoring writing at CCP have always emphasized standard pedagogical issues, such as guidelines for tutors interacting with tutees, broad questions of rhetoric and form, the avoidance of proofreading, targeting of patterns of problems in student writing, matters of style, tailoring of tutor intervention to maximize the learning experience of the student, and so on. Nevertheless, in order to assess present practices in training for writing tutors at CCP in light of experiences at other academic institutions, the fifth objective should be

To explore how training programs for writing tutors at other writing centers might suggest alternatives to current training practices for tutors at The Learning Lab Writing Center.

Conclusion

A tour of five university writing centers has revealed that, as expected, among many shared and common practices in the delivery of writing support services,

differences in approach and emphasis appear from one location to the next. Clearly, local influences and constraints have a great impact in shaping the individual character of each writing center. A challenge for The Learning Lab Writing Center is to evaluate the

experience of other institutions' programs and practices to inform future planning so that service delivery and administrative action will continue to achieve a high quality product in the support of academic writing.