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[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

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Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2010 \(Volume 7 Issue 2\) - Professionalization and the Writing Center, Part II](#)

The Public Face: Working the Front Desk of the UWC

Spring 2010 / Columns

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The role of front desk staff in the operation of the writing center

A student's first impression of the writing center is typically made at a reception desk. In the **Undergraduate Writing Center** (UWC) at the **University of Texas at Austin**, the front desk generally employs two staffers to welcome students, collect intake information, pair students with consultants, and do their best to ensure that consultations run smoothly. As a service that strives to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for students, the front desk's role is clearly important.

The professional development benefits for staffers working at the front desk may be less obvious. Our culture tends to distinguish between receptionists and the "professionals" whom they serve. In the case of the UWC, however, working at the front desk helps consultants develop skills that they can employ in future "professional" roles. As an example of the processes and relationships described in this document, this project itself was a collaborative effort between the front desk staff and administration here at the UWC.

In this article, therefore, we argue that the job of staffing the front desk offers an essential professional development opportunity in the writing center. While working at the front desk may not seem like the most complex role, a closer look reveals much going on behind the scenes that is fundamental to the everyday functioning of the writing center. Moreover, being a successful front desk staffer requires and develops many of the same skills demanded of the writing center's administrative staff (its assistant directors, coordinator, and director).

All of the front desk staffers are UWC consultants. During their desk shifts, staffers use some of the same talents that serve them as consultants (such as their friendliness and strong communication skills), but they also learn to develop additional skills needed for the particular situations arising at the desk. One example is using the skill of diplomacy. Diplomacy encompasses presenting a professional impression to students; assessing the expectations of consultants and students; and fulfilling supervisory and intermediary responsibilities should conflicts arise during consultations. By fulfilling the diplomatic functions of the front desk role, staffers develop many of the skills required of administrators who direct writing centers, whose jobs often require them to mediate conflicts; present a positive, professional face of the writing center to faculty, university administrators, and members of the public; and maintain a productive balance between acting as a peer and as a supervisor toward one's colleagues.

Even non-supervisory tasks train staffers on the skills required of high-level administrative staff. The front desk's daily responsibilities include greeting and

processing students, tracking appointments and consultant availability, and providing policy and supplemental resource information. Together, these duties provide staffers with a broad understanding of how the writing center functions on a daily basis. Staffers, therefore, can develop a comprehensive vision of the writing center's operation that the average consultant may not get from focusing on his or her one-on-one consultations, and this big-picture view of the writing center's operations often encourages them to initiate improvements in the center's operations.

Responsibilities

Processing Students

As its public face, the front desk staff provides the student's first impression of the UWC. Front desk staffers mediate between consultants and students to ensure that both groups have pleasant and productive experiences in the writing center. Staffers also facilitate successful consultations by informing students of certain UWC policies so that their expectations are clear and accurate.

The staff's key responsibility is managing the queue of waiting students and available consultants, while maintaining the appointment log, and honoring appointments over walk-in consultations. When processing a student's intake form, the staff must be aware which consultants may be most appropriate for the student's needs, as well as determine whether the student is eligible for a consultation[1]. Knowing how to interpret the intake form effectively improves professional skills by enhancing a staffers' awareness of how student data will be used not only in the immediate consultation but also for longer-term purposes such as statistical research and decisions about budgets and consultant scheduling.

By combining and handling many low-level tasks in a busy work environment, effectively contributing to the overall function of the writing center, staffers quickly develop professionally in their administrative and diplomatic abilities. Because two consultants staff the UWC's front desk, their skill development is reliant upon maintaining the team dynamic. Being aware of one's front desk partner is absolutely necessary to maintain smooth traffic between students and consultants. To maximize the number of students a writing center is able to serve, staffers are responsible for flexible queue management. For example, while one staffer is greeting a student and informing them about writing center policies and the potential wait time, the other staffer will check the current and pending consultations and relay this information, allowing the former to predict quickly and accurately a reasonable waiting period for the incoming student. While one staffer fields phone calls or answers an incoming student's questions, the second will intercept intake forms and input student data into the computer, and so on. This dynamic of increased awareness of a student's or consultant's expectations, along with the sharing and juggling of front desk tasks between the two staffers can be a test of both teamwork and time-management skills.

Effective teamwork, however, doesn't always solve time-management issues. While fulfilling a writing center's commitments, staffer's also occupies the unique roles of student, consultant, and supervisory assistant. These combined positions prepare a staffer to be more receptive when challenges arise and discretion is necessary to alleviate conflicts. Staffers can ease the frustrations of students and consultants alike by remaining aware of the general stresses and expectations affecting each party and by employing center policies to

discover possible alternatives. Mastering these responsibilities allows staffers to develop the awareness necessary to manage expectations and maintain a professional atmosphere at the writing center.

Managing Student Expectations

One of our staffers' greatest challenges is to serve as intermediaries between students and consultants. The shift from being a consultant to occupying a more administrative, supervisory role can be difficult and requires maturity and professionalism. In essence, working the front desk requires a student to occupy the role of both a peer and a supervisor. As staffers become comfortable in this expanded role, they may realize that the job also requires them to exercise judgment in knowing when to be flexible and when to enforce rules.

Often, students have been to the UWC before and are therefore comfortable with the goals of a consultation. However, just as often, students may be unfamiliar with the UWC's process-oriented approach to writing. Here, discretion is one of the first tools used by the front desk staff when managing the student's expectations about the center's policies. Reviewing the intake form with the student is an opportunity for the front desk to discuss the writing process itself. This is also an opportunity to provide students with supplemental information such as handouts and online references while they're waiting for their consultation.

To exercise discretion, staffers must be aware that students are under a great deal of stress, and, as a place that is set up to help them, the center often bears the brunt of their frustration when failing to meet their expectations. For instance, a student may have received incorrect information about the UWC; may not understand the justifications for its non-evaluative process; or may display behavior that is unacceptable in the context of a university (or elsewhere, for that matter). If the student continues to resist after having the writing center policies explained to them, the front desk staff must use discretion to determine whether to refer the student to higher administration or simply turn them away. In some cases, front-desk staffers may need to intervene in problematic consultations. Intervening requires a consultant to request a staffer's assistance in ending a consultation or reassigning the student to a new consultant. To diffuse a difficult situation, a front desk staffer must assess the student's concerns in order to negotiate alternatives. Again, this sensitivity to the student's concerns is the key ability of the staffer in dealing with problematic situations. At this point, they must balance the positions of both peer and a supervisor to effectively mediate the student and the consultant's interests. This kind of management is an important administrative task in any professional situation, and it can only be successful if the staffer can understand the situation and apply appropriate discretion.

Conclusion

The daily services performed by the front desk staff clearly influence the supportive environment and administrative tasks required and developed to maintain a productive writing center. Managing the daily responsibilities required of the front desk staff is an opportunity to develop professional skills essential to future employment and professional roles. The job of the staffer merges the talents of consultants with the managing and mediation skills applied by the writing center's administrative staff, allowing them to make the transition smoothly into a more administrative role. Professional growth begins with the staffers' capacity to integrate the roles of student, consultant, and

administrator through both the low-level tasks of processing students and the daily management of policies and expectations.

By formulating and presenting clear versions of the Writing Center's philosophy for students, front desk staffers start to develop sophisticated, comprehensive conceptions of the UWC's operations. Engaging in these "meta-consulting" discussions about the writing center's consulting practices, staffers at the front desk teach students the Center's philosophy, as opposed to teaching writing in a way that is informed by that philosophy, as consultants do on a daily basis. The distinction is important because the Center's director and other administrators routinely re-examine, revise, and formulate the Center's philosophy and present it to others in staff orientations and training sessions as well as in presentations to university administrators and members of the public.

Staffers collect and integrate these revised philosophies and package them appropriately for daily consulting routines. Also, by serving as the first impression of the Writing Center, the front desk staffers quickly accustom themselves to the constant exposure of differing student expectations by developing awareness of the greater purpose of the writing center. Active involvement in managing these expectations through the use of teamwork, organization, and diplomacy allows the front desk staff to apply administrative skills and leads them forward in a successful transition from being a university student into a future professional career.

Note

[1] A student is ineligible for consultation when the student is not enrolled as an undergraduate at UT; requests a consultation for a paper due in two hours or less; seeks a second consultation on the same day for the same assignment; or seeks assistance that is inconsistent with the non-evaluative procedures provided by the UWC.



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