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Changing Hearts and Minds

Fall 2004 / Columns

by *Jessica Clark*

How you too can improve the institutional status of your writing center.



Jessica Clark

A composition colleague, one with whom I regularly talk about teaching and writing, sends a student to the writing center with these words written across the top of the page: "Your ideas are acceptable but your writing is marginal." (Welch 51)

Recently, a writing center friend told about coming up behind a group of fellow faculty members gathered around a bulletin board. From a distance she could see her name on the recently posted list of nominations for the outstanding teacher award. Next to her name, someone had drawn several large question marks. As she drew nearer to the group, she heard her colleagues question her eligibility. Even though she had recently earned tenure and regularly taught courses for graduate and undergraduate students, the fact that she also worked with students in the writing center placed her outside the circle of those regarded as teachers eligible for awards. (Grimm 524)

As a newly assigned Teaching Assistant re-entering a graduate program after a substantial hiatus from teaching, I didn't have much time to spare in an already overloaded schedule.... I remembered the flyer I had recently received from the university's writing center. The center identified itself briefly as a recently established facility operating under the supervision of the English department and staffed by graduate teaching assistants. As a fledgling center, its statement of purpose was brief. It offered tutorial help with students experiencing writing difficulties and suggested to composition teachers that they refer any students

that might benefit from such help. (Powers 17)

Those of us working in writing centers probably have stories similar to these to share. Although my career is still in its early stages, I already possess quite a few of my own stories that frustrate and disturb me. My experiences also revolve around colleagues in rhetoric and composition and from disciplines across the university who either do not know what we do in the writing center or have conceptions of writing center work that differ greatly from the reality. While we can all find a great many stories like these in the pages of literature written primarily for a writing center audience, I found the passages above in the pages of composition journals. I began looking in these sources as part of a research project that incorporated surveys of graduate students in rhetoric and composition and a literature review of articles about writing centers in composition journals. My own frustrating stories prompted me to begin this investigation of the attitudes, expectations, and beliefs of the composition community toward writing center work. We who work in writing centers know that they are wonderful places filled with possibilities for tutors and their clients, but what do our colleagues in composition really know about writing center work?

The response I received from the surveys was, at best, lukewarm. Too few were returned to provide reliable, valid conclusions, but I would like to note that two of the questions, "As a writing instructor, how would you describe the primary role of writing centers in helping students?" and "How do you see writing center theory and pedagogy complementing rhetoric and composition theory and pedagogy?" received a variety of answers. The varying answers that the first question received leads me to believe that these respondents did not have a clear sense about the services offered by the writing center, and the majority of answers to the second question either honestly expressed the respondent's lack of knowledge about writing center theory and pedagogy or were so incoherent that we who coded the data were at a loss about what the respondent did or did not know.

Reviewing articles from composition journals was a slightly easier process, but these articles revealed stories that are equally as frustrating as the survey answers. One of the positive aspects of these articles from journals like *College Composition and Communication*, *Composition Studies*, and the *Journal of Advanced Composition* is the authors' efforts to make recommendations that can be used by the writing center community to form more productive relationships with composition colleagues and their programs and with other programs across campuses.

These recommendations are diverse and versatile, and their differences allow them to be used in a variety of contexts. Suzanne Powers, whose story appears at the beginning of this article, constructs her recommendations based on qualitative research of three different writing centers and their directors, but she began this research based on her own experience as a new graduate instructor who was uncertain about her university writing center's services. Her recommendations to writing center directors focus on developing relationships with new instructors. This emphasis is reflected especially in her third and fourth recommendations:

[3] Work with English faculty to develop the notion that developing better writers rather than better papers is a mutual goal, one that suggests moving away from the 'fix-it shop' idea as the sole rationale for writing center

existence. At the same time, centers need to be sufficiently politically astute to accommodate and work cooperatively with the English department. [4] Educate faculty about the important role they play in establishing student attitudes toward referrals. (21)

The strategies she recommends are intended primarily to help instructors have a clearer understanding of and more positive attitudes toward writing center work. Her recommendations should be considered useful, as well, to “fledgling” writing centers like the one in Powers’ institution.

Powers’ first and second recommendations should produce the same effect but in a more indirect manner because they are aimed specifically at writing center directors. She suggests that directors should “clarify their conceptual alignment with writing as process and define the roles they would like to play in accordance with this alignment.” Directors also need to “test their assumptions about tutoring and its effectiveness in developing more independent writers by encouraging further research of those assumptions” (21). Although most writing centers probably could benefit, on some level, from implementing these recommendations, they will probably be most useful to writing centers in the earlier stages of their development because established writing centers typically have been using and refining these strategies for some time to fit their mission and their local institutional contexts.

The tenured writing center director and professor in Nancy Grimm’s story implies that the writing center is well established but its work, and the director’s position, continues to be perceived incorrectly by others in the institution. Just as Powers’ recommendations reflect the needs of writing centers in specific institutional contexts, Grimm’s recommendations are aimed at writing centers that have already implemented advice similar to Powers’ and have met with a measure of success but that are still struggling with “should-be colleagues, especially in composition, [who] have not often regarded writing centers as equal partners in critical and creative teaching but instead as doing the lowly, gritty work of making sure that students have mastered norms” (Welch 52). One of Grimm’s strategies addresses the issue of writing centers helping students “master norms” widely accepted by others in the university. She recommends that writing centers give up the protection of old beliefs about normalizing students to academic community and literacy because “revisionist literacy theorists have demonstrated that language is a site of cultural conflict and that we often use language for exclusionary rather than inclusionary purposes, [although] writing center workers and composition teachers continue to talk about their work as that of enabling students to understand and enter the academic community” (528). An established writing center with a history of success might be well placed to challenge these widely held beliefs about community and literacy and to begin educating students about how these beliefs can exclude some while including others.

Another of Grimm’s somewhat controversial recommendations challenges writing centers to stop “checking to see how they are regarded by others and adjusting their behavior and adapting their services to improve this regard” (534). She believes that writing centers need to focus change on the self in order to become “legitimate academic units” (534). To achieve this change in focus and status, Grimm suggests that writing centers use theory instead of numbers to justify their practice. This kind of justification would require that writing centers make some decisions based on more than just local institutional demands and would greatly change the nature of administrative decision

making in many centers. Again, Grimm's recommendation might prove more fruitful for a writing center that has already proved its effectiveness by using numbers and that needs to find more radical alternatives to help colleagues understand that it is more than just a fix-it shop.

Like Powers, Grimm advocates that writing centers increase their sharing of theory, practice, development, and histories with composition programs. Both authors view increased communication as a means of shaping more productive relationships between the center and the institution, but Grimm warns that this process is more complex than it seems on the surface. Because universities are resistant to change, creating a space for communication can be tricky and should be undertaken only after reflection on and research of what is at stake in the future and what has been at stake in the past. Once the center has articulated its position, it can then move toward creating a space to discuss the positions and needs of other departments and groups on campus, and then it can rearticulate its position based on these discussions.

My research foray into this topic revealed that writing centers continue to be plagued by the problem of marginalized status on university campuses; my research also revealed that our close relatives in composition studies continue to fail to see writing centers as places that can teach writing. However, stories and recommendations from scholars like Grimm, Welch, and Powers can be useful to those who want writing centers to be recognized as equal partners with composition programs as well as other campus programs.

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