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Money Doesn't Matter

[Spring 2011/Focus](#)

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Introduction

Stephen North's 1984 article, "The Idea of a Writing Center," highlighted the struggle writing centers face with regard to misperceptions about their function and purpose. North proclaimed that writing centers should not be viewed as centers of remediation but rather as locations for productive and meaningful learning. He vehemently voiced his frustration with faculty and administrators, who he suggested were perpetuating the misconception of a writing center's purpose. Despite that North's call for change and awareness is now decades old, misperceptions of writing-center work remain common.

Praxis's most recent Call for Papers caught my attention — "From Triage to Outreach: Raising the Institutional Profile of Writing-Center Work." I let out a sigh of relief as I recognized, although disappointedly, that it is not only my institution, but centers around the world that continue to struggle with this challenge. As I continued to read through the call, however, I felt rather jolted: "when writing centers are perceived only as writing hospitals...they are more susceptible to budget cuts and funding crises." I write from a context in which the reality is quite the opposite. Allow me to explain.

I work in **Education City** in **Doha, Qatar**. Education City is comprised of a number of American higher-education institutions that have established branch campuses here. Notably, these branch campuses are only selections from the main campuses — for example, **Virginia Commonwealth University** only imported the School of the Arts, **Georgetown University** carried over the School of Foreign Service, and **Texas A & M** replicated the School of Engineering. The aim is to bring the most elite school from each university to Qatar. While individual contracts vary, the primary mandate for all institutions is the same: create a mirror image of the home institution. Education City universities are funded by the State of Qatar; as a result of the Gulf's wealth, funding is not a particularly pervasive problem (although it is notable that the campuses are politically and administratively linked with their home campuses, and on occasion this can result in financial wrangling).

The bottom line for writing centers in Qatar is that, while funding may not be a concern, their institutional profiles are still as low as their U.S. counterparts. Most of the Education City universities have ample discretionary funds, but they are rarely used for writing-center development. For example, writing-center administrators at Education City universities often find themselves writing lengthy rationale statements or trying to justify their need for software, peer tutors, or other resources.

Other departments do not seem to face these same challenges. Libraries, for example, simply request a book that is “necessary to develop the collection” and — voila! — the book is purchased. Writing centers, however, must begin by explaining what a writing center is, what it does, and how it can assist students, faculty, and staff. That is, writing

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centers are misunderstood and, as a result, deemed unimportant. My goal here is twofold: one, to underscore that writing centers remain low on the academic totem pole, regardless of funding concerns; and two, to articulate some of the methods writing centers in Education City have used to raise this profile — first through a general increase in visibility, and subsequently through a deeper understanding of the writing center’s role.

With regard to the first aim, it is important to reiterate that even within a context of seemingly unlimited funding, writing centers still encounter perceptions of being a place for remediation and “fixing.” A constant increase in visibility is critical to developing and improving the status of writing centers. General awareness increases general knowledge; the more writing-center staff can disseminate information about writing-center pedagogy, the more improved the center’s profile will become.

To articulate some of the methods writing centers in Education City have used to raise the profile of their mission within the institution, I focus on two universities — Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQ) and Georgetown University in Qatar (GUQ). The reason for this stems from my own experiences — while I have colleagues and anecdotes from other institutions, my primary work experience in Qatar has been with these two universities. As such, I will focus on two primary features I have noticed in writing center work: tutorial reporting and increased professional development.

Act I: Reporting

During the 2009-10 academic year, I worked as an adjunct English faculty member at **Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar** (VCUQ), but I transitioned to a permanent position in the writing center at VCUQ in October 2010. My initial experience as a faculty member was useful because I saw things from the perspective of a writing center instructor (while I was teaching at VCUQ, I was also working part-time at **Georgetown University in Qatar**’s writing center.). As a faculty member at VCUQ, I received reports from the writing center about every student in my class who visited and received services (students sign a waiver at the beginning of the semester — they are able to opt-out of this automatic reporting if they choose). At GUQ, there was a very different reporting system, which will be further described below.

VCUQ’s system of automatically reporting each session to the instructor provides a useful, collaborative link between the writing center and faculty. As it is, there is very limited interaction between the writing center and faculty. Since the vast majority of students are non-native speakers, the interaction typically involves a faculty member sending a student to the writing center to “get the grammar fixed.” While this may be an area covered in the tutorial, often higher order concerns are also addressed. For example, many students come to the

center simply to understand an assignment before they begin writing. Other students come to discuss the organization of their ideas. Sometimes tutorials are even further removed from the writing process than one would expect — one of my recent reports states, “She seemed to have all the information she needed to complete the assignment but primarily needed emotional support.” The reporting system can capture these interactions and assist in educating faculty about the incredibly complex and diverse role of the writing center.

VCUQ writing center staff also attempt to use lay language, making reporting accessible to a broad audience. This is critical in an environment where many of the faculty are either themselves non-native speakers or from disciplines where reading and writing is not heavily emphasized and the role of the writing center is somewhat unclear (e.g. a design school such as VCUQ). A conversational, narrative style of reporting provides a more welcoming framework to which faculty can respond.

In contrast, GUQ has not had any formal reporting structure in place for faculty. Tutors are expected to complete hand-written notes on template forms, which are ultimately filed away and typically forgotten. On occasion, forms may be pulled to assist in determining whether or not a probationary student has made an effort to seek academic support. There are also periodic “Faculty Referrals”, when a student has been specifically referred to the center for academic support by a particular professor. In this case, the student is required to have the form completed by the writing center tutor and return it to the professor. Faculty rarely inquire about student use of the writing center, and no efforts have been made to reach out to faculty due to confidentiality concerns. No doubt this line between open communication and maintaining confidentiality is one with which writing centers across the globe struggle, but from my view it is a critical issue for writing centers to tackle in order to improve our overall institutional profile.

Act II: Professional Development

Another salient feature I have seen at both institutions is an attempt at professionalism — specifically, I am referring to professional development initiatives. In Doha, representatives from various writing centers (both inside and outside Education City) collaborate and rotate in hosting writing center meetings. These typically include a specific topic of writing center work (e.g. peer tutor training, staff development, administrative logistics of reporting, etc.), and often one of the participants facilitates the discussion or gives a brief presentation.

In addition to the informal Doha writing center network, there is also a **Middle East and North Africa Writing Center Alliance** (MENAWCA). This group, established in 2007, is a much more formal entity that hosts biannual conferences and aims to provide a forum for writing center concerns and development in the region. Due to the formality of the MENAWCA organization, I must request funding from my institution in order to participate in events. This has significant implications in raising my professional profile within the institution. For example, as a writing center instructor, I have very little and limited interaction with the Dean. However, when I apply for professional development funds to attend the MENAWCA conference, it is the Dean who needs to sign off for approval. The simple act of reading my request and recognizing that such a professional organization exists helps add credibility to

my position. This is not unique to VCUQ; it is typically the upper level administration that must sign approval for all professional development funding.

These acts of professionalism are one way of highlighting the important work of writing centers, not only regionally but within our own institutions. Our professional development initiatives underscore the growing importance of our work as writing center staff for upper administration officials.

Conclusion

This article has been very limited in scope — there are countless other endeavors that VCUQ, GUQ, and other Education City writing centers have embarked upon that are worthy of further elaboration. Nonetheless, these two foci of reporting and professionalism are useful considerations for writing centers around the world that can be realized regardless of budgetary constraints.

Reporting can take many forms and can be a collaborative process. Some institutions may have strict confidentiality rules that prohibit them from sharing session reports. However, there are other ways to have collaborative faculty and institutional involvement. Perhaps an overall report to the faculty or administration with statistics about how many students from different disciplines have visited the writing center, or what types of services they seek, would be appropriate. While reporting can take many forms, the ultimate goal is communication.

Professionalism can also take many forms. While attending conferences and developing partnerships is important, professionalism can happen internally as well. Staff training initiatives can be developed and promoted in-house. Writing center staff can develop and facilitate workshops for other faculty and staff at their institutions, thus demonstrating a desire to be an open and communicative center that is integral to the entire institution. These are professional development opportunities for the entire university community that can be implemented at any institution.

Raising the institutional profile of writing centers is an ongoing, challenging task. Regardless of funding constraints, there are mechanisms that can be used to maintain a culture of communication and an awareness of the importance of writing center work. While writing instruction and development is a primary aim of centers, dispersing knowledge and an understanding of our profession also remains a critical element of our mission.

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