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What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers: Position Statement on Professional Concerns

Jeanne H. Simpson

The existence of a National Writing Centers Association and half a dozen regional writing center organizations suggests that the idea of writing centers has matured. We have a growing library of writing center books available to us, two publications, and an annual round of meetings and workshops. All this evidence that writing centers have arrived may lead us into complacency, into the relief felt after a battle has been won. We should be wary of that complacency and ask ourselves just where we are and where we go from here?

The evidence indicates that we have achieved a kind of legitimacy: writing centers have become academically respectable programs. Even though Stephen North must remind the world that its perceptions of writing centers are often wrong, the fact is that the academic world now accepts writing centers.

The writing center movement has expanded because writing center people have learned to communicate—to form a network, to transmit information, and to exchange assistance. Thus the isolation of individual writing centers has ended.

Great. Now what should we do and what should we not do with what we have created?

First, we should not assume that our work is over—that now we can glide easily along, meeting a couple of times a year, giving or attending a workshop here and there, assuming that writing centers are now a permanent part of the academic scene. The changes in writing centers—in what they mean and how they have been used, funded, and administered over the last decade—should tell us that fluidity is a fact we must accept. Writing centers unquestionably will continue to change. We must be careful to use the structure we have built as a way of detecting those changes, of evaluating them and of adjusting to the changes that represent improvement and working to prevent those we consider harmful.

In the past, the writing center movement has operated largely as a support system, a way of keeping lots of worried people afloat. That function will continue, but it seems likely that the movement, with its publications and meetings, will increasingly function as a system for addressing issues. For instance, I find many writing center people who see no problem with giving a writing center a strictly remedial focus. To me, that approach is anathema. But we have to understand each other; we have to listen to each other, or we will both lose. Similarly, I oppose the idea of incorporating writing labs into larger “learning centers” in which tutoring for several disciplines occurs. Yet people whose work I admire and whose centers have been models for mine are moving in this direction. We need to make opportunities to listen to each other, to ask questions, to examine arguments for both sides.

These are issues within the writing center movement. At the same time, we need to continue the dialogue between writing center people and others, especially administrators—those who control our budgets. In that dialogue, we still have much to accomplish. One effort obviously will be directed toward improving the conditions under which we work. Although the idea of writing centers may be firmly established, writing center directors still face a struggle to move out of positions of relative powerlessness. One of the immediate purposes of having a national organization is to lend the strength of the organization to the struggle for control of writing

centers. At the same time, the existence of the organization implies a sense of professionalism. If we demand working conditions that encourage the best from us, we must also be willing to listen and make reasonable compromises. The situation is a reciprocal one—the more professional we are, the more we can ask for; the more we ask for, the more likely it is that we will be recognized as professionals.

Presenting writing center directors as professionals is, in fact, one of the most important tasks facing the writing center movement. The National Writing Centers Association has been collecting ideas from the membership on this subject, and the results are reported below as a position statement on the professional concerns of writing center directors. The statement explains the need for appropriate preparation for writing center directorships, asks for clear job descriptions, outlines the ideal conditions of a directorship, and suggests guidelines for directing a writing center. The statement is intended to guide both writing center directors and administrators who hire and supervise them.

Although most of us are unlikely to encounter working conditions as ideal as those suggested by the position statement, we can regard the statement as a “basis” for negotiation. Often, writing center directors work in dreadful situations not because administrators are intentionally making things difficult but because no one has a clear idea of how things should be. The existence of a position statement endorsed by our national organization should solve that particular problem. Further, the existence of the statement should encourage a trend toward graduate programs that provide specific training for writing center directors. Surely it is our obligation to foster such programs since they will be a source of our future leadership.

The statement is the product of effort by the Executive Board and the Professional Concerns Committee of the National Writing Centers Association, dozens of writing center directors who participated in NWCA workshops and who answered our letters, and individuals who took time to answer my questions.

Position Statement on Professional Concerns of Writing Center Directors

The directorship of a writing center is a professional position, one that requires specialized preparation and administrative experience. It should be recognized as such and should carry the same rights and responsibilities as other professional faculty positions.

The National Writing Centers Association opposes the hiring of part-time faculty as directors unless they are given full access to the rights, privileges, and services available to regular faculty. The National Writing Centers Association opposes the practice of establishing temporary directorships and filling them with temporary or unprepared personnel. Establishment of a writing center should be a long-term, fully budgeted commitment on the part of an institution, since these conditions are necessary for a writing center to meet any but the most modest goals.

Therefore, the National Writing Centers Association recommends that institutions employing writing center directors provide the following working conditions:

1. Establishment of a directorship should begin with a definition of appropriate preparation for the position.
2. Directorships should carry sufficient stability and continuity to provide for sound educational programs and planning.

3. Directorships should not be assigned to persons against their will.
4. Directorships should be considered faculty and administrative positions rather than staff positions.
5. Directorships should include access to promotion, salary, tenure, and travel funds equivalent to that provided for other faculty and administrators.
6. Requirements for retention, promotion, and tenure should be clearly defined and should take into consideration the particular demands of the position.
7. Directorships should be established with clear formulas for determining equivalencies, such as released time for administration and tutor training. The National Writing Centers Association recommends that, where it is appropriate, tutor training programs should be considered courses and should have credit units assigned to them.
8. Directorships should be established within a clearly defined administrative structure so that directors know to whom they are responsible and whom they supervise.
9. Directorships should include access to administrative support—such as clerical help, computer time, and duplicating services—that is equal in quality to that available to other program directors.
10. Evaluation of writing center directors should be conducted by persons in the same area of specialization.

The National Writing Centers Association offers institutions the following guidelines for developing job descriptions for writing center directorships and for evaluating the credentials of applicants for these positions:

1. Essential preparation for a writing center director should include the following:
 - experience in teaching composition and rhetoric
 - knowledge of theories of learning
 - knowledge of research methods
 - knowledge of evaluation methods
 - experience in developing and evaluating materials
2. In addition, academic preparation or experience in the following areas should be considered appropriate credentials:
 - accounting
 - basic business administration
 - psychology
 - personnel management
 - information systems
 - computer technology
 - records management
 - decision making
 - writing experience
 - grant writing and administration
 - curriculum design
 - methods of teaching English as a second language

3. The responsibilities of a writing center director should be the following:
 - to provide and preserve a sense of direction for the writing center
 - to shape the curriculum of the writing center
 - to teach in the writing center's programs
 - to prepare and/or purchase materials needed in the writing center
 - to consult with writing center staff and with faculty on writing instruction
 - to select and train tutors
 - to supervise tutors
 - to evaluate tutors regularly
 - to keep careful records that are made available as required to students, teachers, tutors, and administrators
 - to administer budget allocations responsibly
 - to ensure continuous funding of the writing center
 - to publicize the writing center
 - to maintain communication with the institution's other writing programs
 - to work with faculty in writing-across-the-curriculum programs
 - to continue professional growth through appropriate reading, courses, studies, research, and participation in professional organizations and workshops
 - to organize all activities of the writing center
 - to provide for regular reports on the activities, progress, and problems of the writing center
 - to provide for regular and thorough evaluation of the writing center's program.

The National Writing Centers Association offers the following basic guidelines for operating a writing center:

1. Because writing is a skill used in all subjects and at all levels of the educational process, a writing center should be considered a support service for the entire institution rather than simply for a single department. Although the budget and staff of a writing center may come from a single department, the mission of the center and its constituencies should encompass the entire institution.
2. Regardless of its organization and design, a writing center should be based on the idea of individualized instruction. Therefore, materials and methods chosen for writing centers should be adjusted to individual needs.
3. Access to the writing center should not be limited by a student's level of preparation or physical capabilities.
4. The writing center should have instructional goals that are clearly understood by tutors and students.
5. Writing center records should provide for continuity of instruction regardless of how its staff is organized.
6. A writing center should have clearly stated, consistent, and ethical principles to guide its tutors. The National Writing Centers Association suggests the following:
 - Tutors should be provided clear explanations of writing center procedures.
 - Tutors should neither directly nor indirectly offer criticism of a teacher's assignments, methods, or grading practices.

- Tutors should be given guidelines for defining acceptable and unacceptable intervention in a student's writing process.

The spirit of this statement is one of professionalism. The writing center movement has gone beyond the "can do" stage of scrounged materials and informal communications. However, we must not lose either the energy or the commitment that characterized our initial stages. A change in style need not affect our basic purpose of making writing centers exemplary programs that offer students an opportunity to develop as writers.

Works Cited

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