

Carrie Kancilia

The Writing Lab as Community Resource: Staff Outreach at Purdue University

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Slide 1: The Writing Lab as Community Resource

Slide 2: STAFF USE OF THE PURDUE WRITING LAB: FREQUENCY OF USE

- Beginning of semester lab tours and inclusion rhetoric. At the beginning of each semester, students of Introductory Composition at Purdue (ICAP) visit the lab to learn about the services provided there. Tutors use lab tour scripts to guide them. Since I began as a tutor at Purdue in 2014, there has been language around the inclusion of all the members of the Purdue community in this script -- with “staff” cited specifically. The concept of active staff usage of the lab has always excited me, but in my time at Purdue, very few staff members have visited the lab. This project was my attempt to investigate the reasons for low staff usage and to gain insight into how to increase it.
- According to the Writing Lab’s annual report, staff visits to the lab accounted for less than half of 1% (.44%) of our traffic during the 2015-2016 academic year. (The 2016-2017 annual report is not yet available.)
- The 2015-2016 annual report does include a reference to staff: “During one-to-one consultations, Purdue students, faculty, and staff engage in 30- or 60-minute, in-person meetings with one of our graduate or undergraduate tutors. Consultations can take place at any stage of the writing process, from the very beginning when writers are just generating ideas, to after a draft has been

completed.” This language reveals the desire for staff inclusion despite minimal usage of the resource by staff.

### Slide 3: METHODOLOGY: ANONYMOUS SURVEY QUESTIONS

- Using an anonymous IRB-approved survey, my project aimed to address the reasons for low staff usage of Purdue’s Writing Lab. I endeavor to find ways in which to (1) encourage staff to make tutorial appointments and (2) develop modes of outreach such as materials and workshops tailored to the types of writing Purdue staff tends to do most regularly. The first step in that process was to try to determine the root cause(s) of low staff usage.
- During the 2015-2016 academic year, a mere 22 of 4,950 visitors to the lab identified as staff (down from 2014-5 with 58 of 5,317 visitors identifying as staff). My survey was designed to help discover if Purdue staff do not use the Writing Lab because of language barriers, the belief that they do not need writing help, scheduling conflicts, or a lack of awareness of the range of available services offered to them.

### Slide 4: MENTIONS OF STAFF ON THE PURDUE OWL (2014)

As I began this study, I wondered if there were easily identifiable areas of the Purdue Writing Lab website where a staff member could see that the Writing Lab was a resource for them. This slide shows what I found on the 2014 version of the website.

- In 2014, the Purdue Writing Lab website directly addressed staff in its website language saying: Purdue University, students, faculty, and staff at our West Lafayette, IN campus may access this area for information on the award-winning Purdue Writing Lab. This area includes Writing Lab hours, services, and contact information.

Slide 5: MENTIONS OF STAFF ON THE PURDUE OWL (2017)

While the current version of the website addresses the Writing Lab’s commitment to diversity and the academic community, staff members are not specifically mentioned.

**Goals**

- To help clients at Purdue, West Lafayette, Indiana, with documents in any stage of the writing process, in any discipline, in any medium, and in any genre
- To provide world-class resources and services to the global community through the Purdue OWL
- To promote responsible academic inquiry, critical thinking, and the expression of diversity
- To serve the academic community by fostering professional development and writing-related research

These findings illuminated the need for explicit language on the website regarding staff inclusion. While it is important for first-time ICAP visitors to know the Writing Lab is a community resource, staff members do not receive lab tours (as new students do) and therefore would not necessarily assume they were welcomed to use the lab.

Slide 6: STAFF RESPONDENTS: BREAKDOWN BY DEPARTMENT

In most departments, non-faculty and non-student staff members are categorized as clerical, administrative, or service. An “other” option was provided for those who self-identify with another position title. From my review of the data, most of the respondents who chose “other” were faculty, visiting scholars, or post-docs despite my email instructions that only non-student, non-faculty staff take the survey.

Clerical	20.99%	34 responses
Admin	60.49%	98 responses
Service	7.41%	12 responses



Having worked in office jobs prior to beginning my PhD at Purdue, I composed this list of writing genres for staff primarily based on my own experience. Respondents were asked to check all writing genres that applied to their habitual writing practices. The responses I received here were not particularly surprising with the notable exception of the “creative work” category, as a staggering 37% of staff respondents in predominantly STEM- related departments reported active work on creative projects. While the Writing Lab tutors at Purdue are certainly capable of providing support and direction for traditional workplace writing genres like professional emails, internal memos, status reports, and spreadsheets, this finding about creative work illuminated an interesting potential for staff and lab tutors to collaborate.

#### Slide 8: Reasons Why Staff Do Not Visit the Lab

The survey posed multiple possible reasons why staff members had not used Writing Lab services, including responsibilities to family, uneasiness about writing and/or speaking about writing, and simply not being aware the services at the Lab were open to them. While respondents were asked to check all scenarios that applied, an overwhelming 67% of respondents said they did not know they were able to use lab services. The second most common responses with 29.73% each were: “I do not need help with my writing” and “I did not know the location.”

#### Slide 9: Representative Quotes by Staff

- “I recommend the writing lab to students all the time, but just never thought of it being there for me.”
- “Although my supervisor supports professional development, she does not approve of taking time away from my office unless I am to attend a 'proper'

workshop -- which makes personal development (such as tutors) difficult to get approval.”

- “Most of my writing cannot wait for a tutor.”
- “Thought this mainly a student geared program, and thus assumed it was unavailable to faculty/staff.”

Slide 10: Next steps: How Can We Encourage Staff to Use The Writing Lab at Purdue?

- Given staff responses, possible modes of staff outreach include:
  - University-wide publicity of the Lab’s address and resources available to staff
  - Retention of language on the Purdue Writing Lab website with reference to staff inclusion
  - Highlighting the availability of both synchronous and asynchronous online options across the campus
  - Identifying an administrative contact for each department with whom to liaise regarding department-relevant workshops on the genres of writing most used by staff

Slide 11: Ideas for Staff Outreach

- Given staff responses, possible modes of staff outreach include:
  - Wide university publicity of the Lab’s address and resources available to staff
  - Retention of language on the Purdue Writing Lab website with reference to staff inclusion
  - Highlighting the availability of both synchronous and asynchronous online options across the campus

- Identifying an administrative contact for each department with whom to liaise regarding department-relevant workshops on the genres of writing most conducted by staff

Slide 12: Conclusion

- The aims of this study are ultimately to make the non-student staff community of Purdue aware of the services provided at the Writing Lab and to consider inclusive activities and content to support their professional and personal writing goals. Understandably, the Writing Lab's chief commitment is to its student population, but I envision this pilot study as a step in fostering stronger ties with the broader community at Purdue.
- As we open up discussion to questions later, I would be interested to know the frequency with which the staff members at your institutions visit the Writing Center and would welcome any mode of staff outreach I had not considered.