

10 Filling the Room: Public Relations

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Attracting, cajoling, or enticing students (and staff) to utilize a writing center obviously depends upon the nature of the services offered in the center. Our center, "The Write Place," has three major services: (1) to provide remediation, reinforcement, and enrichment of all communication skills to all students on a request or referral basis; (2) to provide "The Write Place" personnel in all classrooms so that they may introduce and give practice in traditional writing skills (for example, essay exams, research papers, study skills, and so forth) and also introduce and assist with writing-as-learning activities; (3) to provide a center for staff exploration, development, and sharing of writing-as-learning activities. The following discussion is based on our experiences. Please feel free to utilize or modify any of these ideas for your center.

Essential to "filling the room" is raising student, staff, and community consciousness about the center—and this must begin even before the center opens. Such consciousness-raising activities must then continue once the center begins operation. We began research into a writing center and began writing formal proposals to establish one almost three years before the center formally opened. We also spent much of this time discussing and debating the need for and design of such a center within the language arts department and with all other departments and staff members. We tried to make all staff members aware of the potential uses and benefits of such a center and tried to establish the broadest possible base of support. During this time, we were also discussing the proposed center with any and all service and civic clubs, school related organizations, and any other interested groups. We began to offer many of the center's services on an informal basis and used this work to help refine our design for the center and to help raise consciousness. Although we have no way to judge the effect of this "informal promotion," we believe our efforts were worthwhile.

Before the formal opening of the center, we held a full faculty meeting to explain the nature, operation, and services of "The Write Place" for both faculty and students. We encouraged all faculty members to recommend that their students use the facilities and services of the center. Just as important, we urged the faculty to refer students out of their classes and to invite center personnel into their classrooms for assistance in traditional writing activity and for writing-as-learning. We gave each staff member a copy of the flier the students would receive and a large supply of "appointment request forms" for assistance in and from "The Write Place."

Before the official opening, we also made signs and posters that simply said "The Write Place." We began daily announcements on the public address system that played upon the "write" and "right" idea. As the official opening drew nearer, we wrote articles about the center for the school newspaper, the monthly building newsletter for parents, the district newsletter for parents, and the local news media. These efforts have been continued and expanded. In the monthly building newsletter, we have invited parents to visit "The Write Place" to pick up writing and study aids for their children. We have also urged them to encourage their children to utilize the services of the center.

We continue to try to heighten consciousness and use of "The Write Place" in several ways. A minor but important point was to have our letterhead stationery and memo pads printed. We hope to sponsor a contest later this year to encourage students to create a logo for the center because we think this separate identity is important.

In addition to the services that we offer, the center also publishes three types of publications. "The Write Place" reproduces articles about writing, learning, and writing as-learning for the staff, and we always encourage staff to use all of the services of the center for themselves and their students. "The Write Stuff" is a newsletter written by and for the faculty and contains editorials, reviews of professional materials, sharings of successful classroom techniques, and creative works. Each issue also contains encouragement for use of "The Write Place." We also publish "Student Stuff," a newsletter of student fiction and non-fiction (in which we urge all students to utilize the center). We print all contributions to "Student Stuff." The submission basket is located in "The Write Place."

We have devised a number of interesting ways to get students to visit "The Write Place." In addition to having the submission basket for "Student Stuff," we have also made a "Contest Corner" in the center. We list all of the current writing contests and scholarship competitions, and we sponsor group sharing sessions for all students

interested in entering the same contests. We have campaigns to encourage college-bound students to utilize the center's personnel in assisting with college and scholarship essays. We also use the center for small group meetings with visiting speakers and artists.

When the center officially opened, we asked every English instructor to distribute fliers about "The Write Place" and give each student an appointment request form. We asked that the instructors explain the operation of the center and encourage all students to use the center for all communication needs and assistance.

We have begun to utilize student tutors in "The Write Place." We now have the instructors and student tutors visit each class early in the semester to introduce themselves, explain the operation of the center, and encourage students to use the services that are available. We ask student tutors to do most of the talking and most of the "promoting."

We have expanded the use of center personnel and student tutors in an important way. If there are no center requests, we send at least some of our personnel into writing classrooms to help confer with and tutor students or groups of students in the classroom. We will expand this in-class conferencing and tutoring into several content area classrooms later this year because we believe this is very important. We always have our tutors leave the students with a strong suggestion/invitation to make an appointment with "The Write Place" for follow-up help.

Some instructors give students "extra credit" for verified visits to the center. The building now handles all of our scheduling and report cards, and we are able to send notes on report cards urging students to visit "The Write Place." We are also trying to do a more effective job of coordinating major research projects among content area teachers and language arts teachers and "The Write Place," to involve more effectively the center personnel in aiding students who have such major projects.

Another of our promotion devices was to place a "coupon" in the school newspaper to help stimulate awareness and use of the center. The coupon entitled the bearer to "One Free Visitation in The Write Place," and while most students know that there is no charge for center services, we did have students who utilized the coupon.

On the professional level, we sponsor informal coffee sharings for all faculty to discuss writing and writing-as-learning ideas. Through these meetings we urge faculty to use and we encourage students to use the services of "The Write Place."

There are times that the center has more requests for services than we can handle, but this is an enjoyable problem. There are times when no one is utilizing any of the services or personnel of the center, and this is most frustrating. We have accepted the fact that simply making

the services available to students and staff is not enough; we also have to create the need to use the center. We sometimes wonder if our efforts are worth the outcome, but then we ask ourselves, "What did these students who use the center do before it opened? What will they do if we close?" The answer to those questions is as obvious as the reason why we will keep offering and promoting "The Write Place."