

# 13 Supervising

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Survival. The pioneers of our country had to combat physical forces aimed at destruction, hostile environments, and hostile tribes, and I liken the secondary school writing center director to these pioneers for many of the same reasons. The director and the tutors must do daily battle with administrators who may or may not understand the nature and purpose of the program; students who want immediate Band-Aid surgery for papers that are due next period; students who wave a paper at a tutor and say, "I'm turning this in in five minutes and Mr. Nellis says I can have extra credit if it's signed by a writing center tutor"; fellow teachers who harumph and say that those kids helping kids can be likened to the blind leading the blind; students who become writing center groupies to avoid going to study hall; and some students who develop crushes on the tutors and invent writing assignments to get their attention. As one tutor stated, "I sometimes feel more like Dear Abby or a counselor than I do a tutor." As with those early pioneers, who discovered a new obstacle to go over, around, or through with each turn, the tutors and directors must be prepared for different problems each day—and be able to "think while standing" in order to survive.

Since the center is student based, the problems of the students dominate our concerns. The most obvious and most repeated dilemma occurs when the client expects the tutor to either do the work or patch up the paper. In order to survive with dignity and not place themselves in a position to take over the paper, my tutors never physically touch the paper of the client. I have seen some actually sit on their hands to prevent themselves from doing so, and many will not take a pen or pencil to the table so that they can reduce the temptation to do the writing for the student. They spend time explaining to the client that the thoughts and the expression of those thoughts must remain in the

control and in the voice of the writer. And they begin to question, and question some more. They are much better at waiting for a response than I am. This approach usually works, especially after the center has been in operation for some time and the word spreads that the tutors will "help you write but they won't write for you."

The fine line between pointing out usage and spelling mistakes without becoming an editor varies from client to client, depending upon the expertise of the client and, yes, even the grammatical expertise of the tutor. In most situations the tutor says to the writer, "I see several misspelled words [or subject/verb disagreements, or several punctuation errors, or whatever]. Do you think you can find them? Read the paper [or the second and third lines, or the last sentence] aloud. Do you hear any errors there? If so, where? What do you think might work better?" My tutors have found the *Dictionary for Bad Spellers* (Joseph Krevisky and Jordan L. Linfield. New York: Random House, 1967), an excellent handbook for them and their clients. No tutor ever promises a "better grade" or an "A" paper. One tutor, in thinking that he admitted defeat, wrote on his record sheet, "After three full-period sessions, I realized that I was trying to make Bob's paper into an 'A' paper according to my writing standards. It simply couldn't be done." And I wrote back to him, "Right, and you shouldn't try. Take the student from where he is to as far as he can go with his paper."

Students who come to the center for other than writing help can be annoying, but in virtually every instance, I have seen my tutors handle a myriad of distractions far more calmly and effectively than I would have. One of the criteria for their selection as tutors is that they must be sensitive to other students and that includes being able to chastise them or redirect their attention. They truly do this with more aplomb than I could muster. A student's response to another student's chastisement is refreshing. The disrupter holds another student's opinion in higher regard than that of an adult's. I watched with respect and amusement as one of my tutors said in a solemn voice to a squirming and giggling seventh grader, "Haven't you learned yet that it is in extremely poor taste to laugh at your own humor?" The giggling and squirming immediately ceased and the session began.

The tutors must also be alert to the "hangers on," and, on occasion, when the groupies have been friends of the tutors, I have had to speak to the tutors and remind them of our precarious position. Teachers and administrators who see what they perceive to be "socializing" going on in the center will be quick to condemn, and, if the problem persists, rightly so.

An innovative program such as the secondary school writing center seldom wins instant or universal approval among teachers and administrators. "New" to some teachers seems synonymous with "fad,"

“ephemeral,” or even “irresponsible” in this current buzz-word decade of “back to basics.” I can only say, “Avoid confrontation, run the program as effectively as possible, and have faith that the program itself will eventually quell the criticism.” And the criticism will come. Deal with each situation as professionally as possible and don’t go looking for enemy tribes; let them scout you out. Find your supporters in other departments (such as social studies), and increase the number of positive troops as quietly and quickly as you can.

Most secondary school writing center directors will probably find that running the center will be an additional activity to teaching the regularly scheduled classes. Keeping track of records to justify your existence can become an endless activity, and hopefully so, because the numbers of students and the numbers of sessions should accelerate as the program becomes established. Ideally, the director will be assigned to the writing center one period per day for supervision, and this period can be used to read record sheets, respond to journals, file the record sheets, compile status reports for the administrators, check supplies, and order additional materials when needed. Whether assigned or not, I suggest that the director set aside time each day, even if after school, to keep up with the paper work. When I have allowed myself to get behind, I realized that I had lost touch with the day-to-day operation of the center, I had missed some appeals for help from the tutors on the record sheets (one client had confessed to the tutor that his mother wrote all his papers), and by the time I read it four days later, the tutor had decided that I approved by my lack of immediate response. I have not fallen behind in my daily reading of record sheets since then.

The expected and hidden risks in pioneering are myriad, but survival can be a reality if the tutors are carefully selected, the director has a handle on the concept and the purpose of the center, the tutors understand and can implement that concept and purpose, and the program itself can quell the enemy by its continued growth and increasing support by the students and the other teachers in the school.