

Chapter 10. Moving On to Move Up

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In our field, and in our individual institutions, we frequently discuss the lack of resources for writing centers, whether that is a lack of full-time employees, student employees, funding, or institutional support. At my previous writing center (a large public institution featuring three full-time administrators, 9 graduate assistants, 30 undergraduate consultants, and 10 administrative assistants), we experienced budget cuts for two out of the three years that I was there. This resulted in one full-time employee's position being "reimagined" (administrative speak for downsizing) into a smaller role in order to save money, as well as the loss of a graduate student assistantship. At the same time these cuts were happening, we also went through the turmoil of COVID-19, which required us to go online for six months and then institute a hybrid model for delivering services. It would have been easy, in the face of budget cuts and COVID-19, to have smaller ambitions for the center.

However, at the same time as these issues were happening, we were able to expand our services, engage with more students, and positively shape perceptions of the writing center on- and off-campus. Using the same (or even sometimes fewer) resources than we previously had, we were able to expand our tutoring hours and writing retreat offerings. We were also able to build new services, including a multimedia communication center, a speaker series focused on linguistic justice, workshops by request, and embedded tutoring. And, we were able to provide leadership and professional development opportunities through the creation of student positions like a media coordinator, retreats coordinator, outreach coordinator, and pedagogy coordinator. But why, and at what cost?

I had many reasons for wanting to push against the tides buffeting our center rather than succumb to them. The first was personal pride and a desire to be a leader and innovator in our field. I wanted the center to be recognized as one of the best in the nation and as an example for other centers to follow. The second was a need to escape what can be the monotony of the position. One-on-one and group tutoring are excellent services, but they also follow a similar and well-worn pattern for those of us who have been in the field for a long time. The third was to demonstrate our value for stakeholders on campus, particularly administrators, that control our budget and resources. We wanted to ensure a larger footprint for the center that increased our visibility and impact on campus, thereby positioning the center to ask for additional funding while protecting it from budget cuts. The fourth, and last, reason was to position myself for the next position. Many writing center positions lack the salary, institutional support, and funding that

would make them long-term homes to administrators. That helps explain the transitory nature of many writing center positions as well as the many job opportunities available on job posting sites like *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *HigherEdJobs*, and *Inside Higher Ed*. It also might explain, in part, why we work so very hard.

It is the fourth reason, positioning myself for the next position, that I want to focus on. I have worked as a professional in four writing centers (including my current position). I left each of the first three positions to progress in my career. After serving as a writing center tutor during graduate school, I served as a professional consultant as part of my first position. I then transitioned into administration as an associate director and then as a staff director. My current position is a faculty director on the tenure track. Until my current position, I was always concerned with maximizing my performance, and the performance of the center, to progress to the next position. In some ways this was positive because it led to a productive and prospering center; however, it was negative because I was always doing more work than I was compensated for and often beyond the initial scope of the position.

My time in writing centers reflects two aspects of the labor practices of the field. The first is that we constantly optimize our own work and that of our employees. This optimization can be beneficial, but it can also be detrimental. We can reach new stakeholders through the creation of new programs and initiatives; we can also increase our footprint by elevating employees into positions of leadership; in short, we do good and meaningful work that impacts the lives of thousands of writers and hundreds of tutors over our professional lifetimes. At my previous center, we were able to create student positions for a media coordinator, pedagogy coordinator, and outreach coordinator. By doing so, we diversified our offerings while engaging new stakeholders. But this optimization can also be detrimental to both employees and administrators. For employees, they may be put into positions that they are unprepared, undersupported or under-compensated to perform. For administrators, they may take on new duties which are outside the scope of their job and make the lives of future administrators more complicated. As our services expanded and students were elevated into leadership positions, I became more of a people manager. My job was, increasingly, meeting with other institutional administrators and with my own employees. While I have been trained and had the experience to develop programs and initiatives, it was more difficult moving into the role of supervisor. I gave up, in some ways, a sense of control of initiatives and programs as I was no longer involved in the day-to-day success of them. It also meant “coaching,” advising, and high-level supervision of projects. I was further and further removed from the day-to-day operations of tutoring, initiative development, and program execution; rather, I supervised the people who did these things.

The second is the transitory nature of writing center work. Because of the lean nature of writing centers—whether it is from budget cuts or understaffing—there

is usually not an opportunity to move up in the center. And the best jobs are entrenched with administrators that have no intention of leaving their position. Therefore, the only way to advance is to move to another writing center. For me, that meant uprooting my life—and that of my family—three different times in the space of eight years to move from Cleveland to Michigan to Iowa to Mississippi. And the moves were basically the luck of the draw. Good writing center positions (whatever that might mean to an individual) often have people who work there for a long time. That means the best jobs in the field only become available once every 10 to 20 years. Even if good positions are available, they are highly competitive because everyone wants those positions. And those jobs may be in far flung places, geographically, or politically inhospitable, or far away from family.

Now that I am in a new position at an institution where I am a tenure-track faculty member who also happens to be the writing center director, I am not interested in optimization in order to get to the next position. That is a relief and a burden lifted from my shoulders. And, I will be careful and strategic about optimization for other reasons, including being a leader in the field, bringing variety to our work, and demonstrating our value to stakeholders. I will be mindful about what that optimization does for (and to) me, my staff, my employees, and our stakeholders.