

Chapter 11. The First Year: A New Director's Experience

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I started my first position out of graduate school as the first faculty member serving as writing center director. I graduated from my Ph.D. program in May, moved in July, and started my new role in August, all during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I aspired to be a writing center director from the time I was a college sophomore. I discovered the writing center in my own transition to college-level writing. I came from a rural public high school where I would receive A's on all my work. As I entered a private university, I struggled to meet the new expectations. The writing center is the place that reminded me I belonged. I remember leaving my first tutoring session in awe, knowing I wanted to be a part of that type of work, of ensuring student's agency in their writing and reminding them of their own abilities in new contexts.

Now I'm entering my second year in my role as assistant professor and writing center director at a regional state university. Our student body of roughly 11,000 serves a large percentage of non-traditional students, including many first-generation and military-affiliated students. My biggest challenge is making students aware of our services and trying to meet them where they are.

I entered this position eager to help. The Notes App in my phone was flooded with brainstorming ideas—what events we'd host, the writing workshops we'd offer, social media posts. I couldn't believe that I had secured this dream job of mine—all during a pandemic! And while I still feel the same passion I did as a student using the writing center and during my eight years working as a tutor, I've come to understand the almost impossible labor expectations of this role. During my graduate programs at RIS, I worked in an administrative role as an assistant director for the writing center. I was part of a team of five to six people, all serving the writing center. We had solid funding, staffing, and resources to draw from.

I quickly realized the shift as I started my own position. Being the first faculty-based position, expectations for my role were still being solidified. The team of administrators became one person: me. I realized my lofty goals of serving the students through writing workshops, campus events, and more would have to be scaled down. I started with eight students to staff 50 hours a week. Between my teaching load and administrative work, I stepped in and tutored numerous times when we simply didn't have the staff to do so. Our tutor hourly wage (\$9.50) was lower than most campus jobs. It seemed like an impossible task. I first turned to blame myself: I was a good tutor. But maybe I wasn't a good

administrator. However, I started understanding that the problem was less about my own abilities and more about the need for support. Now, looking back, I realize the immense systematic challenges I faced as a wide-eyed, recent graduate student-turned-director.

Our writing center staff has grown to 23 tutors and 8 front desk workers. With this growth, I have discovered new challenges. While last year we could not meet student demand because of our low staff numbers, this year I'm fearful we won't have enough students to utilize our larger team that I grew so quickly. I advocated for an increased hourly wage for our tutors to \$13. This created more challenges: will we burn through our budget in one semester? How do I ensure our tutors have the amount of hours they want and need? Furthermore, how do I ensure the quality of tutoring, not just the quantity of tutors?

Our tutors come from a variety of disciplines, from Biology to Communications to English and Radiology. We have students ranging from first-year to graduate-level. Part of my job expectation is to host recurring tutor training. The training is not a course credit. I learned through trial and error my first year that there would never be a time all staff members could meet on Zoom. We're trying asynchronous training this year, with weekly readings and written reflections. This creates a different workload—one that I enjoy, but is still labor, nonetheless. I want to give each tutor the support they need at the stage they are in by reading their reflections, responding thoughtfully, checking in with them, and observing their sessions. I'm learning how to delegate now that I have a small administrative team around me with two dedicated graduate student assistant directors.

I've also learned how to advocate for our center. To me, that's the easy part. What is more challenging is advocating for myself. That's the part I'm continually working on. I'm making appointments across campus with administrators to advocate for increased funding. I'm learning to be loud. I'm learning to say no.

There have been numerous times over the last year in this role that I've doubted myself. I'm realizing now that doubt comes from the overwhelming feeling of taking on a role meant for multiple people and a larger budget.

I always tell my tutors, "You are never expected to know all the answers. We work together as a team to discover answers together." As a new director, I'm trying to take this advice myself. I am learning to ask questions, to learn from those around me, and to advocate for the creation of more of a team to assist in running our writing center.

In this last year, I have grown and learned from my tutors and students alike. My goal for my first year was relational-based. I wanted to learn about the students we serve and the tutors we employ. I wanted to see what needs our campus has and how we, as a center, can fulfill those needs. I'm striving to discover and maintain healthy labor boundaries. I wish I could have connected with more first-year or early-career writing center directors. Through the challenges, I continue to remind myself why I'm doing this work. I come back to that passion I've held since my first writing center experience when I felt self-doubt and overwhelm

creep in. I'm learning to find and connect frequently with a mentor while also learning where to go to advocate for my center and myself. Perhaps the most important lesson I've learned as a first-year writing center director is to keep a record of what our center accomplishes. I'm constantly reminding myself of my value when I need to advocate for more resources.