

Chapter 15. Into and Out of the Tutoring Center

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“The writing center is being moved from English to tutoring. A decision has already been made. The change will happen quickly.” Hearing these words is not hard to imagine for anyone who has directed a writing center for very long. I was familiar with similar narratives playing out in the lives of my colleagues, and I was never naïve enough to assume it couldn’t happen to me. We are all one key change of administration, one reorganization, one person’s “vision” away from it pretty much at any time. After over twenty years of serving as my writing center’s founding and sole leader, I heard these words from my own provost.

My story has a satisfying conclusion, but it is an unfortunate narrative in which too few people with too much power made uninformed decisions. It is also a story where others with power emerged to save the writing center. As I lived through the next three years of upheaval, I endured a kind of stress I had never known. Through the course of it, I proved to myself that I possessed patience, restraint, resilience, and a passion for writing centers that extended beyond any desire for self-protection.

“It’s all tutoring. It goes together,” was the only response I received when I asked the provost why the move was happening. There was no discussion, no reliance on my expertise, not even a request for the years of data I had collected. In the months that followed, many important decisions about how to make the writing center “fit” in the tutoring center were made without my input. The staffing structure was quickly dismantled, and the writing center was physically relocated to a low-visibility and dysfunctional space within the tutoring center. At least weekly, I tried to defend writing center pedagogy after having been told by a tutoring center administrator, “We don’t do things that way.”

There were two silver linings. Most of the writing center staff, due to the restructuring, got better positions with higher pay. The other was that the full-time tutor who would co-lead the area with me where the writing center was positioned became an ally and trusted confidant. When that person left, and a new person was hired, my relationship with him was equally valuable. He and I spoke the same language and understood each other’s frustration with the lack of interest in understanding our pedagogy and lack of trust in allowing us to forward our vision for a successful writing center within a tutoring center.

And then the ultimate staffing change happened. I was told by the tutoring center director that my position had been eliminated. I was thanked for teaching the tutoring center staff all about writing centers and told I was no longer needed. A newly hired provost had apparently already approved my dismissal. Even

though I shouldn't have been, I was surprised. I also began to feel an odd sense of relief. I had told my English department supervisor I was going to leave the writing center more than once already. He and various others had successfully talked me out of it: "You have so much invested in this." "Please give it time." "What will become of the writing center?" And so, I held on. This time I had no choice. I had been dismissed. I still had a full-time faculty position, just without reassignment time for the writing center. "Not such a bad deal," I consoled myself.

I shared the news with the faculty union president, and she was stunned. When I said the new provost had been the one to decide, she became uneasy. This new provost, she said, would not make a rash decision without being influenced by someone who used her lack of knowledge to craft a narrative in which I became disposable. The union president made me promise that I would ask for a meeting with the provost, simply because I deserved an explanation. Though I dreaded such a meeting, I couldn't disagree.

I could not have been calmer in explaining to the provost that I respected her decision but wished to know what prompted it. In my mind, the writing center was no longer mine to lead, I had nothing to lose, and I was ready to let go. The provost listened, took notes, asked questions, and, at some point in the conversation, asked me to back up and tell her the story of the writing center from its inception through the events that had just unfolded. When I finished, she sat in silence and then said, "I have made a decision based on limited information." She apologized and asked for my patience as she rethought things. I had never experienced such humility on the part of an executive-level administrator.

A week later, we met again. The provost said I was not obligated to accept her offer but wanted me to retain my position in the writing center with the promise that she would work closely with me and the tutoring center director. She went on to say so much more than that. In fact, I took notes in that meeting that I still have on a digital sticky note. She assured me that I would have control over all kinds of changes in the writing center going forward. The digital note serves as a reminder of both the sincere good intentions of a savvy leader trying to make things right and of the spectacular fashion in which they unraveled despite her efforts.

The provost kept her word and spent hours working closely with the tutoring center director and me. It felt like we were making progress. But after the meetings, with the provost no longer present, things fell apart. I was in no way allowed to have control over the methodology or delivery of writing support. Yet, at the same time, a new power dynamic had emerged. I now had the ear of the provost to whom the director of tutoring reported. I did not hesitate to reach out time and time again when I was not able to accomplish any of the things I had written on my digital sticky note. The provost coached me, guided my efforts to communicate with the tutoring center director, and offered to meet again. But the cycle would repeat itself. In our meetings, it appeared understanding had been reached, but when I operated on that understanding, I was stopped cold by various people in the tutoring center.

I found myself quagmired and had no choice but to tread water and wait. I knew by that point that if it were to remain in the tutoring center, the writing center would ultimately be absorbed as merely an area in which tutoring for English classes took place. I also knew the provost, even with all the time she had invested, wasn't at the same point in her thinking yet. I waited, watched, did what I could, and kept talking to the provost. The library building was being renovated, and the tutoring center, along with the writing center, would be moving into it soon. A large, open room had already been carved out for the writing center in a highly visible area.

The provost invited me to tour the new space. The tutoring center director narrated as we paraded through it, ending our tour in the room that had been earmarked for the writing center. Except that suddenly, it was no longer the writing center but a multidisciplinary tutoring center, a new vision the director had just arrived at days ago. This was news to the provost, too, and not good news. It felt like another confirmation of my longstanding fear that the writing center would simply become tutoring for students in English classes, indistinguishable from tutoring in any other subject area. The provost was silent as we walked out of the meeting together, and I mirrored her silence, understanding that she needed time to think and plan her next move. Just a few days later, she made the decision to move the writing center back to the English department. A three-year ordeal had ended.

A year has passed, and we are rebuilding while enjoying a kind of recognition and support we have not had before. The three-year sacrifice, the waiting, and the labor against misunderstanding and dismissal was no small feat. The toll of exhaustion it took on me will not be forgotten, and neither will my amazement at the provost's bold decision. Though this story is not uncommon, the specifics are as unique as the institutional context in which it unfolded. In the end, I am not sure what the concrete take-away is for a reader who might face a similar ordeal. The only guidance I can offer is that the limits of your patience must be carefully considered, and so, too, the risks you are willing and able to take. My tenure at the college, along with my good reputation undergirded many of the bold moves I made. If you are not able to hang on as I did, if the strain on your health is too much to sacrifice, forgive yourself, let go, and don't look behind you.