

Toward a Professional Consultant's Handbook: Researching Support and Training Methods

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INTRODUCTION

Many writing centers employ professional consultants in addition to peer undergraduate or graduate students. We use the umbrella term “professional” to refer to both those consultants who are faculty members working in the writing center and to staff who are not enrolled as undergraduate or graduate students. In other words, we use the term to describe a specific group of non-peer consultants. Professional consultants, if they are faculty members, may work in the writing center as part of their teaching assignments or voluntarily, while other higher education professionals with degrees beyond the bachelor’s might be hired specifically to staff writing centers on a full- or part-time basis. While professional consultants are a distinct presence in writing centers, most major training manuals are geared toward undergraduate peer tutoring rather than to the consulting dynamics encountered by this population of professional writing instructors.

There are several reasons for this gap in the training literature, including the reality that when many faculty and professionals work in the writing center, they do so because they are experienced writing instructors; therefore, it is often assumed that professional consultants need less training in working one-to-one with students. Further, most writing center training manuals, despite being rhetorically cast toward peer tutors, offer instruction and advice about consultation strategies easily translatable to the non-peer-to-peer dynamic. Yet, despite the usefulness of these manuals to professional consultants, most of them do not address the particular dynamics of non-peer-to-peer consulting. The emphasis on peer-tutoring in training manuals, including the challenges they face and the reciprocal benefits they receive, has served to elide the presence of a distinctly different instructional dynamic encountered by faculty and professional consultants.

Faculty or professional consultants make up more than half of our writing center's staff at Case Western Reserve University, which usually numbers around forty each year. We therefore encounter daily non-peer consulting relationships and have identified a clear need for additional resources on the topic. Non-peer dynamics arise in our work with undergraduates and in our work with graduate students and faculty. We have not only identified that such dynamics exist, but also have begun to recognize the challenges and benefits of non-peer consulting—and to locate within the non-peer session important opportunities for effective instruction. Our staff training has been re-customized to address the specific non-peer consulting scenarios that we see professional consultants encountering in the majority of their sessions. We have discovered that contrary to popular assumption—and aside from their many hours working one-to-one with students from their classes—some of our experienced faculty consultants do not have prior experience with writing centers or with one-to-one consulting. Therefore, we have located a salient need for a training manual for this unique population.

We have entered the beginning stages of compiling such a manual for our own writing center, with an eye toward its use as a resource in other writing centers. We determined the issues to be covered in our handbook by conducting a professional consultant focus group and survey. As more writing instructors find themselves staffing writing centers, some while in pursuit of full-time employment opportunities, our handbook both calls attention to—and helps writing center professionals be cognizant of—the role of the writing center as a distinct instructional entity in higher education. This article documents the process of selecting the major issues to be covered in our handbook, which will be ready for both internal consultant training at our university and wider publication for use in other centers within the next year.

It is also important to note our handbook's potential for a more global contribution to evolving the perception of writing centers. In thinking about composing our handbook, we became acutely aware that the aforementioned lack in training materials for professionals not only assumes that classroom leaders do not need writing center training, but also tacitly reiterates the age-old idea that classroom teaching is more important than one-to-one instruction. Put simply, professional consultants are seen to have more instructional authority, which seems to imply they do not need training. Yet, as we have seen, even though faculty members might have years of instructional experience or even might have worked in a writing center as undergraduate peer tutors, the

non-peer dynamics they encounter as a professional consultant not only entail challenges, but can also be used in savvy ways to maximize instruction. Our motivation in creating a handbook is not only to support professional consultants, but also to continue to validate the important collaborative form of instruction that writing centers provide.

COLLECTION METHODS

The information collected for our handbook derives from the experiences of the professional consultants who staff the writing center at Case Western Reserve University, a mid-sized research university composed of around 12,000 undergraduate, graduate and professional school students. Our center serves the entire campus population, including faculty and post-doctorate researchers. Our professional consultant staff is composed of faculty members with doctorate degrees who were hired primarily to teach in the general education writing program. Through focus groups and a questionnaire, these consultants provided over the course of two semesters the director (Megan Jewell) and another professional consultant (Joseph Cheadle) with information about their roles. The results of this research are divided into two sections: we first discuss what we have determined are the most conceptually significant issues encountered by professional consultants in individual consultations. Next, we speak to additional types of training issues found most useful for professional consultants. These issues are in addition to those most commonly addressed, such as working with ESL writers, disciplinary consultations, working with difficult students, and others that might also be covered in peer training manuals.

COLLABORATORS VERSUS TEACHERS

Professional consultants face unique instructional and interpersonal dynamics with undergraduate and graduate students. They occupy a different space than peer tutors or graduate tutors, and there is a tension between tutoring and teaching that, while already present in writing centers, surfaces more acutely for professional consultants who are further removed by education and institutional position from most writers they encounter. Professional consultants may find it difficult to switch from a position of authority, often as a teacher, into that of a collaborator.

Consultants agree that having a degree changes how they interact with, and are viewed by, undergraduate students. One consultant says, "I don't know if my degree changes my behavior toward the students, but it often changes their behavior toward me." We often find that undergraduate students expect the role of the consultant during sessions to be that of the teacher rather than the

collaborator, and they prefer more directive approaches during the session. Another consultant notes, “the most challenging sessions are with students who simply want to be told what to do and/or simply want to have their grammar corrected.” The consultant adds that “students are resistant to taking responsibility for their own writing, and they want me to tell them what to do.”

Because of the different dynamics that govern a professional consultant’s sessions with students, it is important to move away from the teacher role and embrace that of collaborator. This move can be accomplished by reinforcing the collaborative nature of the session at the beginning of the meeting and educating students as to what services the writing center provides. Also, professional consultants can employ non-directive (minimalist tutoring) methods of engaging with students. Therefore, our handbook would entail much training in “minimalist tutoring,” as outlined by Jeff Brooks. Such techniques that have been particularly effective in our writing center are “hav[ing] the student read the paper aloud to you”; “get[ting] the student to talk”; and “If you have the time during your session, giv[ing] the student a discrete writing task” (3-4). While Brooks’s essay might be critiqued for its “defensive minimalism,” we still advocate its basic techniques for fostering collaboration. Drawing, albeit cautiously, on some tactics suggested by Brooks is a necessary first step in faculty consultant training.

WORKING WITH CURRENT AND FORMER STUDENTS

At our writing center, professional consultants will likely have sessions with either current or former students. We’ve found it useful for our handbook to address both potential pitfalls and advantages of this situation. Tutoring one’s students always carries with it the authority of the teacher and reinforces the teacher-student relationship. According to Jennifer Jefferson, “[n]o matter the level of comfort and amiability that students and instructors might share, instructor authority exists in a way that it doesn’t with any other tutors, peer or professional” (10). Elizabeth Chilbert raises many of the same issues, recounting the difficulties of “flipping identities” from tutor to teacher during consultations.

There are, however, benefits to working with current or former students. We found through talking with professional consultants that there is a familiarity with both the student’s writing and knowledge of the assignment. For example, one consultant who met with their own students regularly for writing center sessions said, “[m]ost importantly, I know the content of assignments and so jump right into the session without any introductory remarks (in most cases). I also *never* have the ‘grammar garage’ issues with my own students, since they are happy to get my feedback on the

content of their drafts” (emphasis original). As both consultants note, there is a benefit in not having to focus on grammar and spelling issues, knowledge of the assignment, and the ability to provide specific feedback to improve that assignment.

MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES WITH FACULTY

When discussing tutor-faculty relationships, prominent manuals on writing center and peer tutoring, such as *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, can help peer tutors understand professional boundaries with faculty. These topics are useful for our professional consultants to understand; yet, the professional consultant might also need advice navigating a facet of tutor-faculty relationships that might not apply to peer consultants. That is, what does one do when noticing that a faculty member’s comments, guidelines, or writing prompt is incompatible with one’s own teaching practices? While noting problems in an instructor’s commenting methods or prompts is not unique to peer consultants, our professional consultants have expressed the need for additional guidance on this issue.

Most of our consultants, as mentioned, have experience writing, implementing, and assessing assignments and are assigned to assist other faculty members with curriculum development and instruction. When students bring prompts to the center that are poorly crafted, vague, or otherwise problematic, consultants tend to experience a more acute conflict between their dual roles as writing center consultant and writing faculty. Indeed, during our focus group, professional consultants expressed frustration with the idea that they had to remain uncritical of the way other instructors are teaching writing or their assignments.

Therefore, we decided that our handbook would borrow Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli’s advice in the *Bedford Guide* for peer consultants to remain as professional as possible, to “never . . . comment negatively to students about a teacher’s methods, assignments, personality, or grading practices” (3). As they remind tutors, “[r]ecognize that you cannot know everything that goes on in a classroom” (3). We also plan to expand on these authors’ advice to remind consultants that the writing center is a distinct instructional entity meant to provide classroom support, drawing their attention not only to articles on the history of writing centers, but also reminding consultants to consider the institutional history and current position of their writing center. Additional content will be added to assist in supporting professional faculty in their relationships with other faculty, including consulting with the writing center director for advice. Most importantly, we will acknowledge the specific difficulties of this issue for our

professionals. The latter is important in validating what is often professional consultants' tremendous writing expertise (i.e., they may feel less valuable than or somewhat powerless regarding the instructor whose poor assignment they need to abide), but also in helping them understand the role of collaborator in an instructional environment dedicated to an individual student's writing development.

WORKING WITH GRADUATE STUDENTS

Professional consultants may work with graduate students on a variety of documents such as course papers, theses and dissertations, and articles for publication. We have found in our center that a potential problem with graduate students—often more than undergraduates—is that they view professional tutors as editors. Further, graduate students may only want editorial advice because they have been admitted to a graduate program requiring advanced expertise; therefore, the assumption, even one that is made by their professors, is that they are fully competent in expressing content (higher order ideas) and only need to visit the writing center for form (lower order concerns). As we have found, such issues are magnified when working with ESL graduate students who have a strong focus on grammar. As Talinn Phillips writes, professionalization into a field is important for all graduate students, but for those who are multilingual, “the ongoing development of their language abilities may mean that they are even further from achieving their professional goals and that it is precisely the remaining issues of language acquisition that will prevent them from attaining those goals.” Therefore, we've found it helpful to remind consultants of the pressure such students are under so that they might better equip ESL and other graduate students with discipline-specific resources, such as vocabulary and other discourse models directly associated with their fields.

Professional consultants can draw upon their specific expertise to effectively assist graduate student writers. According to one consultant, “I think having a Ph.D. provides me more legitimacy in the eyes of the student and also helps me to understand certain processes—journal submission, graduate admissions, dissertation writing, etc. in ways that I would not have understood as a student.” Furthermore, having a master's degree or doctorate can establish credibility with graduate students. As one tutor explains, “I do invoke my experience with having performed graduate level work, in particular a dissertation, to establish credibility and empathy.” Another consultant also finds graduate student consultations productive because the consultant holds a Ph.D.: “I think having a Ph.D. is very helpful for consulting with graduate students. They give me a whole other level of respect because of it.”

While consultants should not just rely on their degree to establish ethos, it is helpful in a training handbook to remind consultants how they might establish authority and credibility during sessions with graduate writers.

WORKING WITH FACULTY

For many professional consultants, the peer encountered in the writing center is most likely a faculty member. This is especially the case for professional consultants with doctorates who may be working on books or journal articles for career advancement. Indeed, faculty members are more likely to utilize our center as a resource because we have professional consultants. Consultants generally report satisfying sessions with faculty members: “I have found the faculty who come to [our writing center] are people who want to listen and learn.” Other consultants report good experiences with faculty members because there is less of a focus on spelling and grammar, and a greater focus on publication requirements. Consultants noted that the atmosphere in a session with faculty is more relaxed and entails colleague-to-colleague conversation. For professional consultants, working with faculty members presents a unique opportunity for peer tutoring and a chance to work collaboratively with colleagues. Yet, faculty users number less than one percent of the writers we see each year in our writing center, and, those we do see often “crave writing community,” as Geller and Eodice note (3). Therefore, it is our hope to educate our own faculty consultants on the assumptions that faculty writers must always work and produce on their own and, when appropriate, to cultivate with faculty more community through the establishment of writing groups and other programs.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Nearly all of the twelve professional consultants we talked to indicated a desire for professional development in writing center work, either to publish in the field or obtain an administrative position in a writing center. Therefore, our handbook will provide examples of professional development opportunities, IRB certification methods, additional quantitative and qualitative research methods, and an extensive bibliography of foundational writing center works.

CONCLUSION

Use of professional consultants spans higher education. There is a growing need to understand what dynamics they bring to writing centers, the training they may need, and unique issues they find arising their sessions. Because most training manuals are directed toward undergraduate and graduate students, our professional consultants’ handbook can fill what we believe to be an import-

ant need in writing center training literature. The major issues that we identified for inclusion in our faculty-specific handbook all speak to the importance of transitioning from a more authoritarian instructional mode to an individual, collaborative one and to the importance of recognizing the context and position of the writer. Therefore, when we unveil our handbook for internal consultant training and prepare it for publication for a wider group of writing center professionals, we will underscore the importance of collaborating with the writer-as-individual in order to best contextualize the day-to-day issues professional consultants face, and the resulting instructional practices in which we engage.



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