



How are Learning Centers Working Out: Maintaining Identity During Consolidation

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The Writing Skills Center (WSC) at Onondaga Community College (OCC) was created by the English department in 1978 in response to a perceived need for supplemental tutoring for non-credit, remedial classes. For the first couple of decades, it served essentially as a lab section for those classes. Although it kept the name, the WSC slowly evolved, changing into a tutoring center open to all students in all stages of the writing process. In the 2014 Fall semester, after a protracted discussion about how to improve access to our campus tutoring centers (the WSC, Reading and Study Skills, Math, and Content), our provost informed us that all tutoring would be moving to a new Learning Center (LC), overseen by a newly hired Associate Vice President for Academic Support (AVP). While there were some obvious benefits to the move, like simplifying the process of students finding help and consolidating resources, the English department had questions. Would the structure and priorities of a tutoring session remain connected to those of contemporary writing centers? Who would set the priorities in the new space and determine what was or was not “good” tutoring? In short, would the unification damage our ability to deliver writing tutoring in the way we saw best?

The change was happening, and my job as Writing Program Coordinator, a WPA-type position in the English department, which includes responsibility for writing tutoring, was to help determine what the organizational structure might look like and the future shape of writing tutoring at OCC. I decided then that our writing center could best maintain its identity by continuing to claim a distinct disciplinary and professional identity in our new, shared space, and by grounding our training, professional development, and tutor evaluation in contemporary writing center theory and best practice.

The danger of combining writing tutoring with other services on any campus is that the emphasis might change from “writing” to “tutoring.” Territoriality aside, members of the English department

were afraid that if our WSC was absorbed into the LC and was not guided by a knowledgeable English faculty member, writing tutors might not conduct sessions in ways that communicated to clients what was really important about the writing process. We feared that writing tutoring sessions would be used to simply correct student papers or tell students what to do without efforts to ensure students understood how or why they were doing it.

To work against these potential negative outcomes, I laid claim to and grounded my identity as a professional in an established discipline, that of Writing Center Studies. The physical space and administrative responsibilities, while important to a writing center, were not as important in this consolidation move to maintaining our identity as a writing center as was a continued commitment to writing center theory and practice. I reiterated this professional claim in meetings with provosts, deans, faculty, and whoever else would listen. I tried to ground this claim in the notion that writing center professionals could get results for our students that others would not, and I was lucky to find a receptive audience.

An entire world of writing center theory and practice exists that directors of writing centers being moved into a learning center can draw on, cite, and reference in our intra-campus communication. We need to make the case, using those sources, that our expertise is unique, special, and valuable. This expertise may be obvious to WLN readers, but it is not necessarily obvious to our campus administration or even to our faculty colleagues, both in and out of the English department. The lack of acceptance of Writing Center Studies expertise may be especially prevalent in a community college environment, where notions of expertise are often more fluid and grounded in practice rather than degree, formal training, or scholarly intervention. Those in other established humanities fields may not have to face this rhetorical challenge, but taking it on can be vital when a writing center is made part of an LC. A writing center director must convince stakeholders that the links to our discipline and proven expertise are worth maintaining.

While we at OCC were mindful of challenges, our English faculty and tutoring staff also acknowledged the benefits of the move. OCC's new AVP streamlined our schedule, making it more responsive to student need, while expanding our hours and making face-to-face tutoring available on weekends. The AVP also provided the resources for us to expand our online tutoring options. I argued that what those online sessions could or should look like ought to be the purview of a writing center professional. Consequently, I was able to propose and secure a structure for the online sessions that was in accordance with contemporary writing center practice,

a structure that I argued maximized student learning. To be able to engage in such work, I explained, tutors needed to understand basic principles of how writers write and students learn and the best way to communicate such insights. In short, tutors needed to be connected to scholarship in Writing Center Studies. In my experience, a writing center director is best positioned to help staff make such connections. Because I was allowed to focus on what our WSC staff needed, a partnership emerged in our new LC. The AVP used her substantial administrative and budgetary skills to make tutoring possible while I focused on what happened during a writing tutoring session.

When faced with the prospect of moving into a learning center, writing center directors need to make the argument that trained writing tutors can bring basic principles to bear on their work with students in a way that others with a different disciplinary background can not. Of course, we expect a writing tutor to have a deep understanding of essay form and structure, rhetoric, English grammar, punctuation, citation, etc. But the job of a writing tutor differs from a content tutor knowledgeable in these areas because the writing tutor must explain and teach these concepts to clients as well as help clients prioritize their approach to writing and writing issues (e.g. clarifying a thesis and paragraph development before working on punctuation or citation). Our content tutors are evaluated on how well they can answer questions about course material, i.e. how good they are at communicating biology, chemistry, or Spanish grammar, whereas our writing tutors are expected to help students understand how to write a paper and not what to write. Our reading/study skills and math tutors also focus on approach over content, and similar arguments about them privileging students understanding of the “how” of the subject over and above the “what” could be made on their behalf.

At OCC, the makeup of the writing tutors, all considered professional tutors with a minimum of an MA in English or a related field, mirrors that of typical composition programs. The bulk of our tutors are dedicated and caring, and the director’s most important role is to help train these tutors. During our paid training, for example, I hold discussion groups using articles from writing center anthologies and journals and bring in speakers when the budget allows. We built a library of writing center resources for use by tutors. Those resources mark our theory and practice as different than those of the other tutors in the LC. We need to continually build on our distinct, disciplinary identity as writing center professionals. We need to remind any and all stakeholders that not just anyone can do our job, or at least do it as well, and we need to follow up with our staff

to ensure, to the best of our ability, that our tutors have the necessary knowledge and practice.

While becoming part of an LC hasn't always been easy, our strategy of claiming professionalism has worked, for the most part. Day-to-day concerns like time card processing and budget monitoring are handled by the AVP, while tutor training and evaluations are handled by me in my role as writing program coordinator. In every meeting and communication across campus, I maintain that it is in the best interests of the student served by our tutors to work with trained writing tutors. To the extent that writing tutoring at OCC has stayed connected to our English department and the Writing Center Studies field, I've succeeded, through repetition and consistency of message, in making our professional distinction a central issue. Whether the expertise comes from the tutors themselves or the writing center director helming the program, it is in our best interest to lay claim to and seek to continually build on our distinct, disciplinary identity as writing center professionals.