

From the Margin to the Middle: A Heuristic for Planning Writing Center Relocation

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As a writing center director (WCD) who has overseen relocation to a learning commons (LC), I offer a heuristic for center directors who are contemplating relocation and considering the individual and institutional implications of such a move. I offer the questions in this heuristic as a generative approach for WCDs to make decisions as they confront a variety of concerns; the questions can be “mixed and matched” in order to suit individual writing center needs.

Despite the local aspect of every WC, a brief overview of my WCD experience is necessary for context. Five years ago, the WC I direct, which reports to English, moved to a learning commons in a library. The following year saw the launch of a Student Success Office charged with upholding student success initiatives and coordinating campus tutoring. The WC is one of several tutoring centers occupying separate conference rooms (approximately 1,041 square feet in size) in the LC. As the WCD, although I officially report to English, I participate on Student Success and LC committees. Every year, the number of responsibilities and opportunities for collaboration increase, but rather than focus on details of our WC’s ongoing journey, I will extrapolate from my experiences and offer a heuristic to guide directors through the process of establishing and maintaining shared resources while safeguarding their existing practices, procedures, and policies.

Because relocation will likely increase opportunities to share resources and collaborate, I’ve devised a heuristic to help WCDs work through potential changes. Potential stakeholders should clarify reporting lines (even if it means ensuring, in writing, that a WC remain with its “parent” department) because, while partnerships are often positive, they can be fraught with new pressures and the need for regular negotiations.

The heuristic comprises suggested areas of exploration loosely organized under the headings of *policy*, *budget*, *physical space*, *collaboration*, and *labor*. Because these areas overlap and influence one another, the questions in each section are non-sequential and

can be adapted to meet local center needs.

POLICY

Are WC policies already established, or might policies change with the move? Where are policies published? Are policies authored by an individual director, a series of directors over time, or a committee? Are policies vetted by a department (such as English) or by a shared group, such as a team of tutoring center directors from across disciplines? Will the WC transfer existing policies into its new space? Could shared resources (such as space, data management systems, or scheduling software) cause policy changes? Which shared resources could impact policies?

BUDGET

What existing resources does the WC possess? What funds will be maintained and from what source? What resources will the WC gain or lose? Who is responsible for hiring, evaluating, supervising, assessing, and handling payroll? Are all tutors paid on the same scale? Who determines pay? What resources will be shared? Who has decision-making authority to authorize resource allocation? What day-to-day office items are needed, and who provides these? Who is responsible for purchasing computers, projectors, tablets, furniture, office supplies, and other items? Who pays for repairs, new software, or software updates?

PHYSICAL SPACE

How will the furniture and space be arranged? Where will students wait for consultations or go afterwards? Will private spaces, cubicles, or administrative areas be provided? How many, and what shape are, the tables? How many desks and computers? How will the administrative desk be arranged? Where are phone jacks and outlets for use during consultations? Does the WCD have a private office, or a private desk and computer separate from tutoring areas? How can the WCD's space be personalized or decorated? What "creature comforts" (microwave, refrigerator, coffee pot, etc.) will be needed or allowed in the WC? Will the WC space be available after hours for other uses? Who manages cleaning, security, and reservation of the WC space? Who has keys to the space, and when is the WC space locked? How might the allotted space for the WC impact the number of sessions? Will space expansion or constraint impact hours? How do the current number of tutors and scheduling affect the space? How does the space affect the number of tutors on staff? How many people could comfortably collaborate in the WC space? Will tutoring "spill out" of the new space?

COLLABORATION

How will the WC collaborate with nearby tutoring offices? How do the WC's pedagogical approaches, structure of sessions, and

staff compare to those in other tutoring centers? What are other tutoring centers' hours, consultation lengths, and types (drop-in, appointment, group, individual, mixed), and staff makeup (volunteers, graduate students, undergraduates,, professionals, etc.)? To what degree are services among tutoring centers expected to be similar? Must special schedules, such as exam study sessions and orientations, be coordinated? How will WC information (hours, closings, workshop schedules, special events, adjusted exam schedules, etc.) be disseminated? Will the WC maintain separate schedules from other tutoring offices? Will directors of nearby tutoring centers meet regularly? Who has access to WC tutor and director performance evaluations, and how can these personnel evaluations be used? If shared software among tutoring centers is used, who has access to data (names of clients, client numbers, usage by departments, demographic information, visit reports, etc.)? Who has permissions to record, evaluate, and use such information? Are there different levels of access to such information? If shared programs schedule appointments online and collect data, who sets permissions and rules within the software? How much input does the WC have in the above decisions?

LABOR

Do the WC administrators and staff have a current, official job descriptions? What does a day, week, month, semester, summer, or year in the life of a WC administrator or staff member look like? What types of meetings do WC administrators attend? What committee assignments do WC administrators hold? Will that change? How? How much time does the WCD spend on day-to-day center operations, in meetings, on data reporting and analysis, staff training, scholarship, or other activities? How might that expand or change? How do WC staff employment contracts (and rank) align with expectations? How might administrative duties and expectations, particularly the expansion, reduction, or combination of roles, be determined or clarified?

Within these questions one might rightfully sense a warning: WCDs should be cautious when joining a learning commons/success center as the only way to grow or change, especially when there are unclear expectations and vague—or non-existent—documents to regulate policy and define boundaries.

To establish and maintain autonomy during a transition to a LC, WC administrators may begin by taking a few steps before initiating meetings and discussions with potential partners: (a) locate existing or historical documents (formal agreements, emails, memos, or other texts) regarding your WC; (b) interview past WCDs, or deans, as applicable; and (c) gather information regarding the

learning commons/success center and its departmental structure. Once these documents are collected and reviewed by the WCD and appropriate support staff in the center, I suggest that WCDs use the heuristic to initiate conversations among potential partners and eventually to generate formal documents outlining shared responsibilities, resources, budget, and reporting lines. Formal documents should be authorized by WC administration, the chair, deans, and/or personnel of other tutoring units before relocation. If possible, a departmental committee or advisory board within the WC's reporting line should be organized to support the WCD and staff, providing both assistance and institutional backing for decisions.

Subsequently, after a WC has moved to an LC, periodic revisiting of “founding” documents may be necessary to renegotiate responsibilities for services and physical space. Founding documents may include the following: WC policies, which should be vetted and published as official procedures and recommendations; chartering or initial “set-up” agreements (such as a “memo of understanding”) that outline who is responsible for staffing, purchases, and maintenance of physical amenities; and guidelines for the development and oversight of data systems before and after relocation to an LC.

It is possible that a center can move to a campus hub—from the margins to the middle—and subsequently exist centrally in physical space, yet marginally in conceptual space. Careful planning for change can help maintain control of (or at least, influence on) decisions rooted in writing center theory and practice. WCDs must then resist pressures to negotiate when “compromises” indeed do compromise WC theory and practice. Jeanne Simpson argued that WCDs need to proceed with caution when working with other tutoring services, and warned, “We don't always have the authority to make decisions all on our own, though writing center directors get left to their own devices so much, they may be beguiled into thinking they do have that authority. Be sure before you act.” In the spirit of Simpson's advice to get ahead of the problem, I offer the heuristic to help directors pursue specific lines of inquiry that will help them preserve center autonomy and authority before they act.



WORKS CITED

Simpson, Jeanne. “WCenter Digest: September 29, 2014.” WCenter Listserv, WCENTER, 30 Sept. 2014, <lyris.ttu.edu/read/messages?id= 24534381>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2016.