

## An Approach to Serving Faculty in the Writing Center

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Many students, faculty, and administrators continue to think of writing and communication centers primarily as resources for undergraduates; however, many centers serve other populations on campus. In so doing, these centers are presented with a different set of administrative and instructional challenges than those faced by an undergraduate-focused center. While serving a broad range of constituencies is not a new part of writing and communication center work everywhere, budgets and other constraints do limit what many centers can offer. However, ours are services that are important to everyone in a university; that is, not only undergraduates need or want help with their writing and communication. Where they are not already doing so, centers are increasingly being asked to serve graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, faculty, and staff. This is not only seen in the evolving programming of writing centers but also in the increase in positions advertised for writing consultants housed in other academic units, such as individual

departments, graduate schools, and centers for teaching and learning. This broadening of responsibilities and the opportunity to serve the needs of such new communities is certainly a testament to the important role that writing consultants play on college campuses; however, designing services for non-student populations in particular is very different from designing services for students. Over the past two years, the Communication Center at the Georgia Institute of Technology has begun to expand its services, beginning with postdoctoral fellows and then faculty, focusing on the unique challenges presented to consultants when working with those clients. This article provides reflections on the early development of these services and offers a model for moving forward with such a program.

The Georgia Tech Communication Center is relatively new, having

been established in 2011. Serving both undergraduate and graduate students from its start, the Center offers support for a full range of multimodal and multiliteracy projects. To complement the opening of the Institute's Office of Postdoctoral Services in 2014, we began offering services and workshop programming for postdoctoral fellows across the Georgia Tech campus. The new position of "Postdoctoral Services Coordinator" was created, and it was filled by a Professional Tutor. Professional Tutors, who have PhDs and serve as faculty members in the Writing and Communication Program and tutor in the Communication Center, make up the core of our staff. We also employ undergraduate peer tutors, but they do not work with postdoctoral fellows or faculty—at the request of our funding sponsor. The program was then expanded in Spring 2016 allowing us to serve faculty as well. Throughout this expansion of our services we have learned a great deal, identifying four primary challenges for writing centers in setting up a faculty consultation program: identifying the needs of faculty, negotiating differences in expertise, defining the scope of our services, and ensuring that tutors have the training and resources they need to be effective consultants for a diverse range of faculty.

## **THE CHALLENGES**

### ***Challenge #1: Needs***

Initially, we modeled our postdoctoral consultations and workshops on our existing programming for graduate students. However, discussions during consultations with postdocs revealed a different set of needs. Though perhaps it should not have been surprising to us, postdocs were just as eager for help with professional writing as they were for assistance with scholarly materials. The most common written documents we encountered in our work with postdocs, for example, were job application materials like teaching and research statements. Postdocs were also eager for help in learning to talk about their research. In response, we developed new workshops, including one on interviewing skills for both academic and industry positions, which was one of our best attended workshops. We also adapted our graduate student workshop on the basics of CVs and resumes to focus on CV organization and design; our postdoctoral fellows already had CVs but they struggled to present their experiences as effectively as possible and had scant access to other help on campus.

The demand for support in crafting job application materials revealed a couple of notable things that have influenced the way we are expanding our services to include faculty. Firstly, we learned

that the differences between graduate students, postdocs, and faculty groups are as stark as the differences between undergraduate and graduate students. Graduate students, postdocs, and faculty represent a continuum of expertise: graduate students are in the process of gaining disciplinary and writing expertise; postdocs, having completed dissertations and published articles, have expertise in both areas but are still training (oftentimes in fields different from their dissertation fields); and, finally, faculty have the experience and expertise but often need confidence and further practice in communication-related competencies. These distinctions are easy to collapse but in order to best serve these clients, consultants must resist that temptation. Only in carefully parsing the needs and expertise of these groups are we able to create spaces for faculty to seek support “where no one criticizes the writer, where competent, confidential assistance is available, where all writing is equal, and where the writer is as important as the writing” (Mendez-Newman 3).

Secondly, our work with postdocs has exposed the way that resources available to non-student groups on our campus are highly fragmented and undefined. Many of our postdocs were cobbling together resources provided by their mentors, home departments, the faculty development office, and career center; however, few postdocs had ever thought of the Communication Center as a resource for them until they saw our advertisements in the weekly emails sent out by the Office of Postdoctoral Services. Even fewer faculty members have thought of the Communication Center as a resource available to them, and we suspect that the experience of postdocs extends to regular faculty members as well. As has been the case throughout the institutional history of writing centers, tutoring is still perceived as a service for *students*. Yet, as our experience shows, postdocs and faculty are underserved communities when it comes to writing and communication support, and writing and communication centers are well suited to meet those needs.

### **Challenge #2: Expertise**

Another challenge we have faced has been related to expertise as professionals (professional tutors) meet professionals (postdoctoral fellows and faculty) in consultations and workshops. As has been noted in the literature on graduate students in the writing center, graduate students are a “different” population because of their expertise (Babcock and Thonus 106-10). That can be true of postdoctoral fellows and faculty as well because they perhaps, by dint of a dissertation and publications, be professional writ-

ers though they may not think of themselves in that way. While the most apparent challenge is that the writing consultant typically does not share the client's disciplinary expertise, an equally important challenge is in helping faculty clients draw upon the writing expertise they already possess but might not recognize. As Carrie Shively Levernz argues about graduate students, the focus in writing consultations should be on providing "support for the knower and the process of knowing through the cultivation of relationships" (59). This is also true in the case of faculty clients. With consultants "actively engaged in the production of experts poised to share new knowledge with the world" (Levernz 60), consultants can play a key role in building a culture of writing on their campuses that has an impact far beyond it. Even though all faculty are engaged in writing in some form, that work is too often invisible to students (and even to other faculty); in serving faculty in our writing and communication centers, we can help to make that work visible.

In supporting a community of writing across campus, we are fulfilling the larger mission of the writing center. Indeed, as Courtney L. Werner asks, "How, though, can a writing center uplift a campus culture of writing if it only focuses on student writers?" (79). Our center has, from its founding, been committed to the instantiation of what Severino and Knight call a "ripple effect" of awareness emerging from a "Center philosophy and practice" that moves us toward "the perfect outcome": "a university that is a Writing Center" (223-5, emphasis added). Serving faculty members allows us to move forward toward a larger goal of creating a "campus culture of writing" because a culture of writing includes writers of all kinds and abilities.

### ***Challenge #3: Services***

One way in which working with faculty writers is much like working with student writers is the common misconception that the writing center is an editing service. This is not to diminish the usefulness of copy editing; copy editing is just not the most valuable expertise writing consultants have to offer, even to their non-student clients. If a faculty member only wants copy editing, we do provide them with a list of qualified editors whom they can hire. However, our goal is to help these clients identify as writers: to help them to "make the move from researchers or teachers who have to write . . . toward writer-researchers and writer-teachers" (Banks and Flinchbaugh 234). It is important to keep in mind that just as with students, sometimes faculty are simply not aware of who we are and what we do. Opening up a dialogue about our

own expertise and what kind of services we provide should thus be a priority in consultations with faculty, just as it is with students.

Defining our services and the scope of those services for non-student clients is vital. To do that, we have to understand our own institutional structure and landscape. As *Working with Faculty Writers* (2013) demonstrates, there are many paths through which to serve faculty writers on campus; the array of types of writing support (writing groups, residencies, retreats) and academic homes of those resources (writing centers, teaching centers) can complicate our efforts to provide support and to cultivate a community of writers. This means that to best serve faculty clients, we should be willing and able to work alongside other units providing similar support to faculty. In so doing, when other units are also willing to work with us, writing centers can serve as change agents at the institutional level by bringing more visibility and increased value to the process of writing where currently the focus can be on the product of writing (Geller 2). Additionally, faculty who themselves benefit from writing center consultations will be more likely to promote our work both to their students and to administrators. Having faculty advocates can be particularly critical when writing centers face budget cuts or other unfavorable restructuring measures.

#### **Challenge #4: Consultant Preparation**

The final challenge we faced in establishing a faculty consultation program was ensuring that our Professional Tutors get the training they need to be effective in this new role. Where student writers benefit from generalized writing instruction, faculty writers need assistance akin to that of a reviewer for a journal. To provide that specialized assistance, we set out to design a consultation model that would allow maximum flexibility and that could be tailored to fit the needs of the individual faculty client. Because of the discipline-specific expertise of faculty and the complexity of their research and writing, providing writing assistance and support to these clients demands additional time and preparation by the consultant. Ideally then, consultants should be professional tutors with experience in academic writing and publication, and where this is not feasible, student tutors must be highly experienced and prepared to work with faculty who might view them as unqualified.

Sponsored by a pilot grant from the Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Faculty Development, the Communication

Center at Georgia Tech has been able to provide a specialized and dedicated consultant for faculty clients. Our Postdoctoral Services Coordinator dedicates 13 hours each week to meeting with post-doc and faculty clients and preparing for those consultation sessions. Their preparation might include reading drafts, becoming familiar with the faculty client's area of research, or reading articles from the journals to which the faculty client hopes to submit. While a writing consultant does not need to become an expert in the faculty client's field, some familiarity with publications in their field, and their own publication history, is necessary. For that reason, we have devised a series of surveys that potential faculty clients complete in order to provide essential pre-session information to the consultant.

### **OUR MODEL FOR ESTABLISHING A PROGRAM FOR FACULTY WRITING SUPPORT**

Our experience working with non-student clients suggests that the ideal consultation model for faculty should be an ongoing relationship either over the course of a semester or an academic year. Consequently, it is vital for the prospective faculty client to understand fully what kind of support we are able to provide and be committed to attending regular sessions. It is likewise vital that the consultant have an opportunity to get to know what the faculty client wants to accomplish through their work together and to have the tools to support the client. As such, we have designed a screening process to employ with this particular community. The screening process is not designed to "weed out" potential faculty clients, but rather to help ensure that the consultant is well prepared to assess the needs of these clients and to develop personalized plans to help them meet their goals.

The screening process we devised has two steps. The first step involves a brief survey that should take the prospective client no more than ten minutes to complete. The survey collects basic contact information; information about academic roles, units, and affiliations; and information about the client's motivation for seeking out a writing consultant. If the prospective faculty client's goals and needs match the services we provide, then a second survey is sent to the client and an initial consultation is scheduled. If the client's goals and needs are not well suited to the process-oriented consultation model that we offer, then we can still provide a useful service by referring the faculty member to other programs or resources.

The second survey is a bit more detailed and should take a faculty member ten to fifteen minutes to complete. It includes prompts

and questions such as the following:

- Tell us a bit about your field(s) and how you describe your professional/academic work in relation to them.
- What do you hope to accomplish through working with a writing/communications consultant?
- What challenges do you face in your writing? How do you think a writing/communications consultant could help you overcome those?
- Do you have a publication or two that our consultant could read in order to better get to know your work and writing?
- What publication venues (journals, edited series, etc.) are you looking to submit to?
- What journal(s) should our consultant look at to get a better idea of the expectations and norms for publishing in your field?

These questions allow the consultant and faculty client to set goals and develop a plan for moving forward over the course of the semester or year. With consultant and client both experts in their respective fields, the surveys help to cultivate a collaborative relationship between them. While our consultation model allows for maximum flexibility for faculty to seek help when (and for how long) they need it, there are drawbacks to that model, which the surveys are meant to ameliorate. First, unlike the “workshop,” “retreat,” and “boot camp” models that are most commonly provided by faculty development offices, our model does not automatically provide a rigid structure to the sessions and does not dictate deadlines. Second, our model does not automatically provide a community of writers supporting one another. As a result, the consultant and client must work together to create an individualized approach to providing appropriate structure and support.

## **CONCLUSION**

As institutions of higher education seek to provide more professional support to faculty, writing and communication centers have an opportunity to expand their services to include these non-student communities. In turn, those centers are not only able to provide much needed services but also to raise their profile on campus. Working with non-student populations underscores that writing centers are sites of support and collaboration rather than sites of remediation and retention. Faculty programs also provide opportunities for student writers to see their professors as writers who sometimes need to seek out expert help as well. So, although our model has its challenges, its strength is in the way that it applies many of the same principles to all of our client communi-

ties—a model that universally speaks to our similarities as writers rather than to our differences. No matter the form of support, by providing services to non-student communities, writing and communication centers have the opportunity to create communities of writers on campus that include the entire range of writers from beginning to expert. When faculty writers get the support and expert guidance they need, the entire university community benefits.



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