



## Rethinking Consultant Training for a Prison-Based Writing Center

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The number of university-level education programs in prisons is growing. The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison publishes a directory ("2024 National Directory") that currently lists almost 500 prison education programs (PEPs). And recently expanded access to PELL grants for incarcerated students provides funding that will aid new program development. Providing writing support is key to these programs' success. To support student writers, prisoner-staffed writing centers are emerging in PEPs. As these centers develop, they should train writing consultants to serve the particular needs of the students who will use them.

Within our prison-based writing center, the single distinctive feature that best explains our students' unique needs is their age and time away from academia. Student ages range from 30s through 60s, averaging 46. Having been away from any academic setting for years, even decades, they are disconnected from knowledge of what their teachers expect in academic writing. And that situation informs our thoughts about adding to our training agenda.

In the fall of 2015, the first cohort of students enrolled at our prison-based, satellite campus, the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI). The curriculum was set up so students could earn a bachelor's degree in five years, after completing the same general education and major requirements as students on the main campus. However, CPI program administrators quickly discerned that these learners, long removed from academia or completely unfamiliar with it, would need extra help, particularly with written work. That realization eventually birthed a writing center.

We opened our writing center (The Rhetoric Center) in the summer of 2018. Our center is staffed solely by incarcerated consultants. All of us began working in our center while we were CPI students, but several have continued after we graduated (and are still housed in the same prison). During our center's first seven years, the staff has ranged from 12-20 consultants, currently at 19, and the number of enrolled students has been about 100. So we have approximately one consultant for every five or six students. Furthermore, upwards of 98% of students in the program use the center, most using it frequently. That level of student access to consultants, coupled with high levels of personal familiarity (we live with, and bunk with, the students we serve), makes us unusually well-qualified to be aware of students' academic needs.

Because our program offers students the same curriculum as students on the main campus, the CPI administrators and our center's faculty advisor believed that our consultant training should follow long-established traditions for college/university writing centers: reading classic publications on writing center theory and practice, discussing pedagogical purpose, holding



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practice sessions, etc. We train our consultants to tell students, “We don’t ‘fix’ your papers; we help you learn to become better writers,” and we focus on larger global issues such as research questions and organization, always making sure that students have primary agency in consulting sessions. Yet, both our clients and consultants found that this non-directive method sometimes left learners needing more.

Early in 2023, as part of ongoing staff training, we read an article on working with first-generation students in a writing center (Bond). It caught our attention both because at least two-thirds of our students are first generation and because one of Bond’s conclusions is that consulting sessions with first-generation students “use more directive approaches” (161). Since we had always taught and employed non-directive approaches, Bond’s article proved to be the catalyst for considering additions to our training agenda. Our main takeaway from Bond is that we need to train our consultants to meet the particular needs of our students.

Assessing the many unusual characteristics of our students—to better understand their needs—highlighted one key fact: They have been away from academics for a very long time. As a result, the freshmen and sophomores who are our primary clientele not only do not understand writing as a process but do not understand academic writing at all. It is common for students to tell us things like, “I don’t know what the prof means when she tells us that she expects X (e.g., claims, secondary research, proper citation style) in our papers.”

So our center’s consultants decided that we needed to better understand exactly what knowledge about profs’ expectations our students were missing. That decision began a process of several months of staff brainstorming to identify knowledge that we ourselves had to learn as students. We concluded that our students sometimes needed us to employ more “directive approaches” regarding these items of knowledge, and that our traditional training needed expanding.

The following list is the result of our brainstorming. Of course, we recognize that profs’ expectations vary a great deal among individuals. That variation may be due to disciplinary and pedagogical training or may be just personal preference or habit. But there are certain categories of expectations that seem to go beyond personal preference. While there is nothing in the following list that will surprise people working in writing centers, we offer it as a sketch of items we have found valuable in our new consultant training, and we hope that other PEPs will find it useful as such. As much as possible, we tried to organize this list to represent the order in which students’ assignments compelled them to learn various lessons about profs’ expectations for academic writing.

- Profs see academic writing as “**joining a conversation**,” a conversation among those who study in an academic specialty. When students join a specific conversation, they need to think and write like an academic in that field. They need to ask questions, conduct research, and make claims—whose nature and form may vary across disciplines—based on their research.
- Because there are so many differences among profs in different courses, students need to pay very close attention to **assignment prompts**. Prompts set the rules for assignments; they are contracts between a prof and students. If a prompt is unclear to students, they should consult the prof to clarify.
- Written assignments fall into a specific set of **academic genres**: research reports, lab reports, research papers and speeches, analytical essays, personal essays, reflection papers, argumentative speeches, critiques, annotated bibliographies, summaries,

presentations, etc. Profs understand the written and unwritten rules of each genre; our students usually do not.

- Profs distinguish between “**formal**” and “**informal**” writing. Formal writing follows specific rules—which are foreign and taxing to our students—that direct formatting (e.g., using or not using headings), stylistics (e.g., first-person or third-person pronouns), citation styles (e.g., MLA, APA, CBE, Chicago), etc. Informal writing, on the other hand, resembles casual conversation. Our students regularly write letters, so they default to informal writing, but some profs penalize for this.
- Expectations of elements such as what the structure is, and how an assignment’s main point is articulated are defined by **disciplinary cultures**. Profs have specialized vocabulary—their own disciplinary jargon. Scientific reports, for example, following an “IMRAD” structure (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion), look and sound very different from literacy narratives, a common assignment in our first-year writing course.
- Especially challenging are the sets of knowledge and practice that profs expect students to **transfer in** from earlier classes and **transfer out** to later classes. For instance, because our students take a speech class in their first semester, profs of later classes may expect that the students know how to build a PowerPoint presentation. This is especially hard for our students, who cannot access the Internet or cloud storage or save any digital data—laptops are scrubbed every term. This leaves them with only recollections and physical notes.
- **Research** grounds all academic writing, but there are many subtopics involved in academic research.
  - Profs talk about “**primary**” and “**secondary**” research. Primary research refers to original research, the original findings and ideas of an author/researcher. Secondary research is the study and use of primary research to develop and support one’s own research. Most student research is secondary.
  - Research appearing in “**peer-reviewed**” publications carries credibility that non-peer reviewed writing (e.g., feature reports published in a monthly magazine) does not.
  - Each prof has an idea, which they may or may not concretely explain, of the **balance they want between published source content and a student’s own ideas and claims**. For example, in an analytical essay about St. Augustine, a prof may expect students to use only content created by Augustine, with no personal ideas included.
  - Student research compels students to understand academic ethics—and **plagiarism**.

These are the main content areas in which we train untraditionally to accommodate our untraditional students. Our center’s faculty advisor (a retired writing center director from Calvin’s main campus who leads us in appointing and training consultants) communicates our concerns to CPI administrators and faculty, leading profs to clarify expectations for students. We are now working on ways, mostly developing sets of examples and analogies, to efficiently teach this content to students. We do not want to risk losing our emphasis on non-directive methods as we explain expectations for academic writing.

We hope that this report on our practices will be useful to writing center staff at other PEPs—and more generally to those who work with varieties of untraditional students. At the end of the day, we emphatically believe that our center helps students, but only in as much as the staff shapes consultant-training to meet the challenges of the untraditional prisoner-student, who sometimes needs untraditional solutions.

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