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AUTHOR(S): Megan Keaton

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Back to the Center

From Writing Lab to Writing Center: The Pfeiffer University Writing Center

Megan Keaton

Pfeiffer University is a small liberal arts institution with an undergraduate enrollment of 700-900. Prior to 2017, the Pfeiffer Writing Center—then called the Writing Lab—was part of the Learning Center. The Writing Lab was housed in a very small physical space, big enough for only one session at a time, and Writing Lab tutoring was not advertised to students. Therefore, few students even knew that the Writing Lab existed, much less what services the Writing Lab offered. Additionally, the Learning Center offered little to no training for tutors in responding to writing, meaning that faculty worried about the likelihood of plagiarism. This concern compounded the attendance issues as faculty were not encouraging their students to go to the Writing Lab. All in all, fewer than 100 students used the Writing Lab each academic year for several years.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, the English Program made a case to move the Writing Lab under the purview of the Program, to utilize a larger space in a different building, and to hire a Director. The proposal was approved, and I was hired as Director beginning in Fall 2017. My goals coming in were threefold: (1) create a collaborative and welcoming culture in the Writing Center, (2) design a training and professional development program for the Consultants, and (3) make the center more visible across campus. I will focus on goals 2 and 3,

because these were the biggest problems we faced as we shifted from the Writing Lab to the Writing Center.

Designing a Training and Professional Development Program

To find consultants, I seek out recommendations from instructors and interview potential consultants; specifically, I look for writing and oral communication skills and the ability to work well with others. When I began as Director, Pfeiffer did not have a credit-bearing tutoring course. Therefore, I took the first two weeks of the Fall semester to train the consultants; in a six-hour training course—broken up across several days—consultants read about and discuss the foundations of tutoring. In this course, they learn about the following:

- understanding the purpose of a writing center, common misconceptions about writing centers, and the role of the consultant;
- setting the agenda for and concluding the session;
- using the rhetorical situation to help students write more effectively;
- working with a variety of learners;
- giving feedback on multimodal assignments and explaining basic design principles;
- discussing with students potential plagiarism, its consequences, and how to avoid it;
- and, now that we offer face-to-face and virtual sessions, conducting online sessions.

This course includes practical strategies, mock sessions, and talk-throughs of potential writing center session scenarios. In Spring 2020, I was able to design and begin teaching a credit-bearing Writing Pedagogy course, a third of which is dedicated to writing center tutoring; this course is now in the catalogue and offered every Spring. Students interested in becoming consultants are encouraged to take this course, though the course is not currently a requirement. Those who do not take the course are required to take the six-hour training course with me.

To continue their growth, consultants also engage in professional development meetings every other week to learn best practices and reflect on their tutoring experiences. For the first year, I led all of the meetings. Starting in Fall 2019, I became more intentional about consultants reading writing center studies scholarship throughout the semester and incorporating this scholarship into their tutoring practice. This reading results in consultants leading their own professional development meetings. At the beginning of the semester, each consultant chooses a topic about which they wanted to learn more, such as helping students with brainstorming, utilizing non-directive tutoring strategies, or adding humor into sessions.

The consultants are then required to read at least five articles or chapters from writing center studies publications about that topic. With feedback from me, each consultant plans a professional development session. This session needs to include one or two readings that the consultants read in preparation for the meeting and activities that push the consultants to discuss the readings and apply the concepts to their tutoring. Many consultants also create a handout with strategies they can use in future sessions. Because I give them the whole semester to work on their reading and planning, they lead their sessions the following semester. Consultants have been committed enough to this project that they have been willing to lead the meeting even if they are unable to work in the Writing Center during the semester they are set to lead.

Making the Center More Visible across Campus

At the beginning of each semester, I hold a meeting of all Writing Center staff to discuss ideas for promotion and outreach. We take the ideas from this meeting and work together to bring the ideas to fruition. These ideas range from targeted flyers for specific majors, to how-to videos, to events, to writing contests. The materials we choose to create are based on what the Writing Center staff feels needs the most attention and would be most effective.

One of the events we hold each Fall and Spring is a semester kick-off party. The kickoff is typically hosted in the Writing Center and we offer a variety of finger foods. This party gives students a chance to

learn where the Writing Center is located and to meet the consultants with whom they could work. We widely advertise these parties on our social media, through printed flyers, and through emails and encourage students, staff, faculty, and administration to attend. I take pictures and videos at these events and create a one-minute promo video that I circulate afterward.

I have also done some work to inform faculty, staff, and administrators about the Writing Center. The first way I have done this is through social media. For the most part, our students are more interested in Twitter and Instagram, while faculty, staff, and administrators are more involved on Facebook. Therefore, the students who work in the Writing Center control and post to our Twitter and Instagram accounts, and I post to our Writing Center Facebook page. The Facebook page has taught faculty, staff, and administrators about the Writing Center's services, events, and social media campaigns. I have also invited professors from different disciplines to come talk to the consultants about writing in those disciplines. Thus far, professors from the Natural Sciences, Business, and Communications as well as staff from Career Services and Disability Services have come to talk with the consultants.

At each meeting, I have seen that interactions with the consultants allow faculty to learn more about what we do in the Writing Center. Furthermore, I have made presentations at the institution's faculty professional development conferences. In these presentations, I have articulated the Writing Center's services and the ways in which the Writing Center can partner with instructors to help their students. Finally, the Writing Center emails instructors when their students attend a session. After each session, consultants fill out client report forms by detailing what assignment the student brought and the major concepts they worked on, such as brainstorming, thesis development, or MLA citation practices. I am careful to remind consultants that these summaries should not be evaluative in any form. This summary is then copied and pasted into the email to instructors along with the student's name and the date that they attended. This email (1) reminds instructors that the Writing Center is a resource available for their students and (2)

shows the variety of aspects with which the Writing Center can help (i.e., we do not only work on grammar).

Going Forward

In the future, I want to continue to find new ways of reaching out to faculty and students. For instance, we currently struggle with attendance from Juniors and Seniors; I want to do more work to encourage these older students to use our services. Also, though a few professors have invited us to their classrooms to talk to their students about the Writing Center, I would like to get into more classrooms and to present to every interested professor's classes every semester. In terms of professional development, I have started to encourage my Consultants to use the research they conduct each semester to write tutor columns for potential publication. So far, only a few Consultants have taken me up on this opportunity. I want to grow this number and develop a more formalized method of helping Consultants move from research to submission. I have also helped two Consultants embark on empirical, IRB-approved research projects; I would like to see more of my Consultants do this in the future.

Center Insight

- Writing Center staff: 1 Director, 7-8 undergraduate Consultants, 3-5 Administrative Assistants, and 4-5 English faculty who tutor in the Writing Center
- Hours open per week: 26-30
- Average number of appointments attended in the Fall (Fall 2017- Fall 2020): 337
- Average number of appointments attended in the Spring (Spring 2018- Spring 2021): 266

Old Writing Lab Space

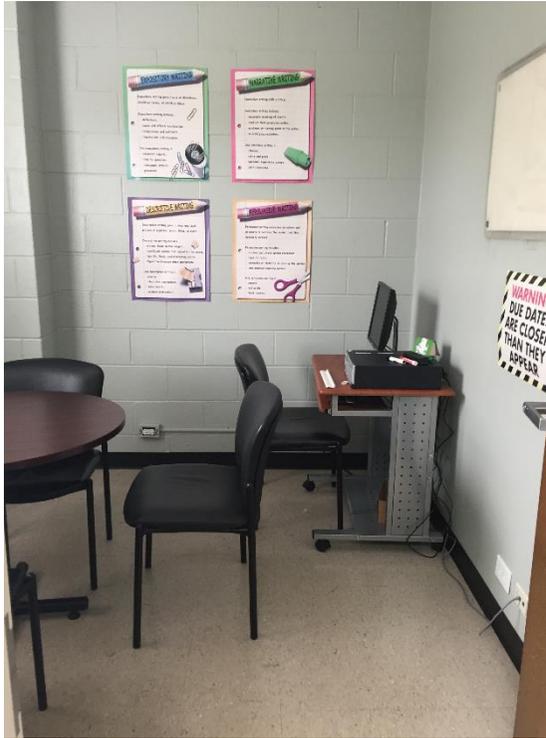


Fig. 1. Old Writing Lab (2017)

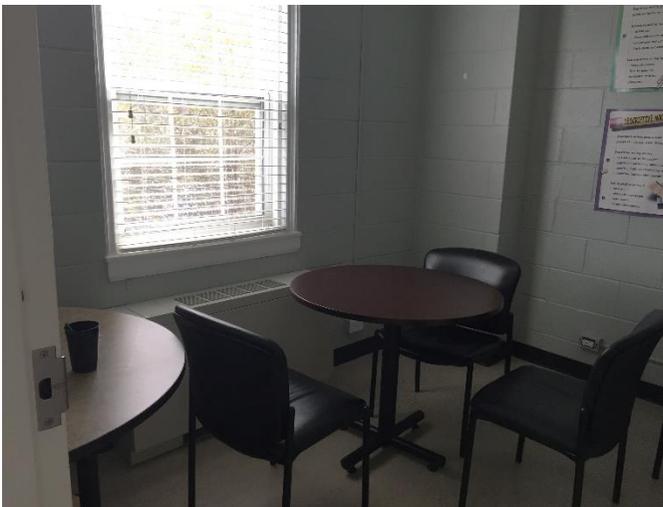


Fig. 2. Old Writing Lab (2017)

New Writing Center Space



Fig. 3. New Writing Center (2021)



Fig. 4. New Writing Center (2021)