

Writing Center Directors: The Search for Professional Status

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During the past decade, the pages of *WPA* and other journals have recorded our efforts to define our roles as writing program administrators. In the last few years in particular, we have begun to experience a period of intense self-scrutiny, evidenced by a sharp increase in the number of books and articles published on the subject. However, preoccupied with our roles in managing university-wide writing programs, we have perhaps paid too little attention to the one writing program administrator who could benefit most from our understanding: the writing center director.

The role of the writing center director has never been adequately defined, and center directors are thus experiencing a kind of identity crisis. The lack of consensus about the center director's role is unfortunate, since the writing center is an essential complement to any comprehensive writing program.¹ Given current composition theory's emphasis on the process of composing and on the social context of language and knowledge, the writing center embodies what current theory says is most important about writing pedagogy. If, in fact, as most compositionists argue, addressing individual writers' processes rather than a "text" is the way to help writers produce better writing, and if language and writing are social in nature, then the writing center very well may be the purest form of theory put into practice.² Thus, it is particularly unfortunate that the writing center director's role is so ill-defined.

Certainly, it is a difficult role to define because, like freshman English programs, writing centers are institution-specific in structure and function. Nevertheless, certain responsibilities and objectives of centers and their directors do remain constant, and identifying and analyzing these similarities will help us move toward a useful definition of the director's role. One step in defining this role is to explore how it is perceived by freshman English directors—those who on most campuses direct the overall writing program, or at least its largest component. Freshman English directors' conception of the status and responsibilities of the center director is especially important because both directors share a common goal: to provide quality writing instruction to students across the university. In addition, freshman English directors' perceptions provide a partial indication of how writing center directors are perceived by

the faculty in general. To discover their perceptions, we surveyed 188 freshman English directors across the nation. (See the appendix for a description of this survey.)

Because the role of center director varies from institution to institution, the respondents' perceptions were not always unanimous; nevertheless, several clear patterns emerged in the responses. Overall, what we found is that freshman English directors are more likely to view the writing center director simply as an administrator, not as a teacher, a scholar, or even a writing specialist.

Teacher, Scholar, or Administrator?

For example, of twenty items listed on our questionnaire, the five rated most "essential" relate to the director's role as an administrator. Here are those five activities, followed by the percentage of respondents who consider them "essential":

- training tutors (84%)
- possessing strong communication skills (81%)
- monitoring the quality of the staff's tutoring (80%)
- communicating with the composition director (70%)
- recruiting and hiring tutors (69%)

Understandably, the respondents' most central concern is the director's role in recruiting, hiring, training, and monitoring tutors. In fact, in response to the open-ended questions supplementing the twenty-item rating scale, over 67 respondents (36%) identify one or a combination of these activities as the "most important aspect" of the director's job. As one respondent puts it, the writing center director is "above all responsible for ensuring that students have access to state-of-the-art tutoring."

Nor is it surprising that strong communication skills and regular communication with the composition director should rate so highly. The ability to communicate effectively would indeed seem to be essential for training and monitoring tutors and for working in conjunction with the composition director. In fact, in their prose remarks, many respondents link communication with interpersonal skills, saying these are "indispensable" for running a successful center. One respondent writes that the director must be able to interact effectively not only with the composition director but with "everyone from entering students to the Dean." Another sums up how crucial interpersonal skills are to the position: the writing center director must be "a specialist in constructive human relations."

While freshman English directors perceive the center director as an administrator, they are less inclined to see him or her as a "teacher," or at least this role is of lesser importance. For example, these five activities are among those that received the *lowest* "essential" rating:

- teaching writing courses (32%)
- receiving outstanding teaching evaluations for classroom teaching (23%)
- teaching courses in tutoring and composition pedagogy (21%)
- conducting writing workshops for the university community (15%)
- familiarizing faculty with new developments in composition (12%)

Clearly, of all twenty items, lowest in priority are those activities that involve teaching and interacting with people beyond the confines of the center. Classroom teaching is de-emphasized, especially teaching composition and pedagogy courses and receiving outstanding evaluations. For instance, fewer than a third of the respondents agree that it is "essential" for the director to teach writing courses, and only 15% that the director conduct university-wide workshops. Also, activities related to faculty development—being a teacher of fellow teachers—rank lowest of all. Only 12% of the respondents believe the director should "familiarize faculty with developments in composition."

While the center director's numerous responsibilities within the center might explain why composition directors de-emphasize classroom and workshop teaching, there is a surprising amount of disagreement about the center director's role as a teacher even within the center. Whether the center director should teach is uncertain. For example, a large number of respondents (40) don't believe the director should participate in tutoring—the center's version of teaching. Of the significant number who do believe the director should tutor students, many qualify their responses: the director should tutor "just enough to have a feel for students' needs" or "simply to remain in touch."³ More importantly, it appears that not many respondents view tutoring students or training tutors as "real" teaching; even though they perceive tutor training as the single most important responsibility of the center director, their responses indicate that they do not define this activity—or tutoring students—as "teaching." John Trimbur, writing in *WPA*, describes this attitude as a product of "the academic caste system" and attributes it to the "traditional academic hierarchy's scale of values." According to this value system, Trimbur claims, the "writing center's time is less valuable than a faculty member's" ("Students" 34).

If freshman English directors do not recognize the center director as a "teacher," they appear equally disinclined to see the director as a

"scholar" or as a "trained specialist." Only 33% say it is "essential" that the director "maintain scholarship." One respondent comments that scholarship might be "helpful if he or she has the time," and another explains that scholarship is not necessary because the director is a TA. To be fair, some respondents (three to be exact) mention that the director should possess "knowledge of current composition theory," and one states that the director should have a "national reputation as a researcher"; but the great preponderance of respondents do not find scholarship to be important for center directors.

Of course, it can be argued that the writing center director does not need to be a scholar (or even a teacher) to run an effective center; that is, the director's position can be defined as purely administrative. And there may be some truth to this argument. But the center director's status reflects and represents the status of the center itself, and status in academe derives from scholarly credentials. Typically, administrators—university provosts, department chairs, even freshman English directors—all prove themselves *first* as competent scholars *before* being given the responsibilities of administration. To the extent that these values do not apply to writing center directors, we can assume that the center director and the center itself are not valued in the academic community. And, perhaps more importantly, unlike many high-level administrative positions in the university, the position of writing center director is discipline-specific. Not only is it inextricably linked to an academic discipline—composition—but writing center direction itself is recognized as a legitimate "field," complete with an NCTE-sanctioned association, a professional journal and newsletter, and books on writing centers published by reputable houses, including NCTE. Thus, it seems unfair to suggest that center directors should remain purely "administrative" and, in so doing, to deny writing directors the same kind of professional recognition afforded most academic administrators and *all* other writing program administrators.

In addition, when asked whether the director should be a trained composition specialist, nearly a fourth said "no" or it "doesn't matter." One respondent writes, "It would be helpful if the director is a trained specialist, but above all she must be an administrator." This attitude sums up our main point: freshman English directors see center directors primarily as administrators and only secondarily, if at all, as teachers or scholars. As one respondent writes, "Other things are more important."⁴

In fact, many freshman English directors do not seem to view the director as a full faculty member who teaches and engages in scholarly research; this is reflected in answers to survey questions about the director's professional status. While it is true that 113 respondents believe the director should hold a tenure-track appointment—as most

faculty do—the remainder (75) state that the director's appointment should be nontenure-track, joint faculty/staff, staff only, or that it does not matter at all. A few respondents write emphatically that the director's position should be "defined as a staff position." Others comment that because TAs direct their centers the question is irrelevant, and 17 write that "it doesn't matter; tenure or nontenure track—either could work." Thus, a substantial number of respondents do not acknowledge the director as a fellow member of the faculty or simply are unconcerned.⁵

Teachers Without Voices: A Paradox of Power

What do the survey data tell us in general about the writing center director? In a way, they suggest that the center director is perceived as a kind of *wife*. Like the idealized support-mate Judy Syfers describes in her well-anthologized essay, the director is expected to keep a good house, to make sure the center "runs smoothly." She—and, incidentally, a substantial number of respondents use the generic "she"—even has a certain amount of power within her house, enough, at least, to make sure her charges behave. But her influence is confined within four walls; outside, she is voiceless, unable to participate as a full member of the large community. She is not encouraged to "work" as the real members of the academic community do, and when she is allowed to, she is certainly not compensated fully for her labor, since her labor is not truly valued by the community. In short, her place is in the home.

If this wife metaphor seems a bit forced, consider these representative responses to the question, "What important qualities and responsibilities are not listed on this questionnaire?":

- the writing center director should be "nice!" (The respondent included the exclamation point.)
- she should "know her place in the chain of command and respect it"
- she should be "friendly, cooperative, and have lots of personality"
- she should be "personable and flexible"
- she should be "supportive but not critical"
- she should not only be "sensitive to the needs of others," but be able to "recognize what needs are not being met" and "respond to the needs of the university whatever they become"
- she should "maintain an inventory of equipment and supplies" (kitchen utensils, no doubt)
- and (believe it or not) she should "provide chocolate chip cookies to writing center clients"

Amusing? Perhaps on the surface. But the attitude underlying these remarks subtly helps prevent center directors from fulfilling their potential as teachers, scholars, and program administrators, and it keeps centers themselves from achieving their mission. As we all know, composition theory stresses that the most effective pedagogy is one in which teachers interact with their students, in which teachers help writers find their own voices, their own *authority* to construct texts. Such theory also emphasizes that meaning-making is a communal, social activity. In no other place in the university is there a better opportunity to engage in this kind of interaction than in the writing center. Interactive learning is much more likely to occur during one-on-one or small group instruction in the center than in the typical teacher-centered classroom, or even in a class utilizing the workshop approach. Yet, it is sadly ironic that writing center directors, the very persons charged with empowering students to find their own voices, are themselves constrained from having a full voice in the academic community of their peers—thought of not as teachers, not as scholars, but simply as administrators.

We must make clear that in no way are we attempting to vilify freshman English directors. In fact, our experience is that by and large freshman English directors are generally supportive of center directors, especially since both program directors share mutual professional concerns. Rather, we interpret these survey data as indicative of the general perception of writing center directors within English departments. If anything, freshman English directors are probably more inclined to view center directors as fellow professionals than are typical faculty members who are not compositionists. And it is reasonable to assume that if freshman English directors have difficulty perceiving center directors as full colleagues, then non-composition faculty are even more likely to have trouble doing so.

Joining the Professional Conversation

If the writing center is ever to accomplish what it is designed to accomplish, these perceptions of center directors need to change. Directors should no longer be isolated within the non-threatening four walls of a "lab." Their position should be redefined so that they are recognized as true members of the academic community: as teachers, scholars, and administrators.

This goal can be achieved in several ways, and most successfully so, with the input and support of freshman English directors. First, the writing center director should be required to be a rhetoric and composition specialist, a person well-versed in theory of and research in both composition and writing centers. Second, along with NCTE and the

National Writing Center Association (see Simpson), we believe the director should hold a tenure-track appointment and receive teaching credit for tutoring and training tutors, as well as release time for directing the center. Further, we believe that as a composition specialist, the director should participate fully in all aspects of the larger writing program, assisting in faculty development and policymaking. In fact, as a specialist in writing center administration, the director should be recognized as a co-equal of the freshman English director—both directors administering their own different but complementary writing programs.

The future of the writing center and the integrity of the larger writing program are directly linked to the professional status accorded their directors. In order to ensure that our programs are coherent and effective, we should more fully integrate the center into the larger writing program, and its director into the academic community. Writing centers can then become, as Stephen North suggests in *College English*, "centers of consciousness about writing on campus, a kind of physical locus" for an institution's "commitment to writing." This is a status, North says, "they can achieve" (446).

That is, we should add, if we allow them to.

Notes

¹This lack of consensus is reflected in the diverse institutional settings of writing centers. To get a sense of the great variety of writing center programs and their administrative relationships to university writing programs, see Connolly and Vilardi, Haring-Smith, Hartzog, and especially Kail and Trimbur.

²For one of the finest theoretical rationales for the efficacy of peer tutoring and writing center pedagogy, see Bruffee. See Trimbur as well as an excellent bibliographical survey of collaborative learning theories ("Collaborative Learning").

³Murray and Bannister asked center directors to rank their daily responsibilities in order of frequency; teaching and tutoring ranked low on the scale, well below advertising center services, handling public relations, and developing instructional exercises (11). Not only are center directors not perceived as teachers, but evidently they do, in fact, spend most of their time and energy in routine administrative activities.

⁴In fact, it seems that directors are perceived more as *supervisors* than as *administrators*. For example, the respondents most often describe the directors' activities in terms associated with "supervision": *oversee, maintain, run, coordinate, serve, compile, schedule*. Such terms appear much more frequently than do terms associated with active administration: *establish, develop, create, determine*. Even the jargon of the field reinforces this attitude: center directors, for instance, do not "teach" but "train"; their "tutors" are called "staff" or "personnel"; their students are "clients" or "tutees."

⁵Over two-thirds of the center directors responding to Murray and Bannister's survey held nontenure track appointments (10).

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Appendix

To determine how composition directors perceive the role of the writing center director, we distributed a questionnaire during the winter of 1988 to freshman English directors across the nation. Targeting a range of institutions from medium-small to large, we selected 275 of these institutions at random, making sure, however, that every state was represented. One hundred eighty-eight directors (68%) completed and returned the questionnaire.

The questionnaire (printed below) solicits data about the tasks and responsibilities of directing a writing center. It asks respondents to rate twenty items on a four-point scale from "essential" to "unimportant." This continuum enabled the directors to rate the importance of each item, giving us a sense of their priorities. More importantly, however, the directors' priorities allowed us to determine the relative level of status writing center directors have or are expected to have. The remaining questions solicit brief answers.

Questionnaire

DIRECTIONS: The first 20 statements relate to activities and responsibilities of the writing center director. Please rate each one by checking the appropriate box. The remaining questions ask for brief answers.

	Essential	Important	Helpful	Unimportant
1. Recruits and hires tutors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Trains tutors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Publicizes center services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Has access to administrators beyond the English dept.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Maintains his or her own scholarship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Teaches courses in tutoring and composition pedagogy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Possesses strong communication skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Creates writing center policy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Controls writing center budget	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Expresses policy in written documents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Stays current with pedagogical applications of computers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Conducts writing workshops for the university community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Familiarizes faculty with new developments in composition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Teaches writing courses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Receives outstanding evaluations for his or her own classroom teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Monitors quality of staff's tutoring	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Remains current with developments in the field	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Communicates regularly with composition director	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Communicates regularly with department chair	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Remains accessible throughout the workday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Questionnaire

(continued)

21. What important qualities and responsibilities are not listed on the previous page?

22. Who should be the primary policymaker for the writing center?

- writing center director freshman English director
 department chair other

23. What is the *most* important aspect of the writing center director's job? _____

24. Should the center director be a trained composition specialist?

- yes no doesn't matter

25. Should the director participate in tutoring?

- yes no

If so, how many hours per week? _____

26. What kind of appointment should the center director have?

- tenure track non tenure track staff joint staff/faculty other

27. Should the director have release time for directing the center?

- yes no

If so, how much? _____

28. In your department, whom does the writing center director report to? _____

