

Appendix A

True Confessions of High School Writing Center Directors

The following pages speak for themselves. Each director responds honestly from personal experience. I have included only some of the answers to my interview questions in order to avoid redundancy. Although the author of each response remains anonymous, I give credit to the following directors for their candid answers and suggested readings: Elizabeth Ackley, Indian Hills High School; Rosa Bhakuni, Kenmore High School; Barbara Brooks, Pattonville High School; Carol Lefelt, Highland Park High School; Amy Levin, Scarsdale High School; Betty Barbara Sipe, Mt. Lebanon High School; Sharon Sorenson, Central High School; Pat Stoddart, Logan High School; Jim Upton, Burlington Community High School; Leslie Wilson, Homewood-Flossmoor High School; and Kim Zupec, Warren Township High School.

What was the hardest part of getting your writing lab/center started?

Convincing the appropriate people, the superintendent and the school board, of the need for a writing lab. In addition, funding for equipping a writing lab and for the salary of an additional staff member proved essential.

Convincing the high school faculty and staff that the writing lab is a worthwhile project needing their support, and that it would not threaten their teaching techniques nor their approach to writing.

Getting administrators and other staff members to understand the concept and logistics of how it could work.

What was the easiest part?

Getting the kids into the lab. After a bit of coaxing, we have recruited many faithful attendees.

Working with the tutors themselves—they understand the non-directive approach.

Witnessing the student tutor-to-tutee relationship; the one-to-one rapport was almost automatic.

Did you have any unusual experiences?

I was surprised at the politics involved in starting a new project within a school system. Benefiting students is not the principal category by which projects get funded and supported. I was also surprised that teachers were threatened by the establishment of a writing lab. Many thought it would bring more work for them and that staff in the writing lab would judge their performance teaching writing, their writing assignments, and their knowledge of the latest theories of composition.

What would you recommend to new directors? Please include any physical, mental, emotional, inspirational recommendations.

A paragraph is too small to make these kinds of recommendations. The hurdles are unbelievable—jealousy from those who didn't come up with the idea, cynicism from those who never want to try anything new, frustration from those who are eager to use the facilities but find scheduling impossible, exhaustion on the part of the person responsible for working with several hundred students per week and maintaining the records to provide continuity, antagonism from administrators who don't want to be bothered with scheduling. Rewards? Only from the dozens of students whose eyes light up with understanding.

Physical stamina—when working in the lab, the teacher must be mobile. Mentally alert—each student has a different need, at times a different assignment, so you must be able to think of new ideas quickly. Willingness to fight for the lab—always to be ready to try new advertisement for the lab. Realize there will be criticism of the lab—be ready to shoulder that criticism. Always keep in mind this is a worthwhile and fundamental service for the student. Be willing to try new ideas—absorb the needs of the students.

In addition to the readings, attend the NWCA workshops, visit as many centers as possible, be sure to design a center to meet the needs of your particular institution, constantly evaluate and assess goals of the center. Cultivate the friendship of at least one other person who is as interested in the center as you are; you will need someone to share frustrations, failures and successes. You *must* maintain patience and a sense of humor. Maintain a journal about writing lab professional and personal experiences; it is good therapy and a needed reference for future use.

What makes the first year different from the second?

You don't have any mistakes to correct, you don't really know *how* the center will work, you are setting precedents in policy, you're *proving* the concept.

Procedures have to be developed, monitored, and revised. You have to develop a core of interested students and teachers. You have to set up channels of communication among teachers, counselors, students, tutors, and others.

Do you have any practical advice?

Keep individual and collective records. Public relations is very important!

Always focus on the positive gains students make. Send thank you notes to faculty who have requested presentations and to faculty who allow students to come to the writing center during their class time. Don't let the centers become a hangout for students who just want to miss another class.

If one is not fully committed to the concept of the center and is not willing to endure all of the hassles involved in developing one, do not attempt to do so. Also, do not believe that failures and successes are your personal responsibility.

How did you get other staff across the curriculum and the English department involved?

This is our biggest ongoing problem—we have a core of supportive teachers trained in writing across the curriculum, but others are still indifferent, skeptical, or even hostile. Our approaches included: my talking at faculty meetings and meeting with teachers during free periods; chats in faculty rooms; flyers in faculty mailboxes; posters around the school; items in newsletters; surveys; memos to teachers notifying them that their student has visited the writing center.

I volunteered to make presentations about the writing lab in classrooms. Once I visited classrooms, I volunteered to present topics such as: term papers, the new MLA documentation, and so on. Also, when we were getting very few students to tutor, I volunteered to “look over” (read “grade”) student essays for teachers. This way, I could suggest that the weak writers should be urged to attend the writing lab.

How did you get students involved as tutors and clientele?

Allow students to come during another class period. Get a teacher to bring his/her whole class in to demonstrate writing as a process (about four days). Many students return on their own with other assignments. Allow extension on papers if students make and keep a certain number of appointments.

Hand-picked tutors from my own classes and the classes of two colleagues who knew the kinds of students I needed. The first week

of school, tutors went to every English class and role-played situations and advertised the center. We have posters, announcements. Some teachers encouraged their students to go.

Tutors: I contacted students who were recommended by teachers. A few also asked to participate. Students are not, however, guaranteed a half credit and the opportunity to tutor. Instead, they must participate in training, and then selections are made.

Clientele: We made flyers for distribution in English classes. I spoke in some classes, freshmen seminars, and department meetings and arranged for publicity in the bulletin, the school newspaper, and the parent newsletter. Finally, I put out flyers on parents' night and asked counselors to distribute more in their meetings with parents. The tutors made posters.

How do you keep your lab/center going?

Pacify the librarians; snoop around to make sure the tutor is there—the one law which is always fulfilled is: *You can be sure a student will appear for tutoring if the tutor is not there*—keep the halls covered with posters; keep on the lookout for opportunities to say to teachers, "Oh, why not send your students to the writing center with that assignment?"; send my own students frequently.

Hard work, determination, enthusiasm, good public relations, and support from supervising principal and department chair.

What have been your biggest problems?

Too many responsibilities assigned to me as director because, "after all, she doesn't have regular classes assigned to her; she has the time."

Failure to have the center formally established. Indifference and resistance from staff members. Frustration at limited scope of operation of the center. Frustration at unwillingness of staff members to explore uses of the center.

Convincing reluctant members of the English department to use the facility. Convincing people that this facility is not only for the basic student. Fighting to maintain the original focus and purpose of the lab from changes administrators try to institute to meet outside requirements.

If you had little or no money, what equipment and supplies would you consider bare necessities? Why? Please list in order of importance.

To get a writing lab started, you need only the following: an administrator who is always supportive and offers his/her erudite

suggestions and help, and gives a lot of encouragement; a tutor or clinician who wants to help nurture in students an interest in writing by helping them to help themselves in the writing process; a non-threatening atmosphere; and one student who needs help to remediate a writing problem, to reinforce a strength, or to gain enrichment. Nothing more is needed.

An area designated as "The Writing Center" so students will always know where they can come for help. Tables and chairs so tutor and tutee can isolate themselves from the rest of the room. Some handbooks of usage and *The Bad Speller's Dictionary*.

A quiet place, tables and chairs, dictionary, paper and pencils, adequate lighting, file cabinet, and reference sources.

If you had all the money you could possibly want, what equipment and supplies would you purchase? Why? Please list in order of priorities.

A receptionist, computers and printers, telephone, Xerox machine, library of computer software, reference books for center personnel and reference books for students, time for visits to and sharings with those who have successful centers in operation, more release time to work on the center and writing activities, money for inservice programs on writing techniques for all departments, nice furniture, carpet, airconditioning.

I believe I would purchase a quality networking system, for I believe that with students being able to communicate with their peers in other localities, they would realize the importance of communicating clearly, specifically, effectively, and logically, and networking would add another cultural dimension to their young lives because they would meet and learn about demographics and living styles in our own United States.

I would also purchase a computer that permits a person to talk to the machine and see his words appear on a screen. Something tells me that this computer will do much toward improving speech communication in the future. It will improve not only oral but also written communication.