

## Editorials and Opinions

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If asked what my biggest concern is when running an effective tutoring center, my answer would be: getting students through our doors who want to receive tutoring. While I definitely want to spend more time training my student staff, as well as give them more professional development opportunities, it is getting students to actually *want* to be here that is my biggest issue.

To be honest, I would like to think that if we build it, they will come, but I know that is not the most effective way to convince students to use our services. Our job is not for the faint of heart; we must accept our responsibility to adapt to the current population of college students and find new ways to capture their attention. It may be easier to repeat what we did last year or the year before when it comes to marketing, hosting events, methods by which we contact instructors, etc. However, the truth of the matter is that we need to be innovative when it comes to engaging the students, as well as their instructors, in order to get them through the door and into our centers. We need to understand who these students are, their attitudes toward our centers, and their faculty members' perceptions of the services that we offer. The other part is not being complacent and saying "It is what it is," but rather making the continual effort to try new things and ways to change attitudes toward and perceptions of tutoring services.

## Winning over the Faculty

It is easy to sit behind a desk and email faculty who may or may not respond. I typically send faculty members information about my centers, the hours, and blurbs for them to include in their syllabi at the beginning of every semester. Faculty who are already advocates of my centers will respond; faculty who are not currently advocates of my centers will likely never respond. I could sit back and say I have done my part, but I would never be able to win anybody over that way. One of the most important lessons I have learned recently is we must learn to speak the language of the instructors and faculty members, as well as step outside our offices in order to interact with them.

When I first took over the position as a writing center coordinator, I sent out a survey to faculty that asked them if they recommended the writing center to their students and why or why not. Not many completed the survey, and the responses from those who did complete it indicated they did not truly understand the purpose of my center. I needed to find a way to communicate to them that purpose and how the writing center can be an effective tool for their students. After some brainstorming, I attempted to host a luncheon for the faculty under the guise of discussing student writing and crafting writing assignments. By basing the discussion on a topic of interest to the faculty members, I hoped some would show up for the luncheon, providing me the opportunity to speak a little bit about the purpose of the writing center and what occurs during a session with a writing tutor. To my chagrin, only one faculty member showed up; nevertheless, I proceeded with my presentation and the discussion with a smile on my face and made an effort later on to meet with that faculty member regularly. Four months later, he invited me to coffee with his colleagues, with whom I was then able to

talk to about the writing center; four months since then, I see the students of those faculty members more often than before. The small increase in traffic has been a stepping stone for the writing center, especially since it exists on a predominantly engineering-based campus.

The site supervisor for my math and science tutoring center participated in a research internship with physics and genetics instructors in the spring. Prior to the internship, the genetics instructor dissuaded her students from seeking tutoring at our tutoring center. The site supervisor and I did not understand the reason for this, even though we had tutors who had done well in the genetics course. After spending the semester with the genetics instructor, my site supervisor was able to demonstrate her knowledge and passion, as well as convey to the instructor the pedagogy practiced in our tutoring center. Since then, we have seen increased traffic flow from the genetics courses on campus because the faculty member is more open to sending her students to the tutoring center.

The examples above are two amongst a few of both successes and failures my staff and I have experienced when trying to persuade faculty to take a chance on our tutoring centers. Not everyone will have the opportunity to have a staff member be part of an internship with faculty who are traditionally opposed to their center. In that way, my staff and I have been lucky. Nevertheless, the lesson to be learned is that opportunities crop up in the most unexpected places. If my staff and I had been complacent and stayed in our offices, we would not have had the chance to change the minds of these instructors. Oftentimes we have had to be creative when coming up with methods by which we could communicate our ideas to these faculty members; other

times we have had to be persistent. What it all boils down to is we must actively find ways to talk to the faculty members about topics or endeavors that interest them – speak their language – and use that opportunity to discuss how the services our centers provide can help them, and help their students, in those areas.

If you're brainstorming strategies for ways to interact with faculty or get them to pay attention, here are some suggestions or things to keep in mind:

- Invite one, two, or a group to coffee to discuss a topic of interest to them.
- Host an informational luncheon prior to the start of the semester.
- Ask a college/department if you can attend their first all-faculty meeting of the semester and give a captivating presentation. Plan ahead, tell them what's in it for them, and don't make something up on the spot when you present.
- Find new and instructive ways to convey the purpose of your center that is relevant to the instructors. (In our subject area tutoring site, we create reports on frequency of student visits and the impact that has on their GPA in comparison to peers who did not receiving tutoring from our centers. We then arrange a one-on-one meeting with the instructor to discuss the report.)
- Offer to host events specifically for the instructor's students or course.
- Don't be discouraged if they don't show up. Keep trying.

### Engaging the Students

Faculty buy-in is an essential step in engaging students, both inside and outside of the classroom. With faculty support, our student staff visit classrooms and give presentations about the tutoring center and hand out fliers, and faculty will encourage their students to receive tutoring or require them to receive tutoring if students are falling

behind. From the writing center perspective, faculty support allows me and my tutors to provide workshops on specific topics during class time; from a subject area tutoring perspective, faculty are more willing to interact with the tutors and either provide a practice exam for or give the tutors guidance as to what to cover during a test review. It is during these moments that we are best able to effectively interact with the students.

While it would be easy to create a stock pile of generic workshops for classes that require writing, this would make the workshops impersonal and boring for the students. Every time I receive a request to conduct a workshop, I have a meeting with the faculty member who requested the workshop, find out what they want the workshop to achieve, and get a copy of the syllabus or an assignment description to which the workshop will be applicable. Although I will reuse certain elements of past workshops in a new workshop, I do my best to make the content I will cover relatable to the students, their course, and hopefully their intended career as well. The way I talk about the importance of mastering specific writing skills and how it is applicable to a future career is different when I address a freshman group of teachers in comparison to a senior group of engineers. The activities I incorporate – because making workshops interactive is vital – are also different: I may require the freshmen teachers to write a letter to an imaginary group of third grade students and their parents to demonstrate the importance of proper grammar and punctuation when establishing credibility; the senior engineers may be required to write a technical description of how to put together a bookshelf to both analyze and practice using active voice. All of this is time-consuming, and oftentimes stressful, but the more successful workshops I have conducted are the ones that are more personalized and relatable.

In my opinion, one of the least effective activities I require of my student staff is that they visit three or four classrooms at the start and end of the semester. These class visits are used to encourage students to visit the tutoring centers. It is ineffective for a few reasons: due to the human element of class visits, each tutor will say something a little different from their peers when talking about the tutoring center, despite the amount of coaching they are provided; students may get hit in multiple classes with the information and find it annoying; not all faculty have the time to spare in their classes for a class visit. In its place, we are in the process of writing and filming parodies of famous infomercials with content that relates directly to the tutoring center. The goal is for the infomercials to appeal to students' sense of humor, while simultaneously conveying accurate information regarding our centers. This is an example of one of those time-consuming projects that may or may not be more effective than what we are already doing; the important thing is that it is different, fun, and more likely to get students' attention. This medium can be shown in class, as well as uploaded on a course's online Blackboard shell, emailed to students, displayed on TVs around campus, and does not require student staff to be present.

When thinking about effective ways to interact with and engage students in the classroom, you may want to consider the following:

- Is it relevant to the student, the course, and their intended career path?
- Can you or the tutors visit on a day that includes peer editing or group work and mix in with the students as they attempt to complete an assignment?
- Are you appealing to their current reality? Are you using technology as part of the interaction process?

- Are the activities you conduct with the students productive, and is their purpose clear from the start?

### Being Visible

Another thing I have learned since becoming a coordinator of tutoring centers is failures are not failures per se. As with the example above of the faculty luncheon, having only one participant could be considered a failure, but interaction with that one participant had a ripple effect on future interactions, which recast it as a success. The same outlook can be applied to marketing initiatives around campus and attempts to engage students outside of the classroom. During National Day on Writing, tutors from my writing center sit at a table in the Student Union and try to get students to participate in a small, effortless writing activity that varies every year. Not many people participate, but the point is we are making ourselves visible. The same concept applies to any marketing strategy; so long as the activity is different, we are exerting an effort to keep the students engaged.

Partnering with other departments is a vital responsibility. Recently I was asked to design and facilitate a campus-wide scavenger hunt for freshmen students, in partnership with two different colleges. While this would not allow me to log any visits into any of my tutoring centers, the name of our centers were on the fliers and it was clear that the event was being co-sponsored. The event provided a valuable opportunity for me to help make my centers more visible amongst the freshmen. Since the event, nearly 17% of the participants have been seen in one of my centers; although the number seems small, we may not have seen those students at all this semester if the event hadn't occurred.

If you are not currently doing more than putting up fliers and updating your website in order to make your centers more visible on campus, consider some of the following initiatives:

- Partner with colleges, departments, or student organizations that are already very active on campus. Co-sponsor, -organize, or –run an event, and make sure your center’s contributions are visible to students who participate in the events.
- Conduct activities as part of your marketing initiatives, especially if you’re tabling in a public area like a student union.
- Host tutoring events in conjunction with major events on campus. For example, if there is traditionally a midnight or finals breakfast before finals week, provide tutoring close to the event location.
- Make your marketing big, relevant, yet inexpensive. My centers always chalk outside the student union with information about special hours and upcoming test reviews before midterms or finals week.

### Conclusion

There are a variety of ways to engage students and persuade faculty to change their views of tutoring centers. The suggestions I have made only scratch the surface, and the examples above are just some of the things I have tried to do to promote my centers on campus. What coordinators and administrators of tutoring services must remember, however, is that we are responsible for finding and trying new methods of talking to and interacting with instructors and their students in order to get those students through our doors.

Convincing students to use our services may feel like an uphill battle, especially since they are near graduation by the time they see a need for tutoring. Upon receiving that realization, a new student body is present on campus and we must learn how to cater to them; what worked for one population of students may not work again in a few years for a new population of students. I do my best to change my perspective and view it as a fun, exciting challenge that never lets my job seem routine. Sometimes I would rather sit behind my desk and write emails to students and faculty, but I remind myself every day that, despite how cliché it sounds, while the effort isn't easy, it is definitely worth it.