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Don't Knock the Hustle: HBCU Writing Center Life

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Abstract

Directing a Writing Studio without its own budget proves even more difficult when financial resources are limited for the entire campus. In this article, I show that by linking all activities to the University's goals, maximizing collaborative efforts both on and off campus, and collecting data strategically, my Writing Studio has been able not only to survive, but even thrive despite limited funding.

Introduction

This article is written for the writing center director who feels frustrated and hopeless. The director who has been told, "We value what you do, but there's just no money" for the umpteenth time. For the director whose writing center still exists in that small room in the basement, yet who knows that his/her tutors are helping to retain students one session at a time. In this article I outline several strategies, including aligning one's space with the goals of the institution, having multiple collaborative partners – in academic and student affairs – and establishing ties with other institutions and professional organizations; for it is still possible to run a successful writing center.

Background

It's been said by many economists that when the economy suffers, African Americans feel the effects more severely. Unemployment rates are higher, housing opportunities are more limited, and educational hardships are increased. With an economy in a slow recovery, many state institutions of higher learning have faced fiscal issues never seen before, including decreased budgets and difficult decisions of raising tuition to maintain quality education.

In the state of North Carolina, we have a governor that some say is launching an "all out assault on public education." Under his leadership, all sixteen universities in our state system faced a 5% budget cut for the 2013-2014 year, in addition to the 10-15% cut from the prior year (Henkel par. 1). Yet, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the same position often feel a stronger impact from those cuts. My institution, North Carolina Central University (NCCU), is the first public historically Black liberal arts institution in our nation with 8,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students.

How can a 5% cut can have such varying effects on campuses in the same system? During one administrative meeting, I learned that approximately 30% of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's operational budget comes from the state. The other 70% comes from grant money, donations, and outside sources. However, state money composes 61% of my university's budget, with only 39% coming from grants and external funders. Thus, because my institution is so dependent on the state for primary funding, a 5% decrease will be felt more. While teaching, research, and service are the major components of our functions, like most HBCUs, teaching takes precedence. Tenure/tenure-track faculty members at UNC-Chapel Hill may teach a lighter load with research as a higher priority; counterparts on my campus teach a heavier load wither loser, yet increasingly more demanding, research agendas.

It makes sense, then, that grant money generally is less prevalent on HBCU campuses because their teaching loads and do not support large-scale research efforts. HBCUs have historically been known for serving underrepresented groups in a setting that is challenging, yet values the individual; simultaneously, research is becoming of growing importance on many of our campuses. Unfortunately, teaching loads, committee and service requirements have not changed enough to let us delve into the scholarly activity required to obtain grants consistently. Ultimately, 5% hurts us more, as we face decisions that will likely affect quality of educational services.

With this last statement, the impact on student services, the concern for writing centers emerges. I have had quite a bit of contact with the other HBCU writing center directors in North Carolina through our NC HBCU Writing Centers Consortium. Even in better fiscal times, many of us shared struggles of affirming our existence. Being a writing center director in this context demands a new kind of leadership that includes being a visionary, a collaborator, and as I humorously, but seriously say, a “hustler.” At my institution, I have the title and responsibility of “leader,” but no autonomy. (Because I do not have any budget, my consultants are paid by seven campus sources.) In the remainder of this article, I share my most successful strategies for helping my Writing Studio not only survive, but thrive despite decreased fiscal support.

Before I became director in 2005, our Writing Studio was the Writing Center, located in the English Department, both physically and administratively, and very few students and/or faculty knew of its existence. The staff consisted of English M.A. students. They received no formal training, kept few student records, and the door to the space was primarily closed. It was estimated by the previous director they held 200 tutorial sessions that academic year (2004-2005).

Fast forward eight years, and we are physically in a new space (centrally located with more technology), housed administratively under a campus-wide unit, conduct formal training session each semester, have a Composition Theory and Pedagogy class that is required of the English M.A. consultants, are composed of an interdisciplinary staff that includes one professional consultant and undergraduate consultants, and we offer classroom presentations, campus-wide workshops, and online tutorial sessions. In 2012-2013 we made approximately 2,000 student contacts.

Achieving this level of growth is rewarding, though it has not been an easy task given the institutional and state fiscal contexts. My role as leader is redefined daily and causes me to take on responsibilities that directors with more stable budgets do not have to consider. There are few tasks that are “beneath” me if the end result will equal more support for the Studio.

Strategies for Success

Strategy #1: Tie All Efforts to University Goals

In every document where I ask for resources, I link our initiatives to some university goal(s). Two goals from our university’s Strategic Plan with which we can most closely align are the following:

- North Carolina Central University will enhance the intellectual climate by expanding productivity in the areas of teaching, learning, research, and service. (Teaching, Learning, and Research)
- North Carolina Central University will create and sustain an environment of accountability and engagement that will facilitate and promote access, persistence, and success for all enrolled students. (Retention and Graduation)

We have interpreted “[enhancing our] intellectual climate” to mean that through our services, we help students become more aware of their own learning (writing) processes, thus becoming better students. Our data that supports this idea includes charting the number of repeat clients (student writers who visit us more than once) and tracking the number of students who make appointments in advance (vs. walk-ins). In 2012-13, 38.4% of our students were repeat clients (this is up from 28% in 2008-2009). In that same year, 86.4% of our students made appointments in advance, as compared to 30% in 2005-2006. We believe these statistics show students are making conscious decisions about their work, such as

preparing in advance, and realizing that the more they practice writing the better they will become. These student behaviors point to a change in the intellectual culture.

As is the case with many institutions, funding no longer is based solely on enrollment, but also on retention and graduation rates. The latter University goal mentioned above speaks directly to increasing our retention and graduation rates, and we feel we contribute greatly to that. This is not a new concept, for many writing center directors have long believed that our work helps to retain students. In his article "Writing Centers: The Student Retention Connection," Gary Griswold makes this argument by building upon the ideas of Spady, Tinto, and other retention scholars to say that because so much retention literature focuses on students feeling connected and committed to an institution, writing centers are a natural fit because we help instill confidence in students and help those who may otherwise feel unsure of their ability become successful (14); moreover, we help them with skills that are transferrable to any discipline. The problem is that unfortunately, most of these retention arguments are anecdotal, rarely providing hard numbers to support the claims. In her article, "Encouraging or Alarming?" Jill Frey shares how she communicated to her administration that her writing center helped support her university's mission. She explains how merely giving numbers (in terms of students served) is not enough to justify her existence. Rather, she digs deeper to demonstrate the impact of her staff's work (248, 250). Similarly, I decided to collect data that speaks directly to retention and graduation:

- **Retention:** The NCCU first-year retention rate from Fall 2012-Fall 2013 is approximately 73%. In comparison, the 2012-2013 first-year retention rate for students who visited the Writing Studio is 84%.
- **Cumulative GPA:** The average cumulative GPA of all first-year students for the Spring 2013 semester was 2.684. In comparison, the average cumulative GPA for all first-year students who visited the Writing Studio in 2012-2013 was 3.249.
- **Course Passage Rates:** During the fall semester especially, our most concentrated group of clients is freshman students taking one of the three first-year composition courses. Many of those students come for multiple visits throughout the semester.
 - Of those ENG 1050 students who visited the Writing Studio in Fall 2012, 90% of them passed the course with a "C" or better.
 - Of those ENG 1110 students who visited the Writing Studio in Fall 2012, 90% of them passed the course with a "C" or better.
 - Of those ENG 1210 students who visited the Writing Studio in Fall 2012, 89% of them passed the course with a "C" or better.
- **Mid-Term D/F Students:** Of our Writing Studio clients who were on the D/F mid-term list in Fall 2012 and enrolled in "writing intensive" courses, 81.3% of them saw their final grade increase by one.

We understand we are not the sole reason for student success, but, we believe there is a directed correlation between the two.

Strategy #2: Create Alliances Across Campus

On so many campuses, colleagues operate in silos. They perceive collaboration as a threat to their own identity on campus. Yet because I lack a budget, my only way of surviving is collaborating intentionally and effectively. Working together regarding publicity and resources helps ensure I am satisfying multiple stakeholders.

- **University College.** This is the academic home for our freshmen and sophomores. Its mission is to "ensure student success" by providing quality advising and academic activity so students do not get "lost" before entering their major disciplines junior year. Administratively, the Writing Studio reports to this unit. While we serve students from all classifications, we do see a high number of first and second year students (64% during the fall semesters). Many University College advisors require their students to come if they are struggling in their composition courses. While in past years we had our own separate workshop series, now all of our writing workshops count as University College Student Engagement sessions. This has increased our attendance and made marketing efforts more effective.
- **QEP Office.** All institutions that are a part of SACSCOC, or the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges, must create a QEP, or Quality Enhancement Plan, to maintain accreditation. Each institution has the autonomy to create its own QEP theme, but it must show that all campus members are focused on obtaining the same skills set. Our QEP theme is Communicating to Succeed, and it focuses on oral and written communication. Understandably then, much of our work in the Writing Studio helps to spread the mission of the QEP; thus, this office funds the majority of our operating expenses, staff pay, and professional activities. We also collaborate with this unit on all campus workshops

and have created a new daytime “mini” QEP workshop series. These workshops are distinct from the aforementioned sessions in that they occur in the daytime, are shorter in length, and targeted toward specific writing concerns.

- *Residential Life.* Often, many of us focus on academic means to reach our students. Yet, we also must consider student affairs. Recently, I met with the assistant director of Residential Life. She shared that they are now focusing on academic activities for campus residents (rather than social and health workshops.) All Resident Assistants (RAs) must plan and execute at least one workshop per month. Rather than create separate workshops, we arranged for residents to attend our workshops and receive credit. It is beneficial to all because students gain valuable information, that is one less workshop the RAs have to plan, and our workshop attendance numbers increase. Similarly, the RAs also must decorate bulletin boards in their hall each month. I now send a PDF of our flyers to them and again, everyone wins because we appreciate the publicity and they appreciate having less work. Lastly, we offer tutoring services in the residence halls on the weekends to enhance student convenience.
- *Community Service Office.* Undergraduate students at my institution must complete 120 hours of community service as a graduation requirement. Because funding is low, I reached out to this office and created an agreement so undergraduate students can volunteer as peer writing consultants and receive community service hours. This has been a great option because it allows us to hire more consultants than we would have otherwise.
- *Shepard Library.* Several years ago, we began partnering with our campus library. We hold our evening and weekend tutorial sessions in the library for safety reasons. We also partner with the library on some campus workshops, such as “Give Credit Where Credit Is Due: Documentation and Avoiding Plagiarism.” Most recently, we had a “train-the-trainer” session where library staff trained us on the various databases available for all disciplines so we could better help students. (While my staff is somewhat diverse academically, most are English majors; thus, I want them to feel comfortable exploring multiple databases when working with a variety of students.)
- *Ongoing Professional Development.* I want faculty, staff, and administrators to know that we are serious about the work we do. Therefore, we partner with several offices to provide ongoing training. For example, our Human Resources team comes regularly to talk about customer service, our Counseling Center staff shares how to identify students in emotional distress, and our Student Disabilities Office staff presents on how to tutor disabled students.

All of these collaborations help to increase the credibility of the work we do in the Writing Studio while simultaneously emphasizing the need of each unit as we work toward student success.

Strategy #3. Create Alliances Off Campus

Since becoming Director of our Writing Studio in 2005, I have served on the executive board of the International Writing Center Association (IWCA) and Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) for multiple years. In addition, I have been active on the state level with our North Carolina Writing Center Network (NCWCN) and our North Carolina HBCU Writing Center Consortium. My purpose in serving in these capacities is two-fold: First as a new writing center director, I benefitted immensely from the wisdom and experience of other directors. I learned techniques from other institutions to bring back to my Writing Studio, and I connected with colleagues with whom I could exchange ideas. Second, serving on these boards signals to my administrators I am dedicated to my discipline and continuing my own professional development. It is my hope that as my administrators see I am respected by my own colleagues around the nation, their perspective of me on campus would improve. While the professional alliances unfortunately have yet to turn into my having a budget, I do feel I have gained the respect of many colleagues on campus, which in turn has led them to collaborate more willingly.

Strategy #4: Keep Track of Students You Must Turn Away Because Consultants are Engaged in Tutorial Sessions

In 2012-2013 we turned away approximately 270 students and the year prior, we turned away approximately 220 students. I diligently document these statistics and place them in all reports. Upper-level administrators very much dislike that we are turning away students who are seeking help – especially since student retention is so important to our University. While this approach has not equaled a windfall of funding, in some instances a few miscellaneous dollars have trickled my way.

Conclusion

The work of writing centers is far from over, and the search for our due respect continues. On many campuses, writing center directors must be willing to take on leadership roles that go far beyond a job

description. Yet the information presented here shows that progress can be made and students can be greatly helped, even during less-than-ideal times. Moreover, because our ultimate goal is to obtain autonomy and true worth on our campuses, future research could demonstrate how these strategies can be enhanced and a budget ultimately established. Creating strong ties with specific units and being smart with data collection are effective strategies to use no matter what the fiscal situation may be. When we are willing to work a little harder for the sake of our students, the rewards for both our clients and student consultants are priceless.

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