

1 High School Writing Centers: An Introduction

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Throughout the country, high school writing labs/centers are functioning independently. Some are failing, many are successful, but most are unaware of what other high school writing labs/centers are doing and how they are doing it. Their basic sources of information are books and pamphlets that describe different college and university writing labs/centers, written by college and university professors and/or writing lab/center directors. Although their purposes and philosophies may be similar, the problems in a high school environment are entirely different. For example, tight schedules of classes and the availability of students are only two such problems. Another problem is staffing a center without funds or only with limited funding. Contractual problems present another unique dilemma. As Ellen Brinkley states, "Unlike their college counterparts, secondary teachers usually don't have office hours or classes staggered on alternating days. Instead, they are locked into a schedule that allows precious little, if any, time for individual conferences with students about writing. . . . A writing center can provide that time" ("Roundtable," 1987: 68-69).

I had proposed a writing center at my school in 1981 and found that there was very little information on high school writing centers. Therefore, several articles, including "One-to-One to Write" (Reigstad, Matsuhashi, and Luban 1978) and "Why Don't They Like English?" (Holden 1981), became important in the planning of my school's writing center. The need for models, a supportive network, and collaboration became even more evident over the years. Schools from New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Virginia sent teachers who were planning to open writing labs/centers to visit our little facility, which I was modifying constantly as space, equipment, and staff improved. Still, every year at the NCTE Annual Convention, I have been overwhelmed by the number of people who need those models,

support, and collaboration. In 1986 I decided to attempt to locate and survey as many high school writing center directors as possible, so I contacted Joyce Kinkead, Utah State University, for a copy of the Writing Center Association mailing list and Muriel Harris, Purdue University, for the subscription list of *Writing Lab Newsletter*. As membership cochair of the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, I also had access to our mailing list. Unfortunately, many people on these lists use their home addresses, so I have inadvertently received several responses from college writing center directors and overlooked names of potential high school writing center directors. On the other hand, some of the respondents have given me names of other writing lab/center directors to include in the survey.

I have distributed over 270 surveys and received responses from more than 100 people, with 70 percent indicating that they either have a high school writing lab/center or wish to start one. Through correspondence with several of the respondents, I decided to write this book, having real high school writing center directors share their experiences. The book deals with problems and frustrations, shares successes and failures, and offers suggestions. In general, it addresses the issue of establishing and maintaining a successful high school writing lab/center. It also provides college and university writing lab/center directors with insight into what the high schools are doing. Perhaps high school tutors who have already been trained may become college writing center tutors, too.

Since the time of my original concept for the book and the subsequent approval of the prospectus by NCTE, I have revised my thinking and rearranged some chapters. I wanted to begin the book with the section entitled "Getting Started," but I did not wish to start or end with theory—we have all read those books! Therefore, I asked a good friend, Bill Speiser, if he would be willing to carry on a dialogue with me in the first chapter of that section. Since we have been commiserating for more than five years about writing across the curriculum and writing labs/centers, I felt that our experiences in trying to establish and maintain facilities at our neighboring high schools in New Jersey would be pertinent. Anyone who has started a writing lab/center can relate to the personal experiences shared in this dialogue; anyone planning to start a writing lab/center should listen carefully to our voices. Many grueling days had been spent editing over forty pages transcribed from the original taped dialogue so that the writers, too, could feel the sense of focus and inspiration for the successful futures of their own writing labs/centers. So, the book begins with a mixture of joys and sorrows, and then moves on to Amy Levin's informative

chapter that describes the importance of considering your individual school's philosophy and goals when deciding the purpose and objectives of your own writing lab/center. Amy had researched and visited several writing centers before she established her facility in New York. The next chapter is a truly collaborative effort that attempts to describe the location and design of the space within the writing lab/center. Dick Allen, of Red Bank Regional High School, provided assistance with the writing center layout drawings that were produced by computer aided drafting (CAD). The drawings had been sent to me by several directors. If I were planning a facility now, these diagrams would be extremely important; as one who has a facility, I find them supportive since so many of the designs are similar, though they were created independently of each other.

At this point the reader needs a chapter on staffing the writing center, whether the staff is composed of professionals or peer tutors. Harriet Marcus, who wrote one of the first *English Journal* articles on high school writing centers, shares her experiences at a private school, Oak Knoll, in Summit, New Jersey, while I include information from my survey to describe how centers staffed by faculty actually function. Although Oak Knoll is a small, private school, their credit-bearing course for peer tutors is similar to one offered at larger public schools such as Indian Hill (see chapter 8). Other schools, like Red Bank Regional, can only offer status, college recommendations, and volunteer time for scholarships or congressional awards to peer tutors. After the discussion of staffing, Carol Lefelt and Barbara Brooks explain how to schedule peer tutors or professional staff within the rigid structure of the high school schedule. Scheduling becomes a complex problem in any high school. These two writing lab/center directors share personal experiences to prepare new directors for the adaptation of a schedule that functions in their own schools. Their practical advice and experience are invaluable to directors. Finally, Lil Brannon shares her expertise as a consultant by describing the role of a consultant in establishing a writing lab/center. School districts that provide funds for consultants will discover the advantages of having an objective expert to help create and maintain an effective schoolwide facility.

The second section of the book, "Functioning," gives the reader an opportunity to learn from the experiences of directors who have been particularly successful in keeping their writing labs/centers functioning quite well. "If I had only known then what I know now" is the cry of many who have failed and many of us who continue to struggle each year. This section gives the reader a chance to know *now!* Readers will profit from the discussions by Anne Wright and Elizabeth Ackley,

who know how to train their respective staffs. These two very busy ladies are totally involved in their work, yet they found the time to write excellent chapters that tell the reader specifically how they go about training a staff. These narratives offer personal experiences with the training of staff that will prove valuable, whether your staff consists of professionals or peer tutors. Even if directors are called "clinicians" or "coaches" instead of "directors," and even if students answer to "tutee," "client," or "writer," the basic roles are the same. Directors must feel comfortable with the terminology and the training program that works for them.

Section two continues with a discussion of our student clients. Since a staff is useless in an empty room, I asked Jim Upton to share his public relations efforts for getting students to attend a writing center. An enthusiastic soul, Jim offers a variety of suggestions to fill the room. Since all writing labs/centers differ according to school philosophy and goals, Ellen Brinkley, one of the originators of the Madeira High School facility, which was selected an NCTE Center of Excellence, shares her experiences with a variety of students. Then, Sharon Sorenson, a director who created a unique lab with cassette stations, explains ways in which she assists students. Her method proves successful in her laboratory situation. Other writing labs/centers have found techniques to encourage students to become more independent writers and thinkers using trained staff or peer tutors. Many high school writing labs/centers have discovered that staff's and student's working together in a one-to-one or collaborative situation proves successful. Other centers use CAI in ways similar to those used by Sorenson with her audio cassettes (see chapter 18).

From my survey, I discovered two things that must be well managed in order for a writing lab/center to survive: good supervision and organized record keeping. The next two chapters describe both of these. Elizabeth Ackley's honest narrative and Anne Wright's accurate explanation clear up many misconceptions about both concerns.

The third section, "Computers and Other Equipment," details the equipment and computer use of any facility. Administrators want to know what equipment you *need* and what you *want*. The very organized Anne Wright helps us get through that situation. The ever popular concern with computers also enters the picture. Although the emphasis in Anne Wright's essay seems to be on computers, it really describes interaction; the comments are practical from a real situation. The majority of respondents to my survey have computers in their writing labs/centers. Thus, I called upon my own knowledge of the role of the computer in the writing center, plus Pat Stoddart's expertise using

computers as writers' aids and Betty Barbara Sipe's personal experience with computer assisted instruction. Whether directors have already purchased computers or are just beginning to select them, they need to hear how computers can be used to fit the philosophy of a particular writing lab/center. These four essays respond to that concern.

The fourth section of the book, "Wider Horizons," presents a collection of narratives that describe ways in which the high school writing lab/center can cooperate and collaborate across the curriculum—with nearby colleges and throughout the community. Henry Luce, director of a college writing center, describes the advantages to both institutions if they do collaborate. Using specific examples from her own writing lab/center, Barbara Brooks shares specific activities that work to offer writing assistance to students in all subject areas. Next, Rosa Bhakuni describes the community connections to her writing lab/center, and John Neil Graham explains the sensitive relationship between his middle school students and the community members of a nursing home. Bhakuni and Graham share some very special experiences. From reading these two discussions, directors may discover connections that would work in their own communities.

Finally, I could not resist calling one of the appendixes, "True Confessions of High School Writing Center Directors." Throughout the development of this manuscript, I received phone calls from contributors who shared horror stories as well as fantasies. High school writing center directors are a unique breed akin to their college and university colleagues. In order to find out specifically what each has experienced, I sent them copies of the interview questions. The selected responses reflect their collective and individual personalities, and so I felt it important to end with their voices rather than just my own.

As I stated at the beginning, there seems to be a need for some sort of network or support system for those who have high school writing labs/centers, both successful and unsuccessful, and for those who wish to establish them. Therefore, I have included a directory of high school writing labs/centers at the end of this book so that readers may contact nearby schools for more information and assistance. This list includes only those schools that responded to my survey, although there are now many more functioning centers. It is mainly a contact list. I hope that this book will be as helpful to all its readers as it has been and continues to be for me.

References

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