14 Keeping Records in the Writing Lab

Anne Wright
Hazelwood West High School
Hazelwood, Missouri

"How many students came to the writing lab last year? How many hours did you spend actually tutoring? Are those computers really being used?" These are the kinds of questions we anticipated being asked when we started our writing lab at Hazelwood West High School. By anticipating the need to justify our existence with records and by supplying them before we were asked, we have been able to maintain our lab and add new services.

Occasionally there are times during a particular day when no students are in the lab, so a principal who walks in during one of those periods is likely to wonder whether the money we spend on the facility and staff is earning an adequate return. Fortunately, we have the records to prove that we serve a sufficient number of students to be cost effective. Of course, we know that real effectiveness is not represented by numbers but by the availability and quality of a service never before offered to our students. But these days, when accountability is the byword, we have to offer concrete evidence.

We begin our record keeping when a student walks in the door. Students are supposed to bring referral forms from the teachers who sent them to the writing lab. This form, which is on NCR paper, has the student's name, teacher's name, course title, room number, class hour, description of the assignment the student is to work on, date, and time the student left the classroom. At the end of the hour, the lab staff member fills in the lower portion of the form with a summary of the session. There is also a place to check whether the assignment was completed or not, and, if not, how many more class periods may be needed to complete it. We file the originals of these forms in student folders, which we keep for every student. The second copy is returned to the classroom teacher at the end of the school day. If the student needs to return for another session, we staple a pass to the form so

the teacher will not have to bother with that the next time. Now that the lab has been open for enough years that the students are well aware of its existence and what it can offer, we have many self-referrals who simply come in with hall passes from the teachers who excused them. In these cases, we do not fill out referral sheets.

When students first come to the writing lab, a staff member hands them an information sheet to fill out, asking for name, parents' names, address, phone number, class referred or excused from, and grade level. At the bottom of the sheet, there is a place for the staff member who works with the student to fill out after the session. We mark the kind of work we do with the students as remedial, enrichment, developmental, or contest (if they come to find information about writing contests or to seek help in entering one). We also indicate what kind of paper the student is writing: paragraph, multiparagraph, research, critical paper, or other kind.

While students fill out the top portion of the form, we write their names on the tab of a file folder and on a sheet we call the *Daily Log.* On this, in addition to the student's name, we record the name of the referral teacher and the class period. The major portion of the page is divided into three sections, one labeled *Date,* one *Problems Worked On,* the third *Specific Recommendations for Work During Next Session.* The lab staff member fills in this section after working with the student. Both the information sheet and the daily log are filed in the student's folder, which we keep in a file cabinet. Each time that student returns to the lab, we update the daily log.

Originally, we used the names and addresses to send letters to the parents of every new student who came to the writing lab. We were offering a new service, and we wanted the parents to know about it. Now that we are in our fourth year of operation, we have discontinued that practice, not because we have decided it wasn't a sound idea and excellent publicity for the school, but simply because the paper work grew beyond our ability to keep up with it. Even though we had a form letter on NCR paper (we kept one copy in the student's folder), we still wrote personal messages on each one; if we had five or six students per hour for several class periods, the letters became a real burden. The letters occasionally brought telephone calls from parents who thanked us for helping their sons or daughters or asked for more information about the lab. As I write this, recalling the responses we received, I wonder if we shouldn't reinstate the practice of sending letters in spite of the time problem because they did seem to result in positive parental attitudes.

In our first year of operation, we asked students to fill out evaluation forms before they left the lab, but we had to abandon that idea quickly because there simply wasn't enough time to do the evaluation. Now

we occasionally give teachers some evaluation forms and ask them to have these filled out by any students who have been to the lab. We also give teachers evaluation forms at the end of each year.

In our lab, we also keep "sign-up" and "sign-in-and-out" sheets. When teachers know they are going to send students to the lab or when they want to bring a whole class, they sign up ahead of time on weekly sign-up sheets we keep just inside the door for their convenience. If students come in who have not been previously signed up, we add their names to the sign-up sheet. We keep these sheets on file so that, if there is ever any question about a student's having been in the lab or about the accuracy of our reports, or even about one or two teachers dominating the use of the lab, we have our records to examine. We also ask individual students who come in to sign their names on another sheet and write the time they come in and the time they will leave; this way, teachers can check on whether the students were here when they were supposed to be. This is unneccessary, of course, when a teacher brings a whole class to the lab.

In order to be able to classify the kinds of information we gather from students, we use the PFS File, Sort, and Report software programs. During the first two years, we printed monthly reports to give to teachers, the communications department chair, and the principal. For the last two years, we have just printed semester reports. No one seemed especially interested in the monthly reports, and preparing them took time away from working with students.

Our reports contain the following information:

> Total students tutored individually _____
> Total students who came to the lab with a whole class _____
> Total students who were in classes for which the lab staff did classroom presentations on how to write a particular kind of paper _____
>
> Total individual tutoring hours _____
> Total hours with students in whole classes
> (the number of students in each class multiplied by the number of hours the class spent in the lab) _____
> Total clock hours in classroom demonstrations _____
>
> The above three categories are added to get:
> total hours with students _____
>
> Number of contest entries _____

Then we break those data down into a chart that lists the teachers who sent students to the lab and what department they are in, the number of students they sent, and how many hours the staff spent tutoring students for each teacher who is listed.

Next, we categorize how many students came from each course and how many total hours we tutored students from those courses. Then we list how many students were categorized as remedial, developmental, enrichment, or contest. Another way we group the statistics is by the number of students in each grade who have been to the writing lab. We also list the teachers' classes for which we have provided classroom demonstrations. We list teachers who have brought whole classes to the lab and how many total hours we spent with them.

The last part of our report consists of listings of the names of students who have used the writing lab. We categorize these names in several different ways: by the referral teacher and the total hours spent in the lab; by the grade level; by classification as to remedial, developmental, enrichment, or contest; by student names with referral teachers and number of hours spent in the lab; by courses students have been referred from.

Finally, we print a list of all teachers who referred students to the lab and how many tutoring hours were spent with each teacher's students.

In addition to these records, we also have the usual kind of library card records of which teachers have checked out books from our professional library. (We maintain a collection of approximately seventy-five books and other kinds of resource materials on teaching writing.) We also keep a bibliography of these materials on a computer disk and update it as we buy new resource materials or books. We print this bibliography once or twice a year to distribute to teachers.

To help the staff keep its perspective on how well we are fulfilling our mission, we use all of the information we gather through the means I've described to write a year-end report each spring. We attach to this report a list of goals for the next year. We give copies to our department chair and principal, but these reports serve mainly to help us take a critical look at our program and see where we need to make changes and what additional services we need to offer.

This process of record keeping must sound formidable, but it really doesn't take too much time away from working with students in the lab. Once the routine is established, the process works smoothly. We have one English teacher and a teacher assistant in the writing lab all day, and the teacher assistant does most of the record keeping. Our assistant happens to be very efficient and fast; maybe the task would seem more intimidating if we didn't have such good help. But accurate, complete record keeping is worth the time and effort for programs such as writing labs because, if a money crunch comes along, such programs will be the first ones considered for cutting.[1] If you have

the records to prove the value of your program, you are much more likely to keep that program.

Notes

1. As Sharon Sorenson has observed: "Without the aide, the writing lab's smooth operation would never become a fact. Chaos, perhaps, but not a smooth operation. What she [Sharon's lab aide] did, allowed us to have meaningful instructional time with students during every lab visit semester after semester. What she did allowed us to have suitable materials when none existed. What she did allowed us to develop the public relations we needed to survive. . . .

"An aide offers significant services at a cost considerably reduced from that of the lab instructor. Sure, the lab instructor can complete those student records. Sure, the lab instructor can make copies of those records and forward them to the teachers involved each day. Sure, the lab instructor can type and duplicate and collate and file and sort. Sure, the lab instructor can prepare, copy, and complete menial public relations responsibilities. But that's expensive clerical help. And it's expensive in two ways: not only is a fully licensed, experienced English teacher paid too much to be a clerk, but the time for which she is being paid is not being spent doing what she does most effectively: teaching students. Sure, most teachers can type, file, collate, and staple. Heaven knows they do enough of it. But if a lab instructor is responsible for the entire operation of a lab for an entire school, then an aide is a must. She is a must both physically and financially, both for students and staff. It's obvious what happens without her. Either the lab operation is, if not chaos, then seriously inefficient, or the lab instructor must devote major blocks of time doing what an aide could do far more inexpensively. And either case is to the detriment of the lab's single purpose, to tutor students on an individual basis.

"When the response is, 'We can't afford an aide,' the reply ought to be, 'We can't afford *not* to have an aide.' "