WLN

A Collaborative Directorship: A Survey-Based Exploration of Writing Center Advisory Board Practices

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Writing center (WC) advisory boards—however they are named, staffed, and/or supported—can play a strong role in supporting directors, developing campus perceptions, and promoting value to stakeholders. However, such boards are rarely mentioned in writing center scholarship. Although advisory boards are often discussed in conference conversations (such as the 2014 Southeastern Writing Center Association-Kentucky Directors' Day, where this project began), there has been no systematic investigation of board purposes, tasks, or implementation practices nor of such issues as structures in relation to institution type and size, concerns of authority and control, opportunities for creativity and community building, etc. In this article, we examine WC advisory board practices and infrastructures via the results of surveys distributed through major WC and related listservs in 2014 and 2017. We reflect on our findings with a focus on opportunity for development. As WCs are continually moving beyond their own spaces to support students, faculty, and even administrators, we hope our study promotes new ways of thinking about collaborative moves required for WC growth and systemic change.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT (OR, DON'T) WHEN WE TALK ABOUT ADVISORY BOARDS

Writing or learning center advisory boards exist in a variety of locations, from smaller schools to comprehensive universities in the United States and abroad, and are organized in different ways. Based on our work, we found that many involve faculty from across disciplines; others are formed, top-down, by administrators with strong roles. Some advisory boards, such as Harvard's, are entirely student run. The diversity in arrangement speaks to the range in possibilities that exists in the field. However, when we

queried listservs and corresponded with colleagues at other institutions, many professionals noted that they knew of no field-specific studies that explained the processes of establishing and sustaining a productive advisory board. Terms such as "advisory board" or "steering committee" come up scant on CompPile-, MLA-, and WC-related databases.

Combing the *WLN* archives for the earliest mention of such a board led us to a 1996 list of promotional ideas, including "creat[ing] a center advisory committee with a representative from each academic division" (Bell 14). A 1998 book review of *The Writing Center Resource Manual* speaks to the need to educate a cross-campus advisory board of best assessment practices, given the differences in academic discourses (Vaught-Alexander 11). In a 2006 article detailing criteria that will help a rotating directorship function effectively for a WC, Ron Scheer also captures what an advisory board could offer any WC:

> A group of tenured faculty members who value writing as a key component of student-centered learning can do much to provide credibility, leverage, and continuity. They can represent the interests of the writing center in faculty governance and cross-disciplinary committees. More important, they can speak for the writing center when the administration is making decisions affecting its resources. (8)

An active board can be integral during campus and curricular change. As Joe Essid noted about the board for the center he directs at the University of Richmond, working in collaboration with other campus members via an active and engaged board helps "maintain the Center's reputation for quality" (4) by highlighting the required tutor pedagogy course for campus stakeholders outside those already involved. These efforts help Essid's center play a role in larger campus discussions, "... to define a [tutor training] curriculum that is not external, but integrated with best practices and pedagogy" (5).

Much of the conversation that describes the practices of advisory boards could be defined as gray literature—produced internally and often hard to find or use despite its potential. As we searched various institutions for advisory board documentation, we stumbled upon a helpful guide to the ways to establish a vision for a board, clarify activities, and determine meeting agendas and membership, which Alan Craig developed at Georgia Perimeter College. As helpful as this and other similar documents were in our own initial discussions and respective initiatives of our board, we knew we wanted to cast a broad and systematic net to see

how such work is done and how such work yields rewards and challenges.

WHAT WE WANTED TO KNOW: OUR SURVEY

Using a 34-question survey distributed in fall 2014 and again in spring 2017 via such academic listservs as *WCenter*, *WPA*, and the Small Liberal Arts College Writing Program Administrators listserv (*SLAC-WPA*), we examined how advisory board relationships—with colleagues, administrators, staff members, and/or students—can reflect a range of institutional values as well as sites for collaboration. In fall 2014, of our 98 respondents, 22 reported that they had advisory boards. In spring 2017, of our 142 responses, 22 again reported having advisory boards, indicating that the use of such boards is not a growing trend. Our entire survey is housed at www.surveymonkey.com/r/WritingCenterDirectors. Highlighting core threads of the survey seems best for this article. After asking participants to offer some background (school and center/staff size, title/rank, years of experience, access to course reduction for writing center administrators, student population, and WC usage), we inquired whether or not their WC had anything akin to an advisory board that linked work to other campus and/or community members. If so, for how long, and why was it formed? To learn as much as possible about localized practices, we offered distinct choices ("generate institutional interest, participation, or support" or "WAC intentionality," for example) and open response opportunities. We also asked if this board was mandated by anyone outside the WC and how members are chosen and viewed as qualified. Specifically, we asked survey participants to define and holistically assess the tasks of their respective board (outreach, representation, etc.)—with an emphasis on training and buy-in. Finally, participants were asked to characterize what defines success in this collaborative enterprise.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SO FAR: FINDINGS

The answers to ten of our survey questions presented significant findings and also areas yet to be explored about the development and maintenance of WC advisory boards. The discussion below focuses on our recent 2017 survey's 142 responses, although we also note comparisons to our 2014 results.

Respondent Demographics: *Are you faculty or staff? Tenure track? (Q3) Teaching load? (Q4)* Responses indicate a representation from different sectors of higher education—29% from research universities, 22% from regional universities, 39% from liberal arts colleges, and 9% from community colleges. Survey respondents

represented three employment categories: 46% are staff, 28% are tenured/tenure-track faculty, and 27% are non-tenure track faculty. Although many teach between two and four courses per year, some reported teaching as many as eight courses annually. Of faculty members who are serving in WCs, 85% receive course reductions in exchange for their work. A majority (68%) report having up to five full-time equivalent positions in their WCs. The range of these responses implies both means and challenges, depending on institutional context, of a WC director's ability to develop and sustain collaborations such as an advisory board.

Longevity of writing center administrators: *How long have you served as a WC administrator at your institution? (Q8)* Our respondents represented all categories of experience: less than three years (39%), between four and six years (29%), between seven and twelve years (15%), and more than twelve years (18%).

Advisory board presence and longevity: *Do you have an advisory board for your writing center? (Q10) How long has the advisory board existed (Q11)* Only 16% of respondents (22 total) indicated that they currently have a WC advisory board. Of those advisory boards, 35% are relatively new (three or fewer years old). In contrast, just over 25% of our respondents have had advisory boards for over 10 years.

Campus conversations: *Has anyone at the respondent's campus discussed forming an advisory board?(Q24)* Among the 120 respondents who do not currently have advisory boards, 24% stated that their institutions have explored forming one.

Exigence: *Who made the decision to have an advisory board (Q12) and who chose members? (Q14)* Although the number of respondents is small (n=18), the majority (88%) who responded to the question of "Who made the decision to have an advisory board" noted that either the current or former WC director had made this decision. Half of our 2014 survey respondents reported that deans or other administrators made this decision, so we are reluctant to draw conclusions from these data.

Duties: *What is the job of the advisory board? (Q17)* Of the respondents with an advisory board, 74% noted that its role was "to simply represent the rest of the university to the director/ administrators." Between 30 and 40% of respondents noted the importance of the advisory board in other areas, such as approving major pedagogical directions of the WC or directing outreach opportunities.

Preparation and Impact: *To what extent has your advisory board helped establish interest, participation, or support with different groups? (Q18) Rank the advisory board's effectiveness in achieving its purpose. (Q20) How was your advisory board "trained" to understand WC work? (Q21)* Among respondents who have advisory boards, ratings of effectiveness are mixed. On a scale of one (not effective at all) to five (extremely effective), 25% responded with "not effective at all" or "slightly effective," 25% responded with "neither effective nor ineffective," and the remaining 50% responded with "somewhat effective" or "extremely effective." We also asked the extent to which the advisory board has helped establish interest in or participation with the WC among three groups: faculty, administrators, and students. On a scale of one (none) to five (a great deal), 47% responded "somewhat" or "a great deal" regarding faculty, compared to 37% for administrators and 11% for students. We also note that our colleagues who have advisory boards report low levels of training for board members, with 90% stating that their boards receive no training.

WHAT WE NOW KNOW: OPEN RESPONSES AND RESEARCH FROM BEYOND OUR FIELD

Although we learned much about the use of advisory boards through quantitative questions, open responses helped in terms of context and texture. Survey participants who offered open responses voiced ambitious yet clear definitions for board mission and success. For example, one 2017 survey respondent noted that a board exists "to support the Writing Program by providing counsel and feedback to the initiatives developed by the Program Director." Another characterized a successful board as "a group that contributes positively to the direction and operations of the center by providing sound advice and suggestions . . . regarding the wants and needs of the university." Such definitions assume common understandings of WC practices, which may require new member development to some degree. As indicated by our research responses, advisory boards could be responsible for many tasks within the WC. A board may be asked to direct the outreach opportunities, to approve major pedagogical direction (i.e., mission statement, student learning outcomes, etc.), to represent the university to the director/administrators, or to give the university a "voice" in how the WC functions. Of course, when a WC director with little background in the field is drafted or hired, which has been indicated in our survey as a less common practice, an advisory board of experienced writing professionals or administrators could serve in a support role.

Our research reflects a desire for training and faculty development as crucial for board success and long term buy-in. Respondents noted that professional development for those new to WC practices is valued but under-practiced, perhaps because of resource or time constraints. Although we cannot draw a straight line between degree-of-training and board success, this correlation seems intuitive. We believe that the intentional selection of members and participation of current WC administrative staffers might also be an integral component of a board's potential success. Writing center professionals know that such work as creating a charter, designing an assessment, and maintaining board members is easier said than done, and many of our initial conversations as we began thinking about this survey project reflected both frustration and critique. For example, some comments from our 2014 survey reflected how these boards are often placed in an institutional second-class status: ". . . any ad hoc committee I've ever tried to form that includes folks from the disciplines . . . hasn't lasted more than a semester or so, even though the Provost has 'invited' people to serve on it . . ." (anonymous). Others voiced concern about leadership on their own campuses from outside the writing studies world, how a program (in one particular case, a WAC-based board) is seen as "authentic only if it's run by someone who doesn't know anything about teaching writing" (anonymous).

Based on our study, we believe WC directors should embrace proven methods of systematic change as illustrated through interdisciplinary research. Advisory boards are common in the non-profit and business world. Businesses develop advisory boards for the same reasons as writing centers, such as promoting their agendas or informing stakeholders. In *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School Professor Emeritus John Kotter advocates for eight strategies for making institutional change. These steps begin with "establishing a sense of urgency," and "creating the guiding coalition" (37, 53). He argues, a strong leader must "find the right people," "create trust," and "develop a common goal" in order to be successful (68). For directors interested in developing advisory boards, support resources like Kotter's can provide reliable, proven advice in their creation, organization, and maintenance.

Resources from non-profit organizations can also be applicable to WCs seeking advisory board advice. For example, in the article "Finding the Right Board Members for your Nonprofit," readers are reminded that being a member of a board "requires continuous learning about those served and being an advocate for

the mission, making decisions that are in the best interest of the organization, ensuring prudent use of the nonprofit's assets, and looking ahead to help the nonprofit plan for the future" (National Council on Nonprofits). The article also includes links to helpful advice about choosing board members, writing an advisory board charter, self-assessing the effectiveness of the board, and approaching inactive board members. This advice reinforces the suggestion that the process of forming a WC advisory board may be challenging, but as Carol Rutz noted via email: "In my experience, having some faculty actively involved . . . has been nothing but helpful."

WHERE WE ARE AND WHERE WCs MIGHT GO

Small but powerful things are happening at Transylvania University and at Lipscomb University because of our increased focus on advisory projects. For several years at Transylvania, we've held a substantive faculty writing development workshop, bringing in scholars from across the United States. Although the cross-faculty group that works with the WC to plan these events (hosting 15-20 faculty members each time) is not a formal "advisory board," the collaborations between faculty and our WC have helped bring attention to writing initiatives. Faculty across divisions have also expressed increased interest in taking part in our recent course-embedded pilot programs. We look forward to exploring the formation of a possible advisory board, stemming from these successes.

At Lipscomb, the Advisory Board is comprised of representatives from six of ten colleges, a student non-staffer, a community member (local high school teacher), and the administrative staff of the Writing Studio (Director, Assistant Director, Student Administrator). The defining task for our board members is to serve as ambassadors for the Studio in the Lipscomb community. We are in the process of developing an online training module for our board members, and the charter we've written (based on advice from the National Council on Nonprofits) is guiding the decisions about what our members need to know to serve effectively in an ambassadorial function.

The design of WC advisory boards will most likely depend on the type of institution in which the board is created. This process could be incredibly different for a WC director at a college with a small number of faculty who mostly know each other and for those at large schools who can only know a handful of others from varying departments. However, such boards have the potential

for increasing the impact of both a director and a WC when it comes to a creating a more sustainable campus culture of writing.

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