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The Writing Center as Workplace: Teaching, Learning, and Practicing Professionalism

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As administrators, we educate our tutors about writing center theory and practice so they can assist others. Their training and work typically benefit them, providing an environment for developing better listening, problem-solving, and communication skills, as well as for increasing patience and empathy.

But a writing center is also a workplace, and, as such, there must be guidelines for procedures and professional behaviors to make it run smoothly. Tutors must know, for example, what to do if they are running late or where in the center it's appropriate to eat, as well as how to handle ethical situations. Centers like ours typically employ traditional-age undergraduate students. To be sure, most arrive with a sense of professionalism and a good work ethic, but all need to know our center's specific expectations. And since these positions can often be their first jobs, here they can acquire and refine basic skills that are crucial in a professional setting—arriving on time, dressing and behaving appropriately, answering a phone properly—and can learn, practice, and hone other "soft" skills. We see this kind of training as an important and necessary part of our administrative responsibility.

In the past, we put together guidelines that listed the procedures and behaviors we expected of our staff, discussed them at orientation and in our tutor education class, and then posted them in our handbook and on our listserv. Just as they would at any institution, our guidelines reflected our specific writing center with its advantages and constraints. We work on a large (38,000-student), suburban, mostly commuter campus in a large center (4-5 full and part-time administrators, 60-70 tutors, plus 6-8 receptionists) with a diverse staff—mostly undergraduates, some graduate students, and some volunteers (mostly retirees). These factors make regular staff meetings impossible, thus influencing our communication with staff and affecting how everyone relates

to one another, plus influencing how we composed and conveyed our guidelines.

Each semester, we found that some aspects of our guidelines bothered us. First, they read like a list of do's and don'ts, a somewhat troubling characteristic in an environment that promotes nondirective tutoring. The influence of the writing center's deliberately comfortable ambiance also gave us pause, as our staff's behavior occasionally reflected this looseness in worrisome ways. In one case, a new receptionist sported headphones and was oblivious to clients arriving, then addressed the administrator who questioned him with "Hey, dude." We wondered if he simply didn't know better. If so, it was our responsibility to make professionalism more transparent. Supporting our reasoning, Molly Worthen notes how newly hired college graduates might misinterpret informality in the workplace:

> They see they can call everyone from the C.E.O. down by their first name, and that can be confusing—because what they often don't realize is that there's still a high standard of professionalism. [Some] things are basic, but they require reminders: show up to meetings on time; be aware that you, yourself, are fully responsible for your work schedule. No one is going to tell you to attend a meeting. In other words, young graduates mistake informality for license to act unprofessionally.

We began seeking better ways of explaining expectations by looking at what others had to say about recent grads and professionalism. What we found suggests that colleges and universities should seek ways to assure that their students graduate with the skills to be successful in entry-level positions and beyond. (For an extensive discussion of the resources we consulted, see our chapter, "Teaching, Learning, and Practicing Professionalism in the Writing Center" in *How We Teach Writing Tutors*.) Collectively, the articles and reports identify key components across industries and occupations and on campus and relate them to graduates in their first jobs. These qualities include

Professional Qualities	Unprofessional Qualities
Work until a task is completed competently	Poor work ethic
Interpersonal skills including civility	Disrespectful and rude
Appropriate appearance	Inappropriate appearance
Punctuality and regular attendance	Lack of time management
Communication skills	Sense of entitlement
Honesty	Apathetic
Focused/attentive	Unfocused

The many publications helped us to articulate what constitutes professionalism, as well as the importance of helping our staff understand a workplace's professional culture and the value in learning workplace etiquette, developing professional accountability, and projecting a positive work ethic.

To formalize efforts, we decided to produce a writing center "Tutors' Code of Professionalism" that identified expected behaviors. (Later, we developed a separate one for receptionists.) Perhaps most importantly, we also decided that the best way to teach professionalism was to involve tutors, so we asked them to research and create their own document. Putting them in charge meant creating a bottom-up, rather than a top-down, plan, so they would decide what to include rather than being told. The advantages of bottom-up decision-making include participation, motivation, empowerment, ownership, and knowledge, but we also recognized that the process could be both complex and time consuming (12Manage: The Executive Fasttrack). Thus, we planned for extra time and embarked on a project that would be self-generated, inclusive, and collaborative, and ultimately would involve every writing center tutor.

Our three-week Winter Session allows time for projects, and we selected a handful of experienced tutors who work well independently, so we chose to begin then. We explained the task and gave them access to articles and reports, as well as examples of "Codes of Professionalism" from other centers, which we'd found in a Google search. We asked our small group of tutors to list the etiquette or behaviors important in maintaining professionalism, considering every aspect: duties as an employee; downtime; and interactions with clients, coworkers, and administrators. Be comprehensive but concise, we said, and provide no more than a page of bullet points. From lists that ranged from the general to the very specific, we then asked them, individually or together, to put ideas into categories.

Throughout these weeks we had discussions with them and difficult questions arose. What should be included? How general or specific should this list be? How should items be organized? What tone should we use? When spring semester began we had a draft. As tutors returned, we asked them to review it and make suggestions, which we incorporated.

So, what did tutors consider "professional," and how did their ideas compare with findings in the various articles and reports? Much fit under four broad categories: responsibility, respect, accountability, and positivity. Under "responsibility" came punctuality, regular attendance, efficient time management,

completion of work, and timely notice for what we might consider "situations." Under "respect" (for clients, co-workers, and the workplace), they fit appropriate appearance and workplace behavior, focus, and honesty, but here were examples of the tutors being effectively unspecific. For instance, they framed respect as an awareness of others' needs, and of clients deserving full attention. Much could fall under these two concepts, including dress that didn't distract from the tutoring business at hand. Under "accountability" came issues that fall under ethical behavior, like making every effort to answer questions correctly, even if it means seeking help, but here things also became more specific, for they included a caution against trying to estimate a student's grade. And finally, important in any workplace, but crucial in a writing center that works face-to-face with students, were items categorized under "positivity": interpersonal skills, attentiveness, communication, and civility. In many ways, our tutors' draft corresponded well with definitions found in other publications, and we were confident in its appropriateness as a tool in teaching professionalism.

The document eventually looked like this:

WRITING CENTER TUTORS' CODE OF PROFESSIONALISM

RESPONSIBILITY: Completing tasks punctually and to the best of your ability helps keep our office running smoothly.

- Be sure to call ahead of time if you're sick and need to stay home or if you're caught in traffic. Otherwise, manage your time efficiently and be at work when you are scheduled, especially during busy times of the semester.
- Budget time realistically during sessions and prioritize according to the client's needs and time allotted.
- Complete all paperwork fully, legibly, and on time to make the office manager's and the receptionists' jobs much easier.

RESPECT: Tutors are responsible for the professional appearance of the Center—even during downtime. For example, always dress appropriately and engage in acceptable workplace behavior.

- An awareness of each others' needs fosters a positive work environment. To promote this environment, minimize distractions to yourself and others (e.g., turn off your cell phone and hold all conversations at a moderate level).
- Clients deserve the benefit of your attention. Greeting them promptly and courteously is important, as is being engaged and patient for the entire session.
- Clients have the right to their opinions, even if you disagree. It is always appropriate to ask questions to explore all sides of a topic or to encourage further research, but do so diplomatically.
- We all want to work in a comfortable and professional environment. Take responsibility for keeping the Writing

Center tidy, and be careful about what you say regarding teachers, other tutors, or student writers.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Part of tutoring ethically involves avoiding the editor or teacher role and placing accountability in the client's hands.

- If you aren't sure of an answer, you can look it up or ask someone. We have the benefit of computers, books, worksheets, and each other.
- Since we are not accountable for students' grades, if a student presses you to judge a paper or estimate a grade, explain that you're not familiar with everything the professor might consider (e.g., information from previous assignments, oral directions, etc.).

POSITIVITY: Tutors should foster an environment where clients feel empowered to become better writers.

- Establishing a positive tone for working together begins with the first smile and greeting, as does making an effort to pronounce names correctly and remembering repeat clients.
- To encourage clients to take ownership of their projects, express sincere interest in and curiosity about their topics.
- Listen and empathize with a student's concerns, but be careful not to criticize assignments, professors, or their grading.
- While constructive criticism gives clients a handle on what they need to work on, specific encouragement reassures them of their strengths. It is important to point out where things are working well in a client's writing.

This document remains fluid. Each semester, we review it with new staff, and every fall, all staff members read it and suggest changes. Throughout the year, we also strive to actively and frequently engage our staff in activities that underscore professionalism. We list some of these activities with suggestions below. We hope readers will use these activities in their own writing center, adapting them to individual needs and functions.

Develop your own "Code of Professionalism" along with your staff. Involve everyone, delegate the task to a small group (perhaps volunteers or your tutor education class), or adapt it as a project for tutor downtime. Note: Don't assume that those most familiar with the writing center, i.e., long-term employees, would be the most capable of drafting a substantive "code of professionalism." Sometimes fresh eyes offer surprising and insightful contributions.

Initiate formal conversations about professionalism in tutor training sessions or staff gatherings. Ask tutors to reflect on how they perceive the professionalism of offices and businesses they visit and how those perceptions affect their view of those establishments. Courteous treatment at a store or restaurant leads one to label that place as good; likewise, poor service

from a single employee often makes one reject the store as a whole. Standards of customer service and appearances of professionalism (readiness, attentiveness, friendliness) usually translate easily from one setting to another. Ask tutors how they might apply those standards to the writing center or how they might react if a staff member in another professional setting had their feet on the desk, ignored customers, or wore something that might be deemed inappropriate for such a setting, (like t-shirts with profanity or disturbing images, or particularly revealing—regardless of gender—articles of clothing).

Here, too, is an opportunity to address issues like appropriate dress that might vary among positions or workplaces and identify what would be considered proper attire in your center. Such discussions not only allow tutors to determine and affirm professional standards in their immediate workplace, but offer opportunities to discuss how those standards might differ in other workplaces. As Leslie Morgan Steiner notes in her weekly radio blog, jeans and clogs may be appropriate in an undergraduate school setting, like a writing center, but not for a receptionist in a law firm.

Have focused conversations about professionalism and related soft or employability skills. You might choose one or two short articles or a section on professionalism in the workplace from a tutor training handbook to read and discuss as a group. How do the points made relate to your writing center? What changes could be made in your center and how? If you have a tutor education class or regular meetings, make a list of important professional aspects to consider, like time management or use of technology, then focus on one over time.

Work professionalism and its benefits into informal conversations whenever possible. Compliment positive behavior to reinforce it and do so publicly when you can. Make it audible, and invite staff to join the conversation with a "Wasn't that great that Chandler did such and such . . . ?" so others see that it matters and is acknowledged. They may choose to join the conversation (especially good if they are new to the staff) and add additional thoughts.

Model professionalism. Perhaps the best way to teach professionalism in the workplace is to model professional behavior yourself. In communications to your staff, adopt the tone you would like them to use with you and others on campus. Let them hear you answering the phone the way you expect them to answer it. Greet students, faculty, and other visitors the way you expect your staff to greet them. Tutors will follow your lead, taking

cues for what is appropriate and acceptable. Go a step further with other tasks they may be expected to do occasionally. If your writing center has a break room or food area, let your staff see you clean it (or ask a staff member to help you tidy it) from time to time, sending a message that this is everyone's responsibility and that they should not assume that someone else will clean up after them.

Post appropriate reminders—notes for recycling, a script for answering the phone, signs to "please replace paper in the printer" or "clean the microwave." You may feel that you should not have to do this, but if it reminds people and saves you time and frustration, it's worth it. Besides, when you do have to speak to someone, you have the luxury of noting that "it shows you how here."

Whenever appropriate, involve staff in decisions about the writing center that affect performance and professionalism. For example, when our center underwent construction, we asked staff how we might rearrange furniture, sign-in sheets, and technology to best accommodate the flow of people. Doing so gave them agency and ownership. The set-up we adopted was heavily informed by their suggestions, and promotes professionalism by making the area more inclusive and welcoming.

Find ways to include tutors in activities that enrich them professionally. Sixty percent of our clients come from required courses in two writing programs. Our tutors are invited to participate in reading groups and workshops sponsored by these programs for their instructors, and we plan our orientation activities to overlap so everyone can benefit from hearing prominent speakers. Not only do instructors notice the tutors' presence, but tutors' participation acknowledges their standing as professionals and allows them to explore and engage in aspects of composition and rhetoric as such.

Advertise tutors' professional activities. In campus, department, or program newsletters and websites, post announcements of tutors' presentations at conferences and publications in journals.

Seek activities that promote interaction with other campus resources, or partner with nearby institutions, perhaps secondary schools, to plan professional activities. Doing so offers advantages. If your school is small, pooling resources allows you to collectively offer events by tutors and for tutors that individual programs couldn't support. Tutors learn about other support programs (athletics, oral communication, math, etc.) through cooperative activities and can, for example, jointly present campus midterm

or end-of-semester events. Aspects of professionalism cross all boundaries, so join with others to offer workshops on professionalism and tutoring to all campus or even local tutors. You might even co-sponsor a day-long conference focused on shared aspects of tutoring, such as establishing rapport or including tutoring on a resume effectively.

Many articles, studies, and reports informed our thinking, including several national studies like those conducted over time by York College of Pennsylvania's Center for Professional Excellence. For a comprehensive bibliography, and to learn more about our process for developing this code and a similar code for our receptionists, please see our chapter, "Teaching, Learning, and Practicing Professionalism in the Writing Center" in *How We Teach Writing Tutors: A* WLN *Digital Edited Collection*.

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