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“Won’t You Be My Neighbor: Camaraderie at the Intersection of Research and Writing Services”

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INTRO - QEP BACKGROUND

Asbury Theological Seminary’s Writing Center, which opened in the B.L. Fisher library in October 2016, is the result of the Seminary’s most recent Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) (a required part of the SACSCOC Reaffirmation process). When the conversations started about what area of the institution to focus on for the QEP process, the need for enhanced writing support quickly emerged as a likely candidate.

Over a period of several years, faculty noted a decline in students’ writing ability. This reflects a larger and frequently observed trend in American education overall. In a survey conducted among ATS faculty, 66.7% responded that providing additional writing support for students would be “very important and an excellent use of resources.” An additional 22.2% believed it would be “useful,” and 86.7% of faculty acknowledged that they lower grades based on grammar and mechanics.

When the students were surveyed, an interesting fact emerged. Students surveyed overwhelmingly believed that their own writing was either “good” (58.6%) or “very good” (33.3%), yet still argued that it was “somewhat” (39.6%) or “very important” (51.4%) to provide writing support to students at the seminary. So, 80% of students did not feel that they personally needed much writing support, but 91% believed that their fellow students did need help with writing. The combination of these results with those from faculty convinced the QEP committee to focus their efforts on improving student writing at the Seminary.

The end result of this process was the decision to establish a Writing Center. Writing centers are very common in undergraduate institutions. Since the 1970s, writing centers have proliferated throughout American colleges and universities. According to the National Census of Writing, 99% of 4-year colleges and 97% of two-year colleges that responded to their surveys have one. Admittedly, only a small percentage of American institutions participated in the survey, but this statistic is still significant (National Census of Writing). A more realistic figure is probably that between 50% and 75% of American institutions have some form of a writing or learning center. Among graduate institutions, writing centers are still relatively rare, but they are growing in number. The Harvard Business Review recently featured a writing center that was established at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia and is showing some very positive early results (Bernoff).

Writing centers have been shown to have a notable impact on student success and retention efforts (Pleasant, Niiler, and Jagannathan 108-110). Consequently, the Asbury Theological Seminary Writing Center was officially opened in Fall 2016, and already we have hosted just over 200 thirty-minute sessions as of August 2017, peaking with 29 in October 2016 and 45 in April 2017. In addition, we are building a library of handouts, with six completed and several others in process. We have also begun the

process of transitioning these handouts into LibGuides. Looking ahead to Fall 2017, we are anticipating even greater use of the center this coming year.

MOVE FROM REFERENCE TO RESEARCH SERVICES

Around the same time as the QEP Committee was deciding to pursue a writing center, other changes were taking place in the Library. One of the most significant of these was the decision to move from traditional reference services to the establishment of Research Services. Like the well-known proverb about teaching a person to fish, Research Services focuses on training patrons in research techniques, so that they can find the information they need themselves, instead of simply finding the information for them. Using individual appointments with researchers and scheduled group presentations, as well as occasional in-class presentations, Research Services hopes to produce stronger independent researchers.

Before the move, Lisa Setters was the lone reference librarian. The demands of working the help desk, her responsibilities as the web resources librarian, and the duties that the reference position entailed proved to be too much for one person to handle, especially during chaotic times such as when Doctor of Ministry cohorts visited and new semesters started. Therefore, Thad Horner transitioned from Technical Services back to his original position in reference. Having two professional librarians has greatly increased the number of services offered by Research Services as well as the job satisfaction enjoyed by the librarians.

PROOFREADING

Before the launch of the QEP, in the Spring of 2013, Asbury Theological Seminary launched a pilot proofreading program in the library. Even before the QEP research confirmed it, faculty had identified a need among students for help with writing. At the same time, the Seminary had several students receiving scholarships from the Kern Foundation. These scholarships required students to complete a service project. The decision was made to assign some of these students to the library as proofreaders.

Beginning with two proofreaders (eventually growing to four), this program was very well-received by the students, with more than 700 appointments over the four years of the program.

It was a popular program, but it did have some problems. Most significantly, the Library had no say over who was selected to be proofreaders. The scholarships were given out based on college GPA, and from that pool of candidates, the admissions office chose candidates they thought could write well. However, the ability to write well does not automatically imply the ability to help others write well, and unfortunately, opportunities for training were limited. So, while this program was a good first step, it was not the long-term answer to writing issues.

MOVE TO A WRITING CENTER

The problem with a proofreading-only service is that it is ultimately short-sighted. If all the editor does is go line-by-line through the document and correct sentence-level errors, it does not actually teach the student anything of value. It provides a momentary boost in the form of a better paper, but the student is disengaged from the process, and

the next time the student has a paper to write, they will likely make the same mistakes again and need to have them “fixed” again. Ultimately, proofreading provides only a short-term solution.

In contrast, the writing center model takes a long-term approach. We hope that our students leave the center with a stronger paper, but more importantly, we hope they leave as better writers. In keeping with writing center best practices, our Center focuses first on higher order concerns (HOCs), which are global, content-related issues such as thesis statement, development, organization — elements that potentially make grammatical issues irrelevant in the face of significant rewriting. The Writing Center will look at grammatical issues as well, but we do so from a skills-training perspective. Our consultants look for patterns and repeated errors, helping students learn proper grammar use for future writing.

More importantly, Writing Center sessions are collaborative. Unlike proofreading, where the proofreader does most of the work, a Writing Center consultant tries to keep the student as engaged as possible — reading their own paper aloud, asking and answering questions, and playing an active role in setting the agenda for the session. The consultant acts as a guide, but the student retains ownership of the process. By focusing on this kind of collaborative process and skills training, writing centers provide long-term benefits to the students we serve.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE WRITING CENTER AND RESEARCH SERVICES



Figure 1

The Writing Center is located directly across the hall from the Research Services office. This proximity has proven to be very beneficial. It provides students with easy access to complementary services. On several occasions, Writing Center staff have identified a student need with a research-related task and have walked students over to Research Services and introduced them to the Research team. Research

Services has done the same thing when one of their students has a writing question. The closeness of the two services makes it easier for staff to effectively serve students.

In addition, the two departments have also hosted collaborative seminars and learning opportunities for students. The Writing Center is a convenient and inviting space, and Research Services often uses it to hold open training sessions. Frequent discussions are held about types of seminars that students would find most helpful. Both departments work together for institutional and program assessment activities, sharing data, compiling results, and using the data to propose improvements in services.

We also work together with other library departments in the joint planning and implementation of library initiatives. Over the coming months, we will be beginning

some collaborative research into writing centers at comparator schools and exploring related grant possibilities. We are developing a proposal for a Plagiarism Response Program. Inspired by a similar program at Indiana State University (Bailey), this would make the Writing Center a first stop for students accused of plagiarism. Students would meet with a consultant to discuss what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, and then they would work with the consultant to revise the offending paper and correct the mistakes, turning a potential disciplinary action into a teaching moment instead.

Additionally, the Writing Center is also partnering with Instructional Design for a Faculty Professional Development Seminar series. Each month during the academic year, we host a one-hour workshop for faculty on a variety of topics, such as effectively using peer review in class. These seminars are live-streamed and archived as well, for faculty use at other times.

CONCLUSION

Writing centers are an increasingly common presence in academic institutions. While not all writing centers are located within libraries, we have found this placement especially advantageous. The Writing Center at Asbury Theological Seminary is still very new, having just completed its first year of operation, and the relationship between the Center and Research Services is still developing. After one year, however, we are very encouraged and excited about what the future holds. The beginning of the 2017-18 academic year has seen an early surge of students into both the Writing Center and Research Services. The students have responded in overwhelmingly positive ways; obviously, they recognize that we are filling an important need. We hope that other libraries will be inspired by our example to consider ways their own institutions could benefit from a similar arrangement.

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