

Writing Centre Circle

May 14, 2004

Executive Summary

Our circle wishes to create a Writing Centre by September 2005 for UBC-O that will serve the writing needs of students in all disciplines. Opinions vary about the details, execution, and management of such a project within the circle, so we propose a six step consultative process and timeline for the phased delivery of a Writing Centre by September 2005.

Working Principles

A successful Writing Centre must

1. Support student writing across the university
2. Be supported enthusiastically by the academic leadership of UBC-O who realize the value-added nature of enhancing undergraduate students' writing in all disciplines
3. Be operating by September 2005 preferably inside a Learning Centre that has complementary but broader objectives
4. Be part of an integrated and long-term approach to writing instruction and faculty development at OUC
5. Be developed through careful and relevant research combined with extensive consultation with key stakeholders.

Background

Currently there is no Writing Centre at the North Kelowna campus of OUC, and only a modest one staffed by one MA graduate is scheduled to open in the fall semester of 2004. At the Penticton campus there exists a small Learning Centre that offers assistance with writing. For the past three years in Penticton, a writing assistant with an MA in English has been available to first year students for one-on-one help with written assignments.

The Writing Centre at the North Kelowna campus was developed in direct response to recent changes in the English Department's course offerings. The first-year composition course (English 100) is being largely replaced with a reading course (Reading Academic Essays, English 154), and the remedial, cost recovery composition course (English 098) has been eliminated altogether.

All participants in the circle sense that UBC-O will need to address writing throughout the undergraduate curriculum since the writing skills of graduates are integral to the value of the UBC-O degree.

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Preliminary research and discussion in the circle indicate the existence of a number of innovative approaches that could be adopted to address undergraduate writing via a Writing Centre:

1. Develop the Writing Centre in conjunction with the Information Commons to help tie writing to the research process. Hire fourth year undergraduate English students to provide one-on-one support and writing tutorials to students using the centre's services. Appoint a Writing Centre Director to supervise the work of the student employees. (Evolving OUC model)
2. Develop an online writing lab (OWL) with remedial grammar quizzes, handouts, and online contact with a writing guru. (Industry standard; see Purdue's OWL)
3. Offer cost recovery, remedial short-term writing courses that ensure students entering the school's first-year programs have adequate skills. (UBC-V model)
4. Offer courses targeted at students that promote writing relevant to their discipline. (McGill)
5. Integrate writing exercises into regular general education courses on substantive topics. Writing Centre staff work with course instructors to create exercises that enhance students' writing abilities. Students have to take two or three of these courses to graduate. (University of Southern California)
6. Create a series of intensive writing courses in all faculties, and ensure students have to take a number of these courses in their first-year of study. These courses would be taught by faculty but assisted by a Writing Centre Director in conjunction with Teaching Assistants. (University of Washington; developing at SFU)
7. Place a Writing Centre in a stand-alone Learning Centre that supports faculty development, employment for students and a wide range of education needs for students.

We cannot with confidence recommend one or a combination of these models since we require more research and consultation to develop the most effective writing centre for UBC-O's undergraduate ranks. All of these options require the hiring of an expert in composition.

Six Step Process

We suggest that UBC-O use the six step iterative process outlined below in order to develop the best possible Writing Centre for September 2005. The process includes a significant research component as well as consultation with the education community, both inside and outside the University. The circle members feel strongly that this process is necessary in order to create a Writing Centre that is endorsed by the entire university community and truly meets the needs of departments and students at UBC-O.

Step 1—Guide the Process

Hire an Interim Director to guide the process with a mandate to create a Writing Centre based on excellent research into composition theory and practice, and consultation with all stakeholders (Faculty, Deans, Students, and High School Teachers).

Action

1. Deans develop a job description in consultation with the Writing Centre Circle.

Timeline: Hired by December 2004.

Step Two—Research the Options

In order to determine the best approach to developing a Writing Centre, research into composition and the role of Writing Centres needs to occur.

Action

The Interim Director shall

1. Perform a literature review that would ask (a) what services are most effectively delivered by a Writing Centre and (b) how does a Writing Centre impact other areas, programs, and initiatives.
2. Conduct a comparative analysis of other university writing programs focusing upon best practices.

Timeline: Plan revealed by May 2005.

Step Three: Consultation

Consultation must occur with stakeholders to meet pedagogical, operational, and financial needs of the university.

Action

1. The Interim Director using the research from step two shall develop a survey that would be used as a method of consultation with the stakeholders in the Writing Centre.

Additionally, this survey would inform the stakeholders about a range of options but also present research supporting the most viable plan.

Timeline: Completed by March 2005.

Step Four: Recommendations

Based on consultation and research, the Interim Director shall develop the most effective model for delivering writing skills to students.

The Interim Director would announce and publish a plan that would contain short-term and long-term objectives.

Action

1. The Interim Director shall write and distribute the Writing Centre project plan. Analysis of the plan and feedback from the stakeholders shall be gathered.
2. The distributed plan shall be analysed by the stakeholders, and responses collected.
3. The plan shall be revised and approval for the next step shall be sought.

Timeline: May 2005 reveal the plan.

Five: Implementation

Based upon rigorous consultation and research, the Interim Director must now implement the recommendations into a project plan that clearly lays out the process, timeline, and performance metrics.

Action

The Interim Director shall implement the Writing Centre.

Deadline: August 31, 2005.

Step Six: Assessment

The Writing Centre must provide a program that is continually improving and is distinguished by quality service; therefore, it must be evaluated rigorously to maintain its mandate.

Action

Key performance metrics for the writing centre shall be developed by Deans in consultation with other stakeholders, and evaluation conducted on a regular basis. The research gathered throughout the process of creating the centre shall likely be helpful in this step.

Conclusions

The members of our circle strongly believe that today's graduates should possess excellent writing and communications skills. A Writing Centre at UBC-O can be an effective tool in supporting students who want to improve their skills and abilities.

University Circle Members

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