Faculty Handout: How You Can Help Us Help Your Students

Our writing center has the great fortune of being blessed with too much demand and not enough coaching[1] supply. But being in this position means we need your help before students get here. There are some simple things you can do to help your students avoid the common pitfalls we see them encounter every year. Here are some suggestions we ask of you, if you're amenable:

1) *Require Drafts Early to Encourage Revision*. Many professors strongly "suggest" writing a draft and recommend dates by which certain tasks should be done. Unfortunately the result of such soft recommendations is often that a huge majority of students come to us literally with only hours to spare (if that!) before a draft is due. If I want my psychology students, say, to seriously revise their writing (something most students avoid doing unless required or guided in doing so), then as draconian as it sounds, I require a draft—even one that I do not read. Instead I often pair off students and have them read each other's drafts, writing comments both on the paper, and on a separate page divided into three columns:
   + for strong writing and content,
   — for weak expression or ideas, and
   ? for interesting or curious sections.
   Then when they submit the final draft to me, they must also submit this prior draft and the comments they received—so I can judge how well they handled peer feedback.
2) *Use Unusual Timing to Send Students to Us Early.* As you might predict, midterms and finals are the massive rush crunch time for writing center demand. Students perennially put off tasks until just before they are due, and unfortunately most classes have work due at the same time. To avoid this pattern, I deliberately assign my deadlines at different times than the usual—for instance, heavily loading writing and reading early in the term, with a draft due in the 5th or 6th week, and the final draft of a long assignment due at least 4 weeks before end of term. While I require every student to seek coaching, I make sure they can even *find* a coach by getting them there at the less busy times of year.
3) *Give Specific Assignment Instructions to Guide the Writing Process*. Sadly, students often do not understand what has been assigned to them, and especially what their professors are looking for in terms of a final product. While I as a teacher want to encourage independent thinking on the part of my students, I believe I can do so and still provide very specific suggestions about how to proceed in actually writing a piece, and I can communicate what I'm envisioning as an ideal response to my assignment. Such specificity, especially if you can make time to create a handout, no matter how brief, often helps us immeasurably if professors insist students take the handout to coaching.
4) *Send Us Suggestions to Improve Our Services.* Now that I've shared some of my wish list, I hope you'll share yours. We are here to serve both students, and the faculty who teach them. In that spirit, we'll offer faculty free coffee in the coming weeks, and hope you'll visit at your convenience.

1 We have adopted the term "coaching" rather than "tutoring" to help destigmatize the idea of seeking extra help, and to show our commitment to more than "remedial" assistance.

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