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An Outreach First

by Jennifer Cooper

The writing center as spark and safety net for entering ESL college students.



Jennifer Cooper

"How many of you knew there was a writing center that helped students with writing essays?" No hands went up. The response of this small group of Hispanic students, three in all, was the perfect motivation for our writing center to start an outreach program. During the first summer session in 2003, the **Communication Skills Center (CSC)** at **Texas A&M-Commerce** began a small outreach effort to help ESL students enter the university. This "reaching out" to ESL high school students started as a way for them to improve basic writing skills under the guise of test preparation. Using computer-based practices enabled the students to connect with the tutor, the computer, and each other. This development created an opportunity for the writing center to play an integral part in not only preparing these students for impending standardized tests, but also developing a relationship with new students from the start. It also promises many benefits in recruiting, mentorship, bridging departmental gaps, and writing across the curriculum.

The program began at the recruiting office. An ESL recruiter came to the CSC director, Dr. Shannon Carter, for assistance with potential students. In light of the growing Hispanic population, recruiting these students straight out of high school would only enrich the diversity of the campus. In a relaxed atmosphere, the students were brought to the CSC and introduced to the tutor.

College can be scary in and of itself for most students because it is so unfamiliar. For ESL students, the cultural and language barriers may multiply these fears. Because the tutor interacted with the high school students and guided them through the writing process for test preparation, the computer provided a shared medium for mentorship between the established writer and the basic writing student. After the tutor introduced practice essay questions

and vocabulary builder exercises, students worked independently as the tutor stood by to observe their progress. Person-to-person interaction often took place when the students did not understand a word or its context. It was clear that the tutor was a vital part of the process both as helper and as cultural translator. Accessing the technology was the first lesson for these future students. The second lesson was that a familiar face in a new and sometimes terrifying environment can mean safety and lead to continued success in the university system. The tutor as well learned the benefit of being able to relate to culturally diverse students.

Getting there was the first step for these students to establishing a long and successful relationship with the writing center. Interviews with one of the students following both his completion of the program and his eventual admission into the university showed that his tutor had become that familiar and friendly face. The writing center had played a significant role to familiarize him and other ESL students with this campus for future enrollment.

Because there seems to be a department for everything in the university system, you might ask, "Why don't these students get this kind of help within the ESL program?" The answer is simple for TAMU-Commerce: there is no official ESL program. Therefore, the **Writing Center** is the place where the majority of ESL students receive the support they need to negotiate standard American academic discourse. The CSC helps bridge the gap between the isolated world of ESL and the rest of the university. Writing Center staff and tutors have just as much to learn about the special needs and considerations of these students as the students do about writing at the college level. As a student without specific education geared toward ESL, this had been an exceptional learning experience for me as a tutor. It was also an added benefit to the student to communicate successfully with another student who did not have ESL training or bilingual skills.

Our purpose is to help students across the spectrum of curricula at the university, not just basic writers or English majors. The ESL students in our program are, in fact, an essential part of Writing Across the Curriculum. No matter where these students move within the education process, they will be connected to the writing center. Two of the high school students are now enrolled in the university and have been frequent visitors to the CSC over a span of two semesters. When asked if the program encouraged future participation, the answer was emphatically "Yes." There is no doubt that utilizing the writing center has been a significant part of their studies thus far.

From this small introductory outreach program, it is difficult to determine if it was a success. As researchers generally understand, credibility comes from measurable numbers. However, Rogelio, one of the three former high school students who is now enrolled at the university, expressed his satisfaction with the program. In response to the question of whether the program was helpful, he stated, "Yes, you will feel more secure to know what you are going to write. If [I] have questions, you can explain me what the details are and get an idea of what to write on." This was affirmation for me as a consultant.

Although this was a first run, the CSC has high hopes that future ESL students will feel more at ease in the writing center atmosphere and see it as an integral part of their educational experience. While the computer certainly was integral to the program at first, in the end, it was the interaction between tutor and writer that has produced longstanding effects. The CSC's outreach program has

opened a door to benefit the university by encouraging and fostering new admissions, creating tutor-student relationships, emphasizing departmental interdependence, and supporting writing across the curriculum. It is my hope that this outreach will continue each summer and will grow to meet the needs of the increasing ESL population.

Jennifer Cooper is a recent graduate of Texas A&M University-Commerce (May 2004). She worked in the Communication Skills Center at the University for a year and a half. She is now living in Sacramento, California with her husband and is currently working on a novel.

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