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My Path to Management: Experience, Mentoring, Leadership, and Ambition

[Spring 2010 / Training](#)

by **Jane Hirschhorn**, Mount Ida College

One woman's journey to writing center management.



Jane Hirschhorn

My path toward writing center (WC) management began in the fall of 2002 when I was hired as a writing tutor at **Mount Ida College**, a small liberal arts school outside Boston[1]. Although I had been a writing tutor for about a decade, this position was my first experience working with college students. Looking back, I realize that my journey has been marked by gaining experience and expertise as a tutor, learning from mentors, seizing leadership opportunities, and embracing my own ambition.

Gaining Experience

My journey started by gaining experience as a writing tutor in this new environment. My work with students, particularly the ones who struggled the most, spurred me to develop a variety of tutoring strategies in an effort to find the best ones that worked for each writer. I learned that it was unrealistic for me to identify and clarify every idea and issue involving language construction within a 30-minute session. Instead, my goal became to move the writer and the writing process forward by asking questions and making suggestions. After years of working with student writers, I learned to look for evidence of coherence, organization, and idea development in every draft. When I read Stephen North's guiding principle that writing centers should ". . . produce better writers, not better writing" (438), I was heartened to realize that my goals for student writers were in keeping with this central idea, which is still cited more than two decades after its publication. Equally important, I realize now that my own goal of moving both writer and writing forward were in line with the college's goal of offering students the professional preparation and experiences they would need upon graduation.

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Excellent Mentoring

Another important experience on my path toward management has been learning from knowledgeable and helpful managers. My supervisor helped me further develop my tutoring skills and created a warm, yet serious work environment during my first years at Mount Ida. She continues to be helpful to me, offering advice and strategies for working with some of the school's most challenging students. As a staff member, I observed how she defused a personality conflict between two colleagues calmly and with tact. I also received excellent mentoring from her supervisor, the dean of academic services, who offered useful advice in approaching sensitive situations with individuals and departments throughout the college. Both of these mentors created the best possible environment for my professional growth.

Developing Expertise and Embracing Leadership

A key development in my movement into management coincided with positive changes in the tutoring program, which provided me with greater opportunities to develop my expertise as a tutor. Until December 2004, writing tutors (who all work part-time) worked alongside content tutors in the Academic Success Center (ASC), which was part of Academic Services. In January 2005, the Writing Center was created and moved to a different building thanks in part to a grant the college received from a private foundation. The new space was larger, brighter than its former location, and housed in a building with classrooms and faculty offices. There were managerial changes as well. The grant and the move allowed the college to hire a part-time supervisor to manage daily activities and provide input to my manager, who, as the ASC director, would also serve as the Writing Center Director.

I realize now that Mount Ida's commitment to writing tutoring with the creation of a separate WC was an important part of my professional advancement, allowing me to broaden my professional perspective and to further develop my expertise regarding best practices. Although I had been encouraged to apply for the supervisor position at that time, I knew I wasn't yet ready for the responsibilities and vision the position demanded.

Nonetheless, the move to the new space proved to be a turning point for me because it allowed me to identify and seize opportunities for leadership. In the new space, I began to view myself as an 'elder statesman' when new tutors were hired. As I got to know my colleagues, I passed on the knowledge I had learned from my managers: I told them about our student population, the types of papers they might expect to encounter, and some strategies that I found effective. I enjoyed teaching others what had taken me years to learn, and I was equally interested in learning about my new colleagues' past experiences and their work with Mount Ida students.

I embraced another leadership opportunity when my supervisor asked me to make faculty presentations on behalf of the WC, a task usually reserved for the supervisor. The presentations enabled me to meet faculty from a variety of disciplines and departments and foster excellent professional relationships with them over the years. The presentations also further developed my leadership

skills by introducing the WC to new students and promoting its services. In addition, the talks increased my visibility on campus; I recognized and greeted more faculty and students as I walked across campus or chatted with them about writing assignments when I ran into them in the dining hall.

Embracing Ambition

My deepening relationships with colleagues and faculty marked another accomplishment on my path toward management: awakening my professional ambition. I began to consider the perception of the Writing Center by faculty, students, and staff beyond its day-to-day activities. Although the WC and its staff were well-regarded by students and my colleagues in the academic services department, I wanted more faculty to use our services and desired our office to have wider communication and outreach. With this awakening ambition came the realization that, after working at Mount Ida for almost four years, I might be able to effect some of these changes.

This feeling of ambition was a significant departure for me professionally. I had always been a conscientious employee and was proud of my work, but for the first time I wanted more. I thought about the WC not as just a place to work, but as a place that embodied my ideas about how to support students through the complex task of writing. What's more, I wanted to reach greater numbers of students and faculty and provide them with information as to how we could best support their work.

My path to becoming a manager took six years, and the time has been well spent. It began by me being a conscientious employee seeking to gain tutoring experience, which grew to expertise.

Time passed. My supervisor left Mount Ida in 2006 to accept a tenured English faculty position, and the supervisor position opened up. This time I applied for it. I felt I was ready professionally and personally. My children, then eight and six, had made a smooth transition to elementary school, and their growing independence would make it easier for me to embrace the added responsibilities and hours the supervisor position would entail. I was disappointed when I was not chosen, but I decided to focus on supporting the new supervisor by passing on the knowledge and wisdom I had gained from working here.

My decision worked well for me. The new supervisor was an excellent choice. She was experienced, intelligent, and impossible not to like. I was impressed by how quickly she developed a keen understanding of the college and its constituencies. Moreover, she was generous: she encouraged me to develop initiatives to improve the WC and supported my professional growth, including providing editorial advice on an [article](#) I published in 2007 in *Praxis* that compared common writing concerns of ESL and LD students.

In many respects, the article represented a coalescence of my progress toward management, encompassing my experience, knowledge, and leadership. In the article, I drew on my years of tutoring experience and expertise with these two populations, noting that effective writing tutors need to think about tailoring writing process strategies to the different needs of each student. The article also illustrated my leadership skills within the profession as someone who was contributing to writing center scholarship. In addition, the publication of the article captured the attention of my colleagues and superiors at Mount Ida, and, I believe, was an important factor in my selection as WC supervisor when the

position again became open in April of the following year.

My path to becoming a manager took six years, and the time has been well spent. It began by me being a conscientious employee seeking to gain tutoring experience, which grew to expertise. Meanwhile, I was benefiting from good mentors. As time passed, I developed leadership skills and embraced my own ambition. These experiences led me to desire more from myself professionally, motivating me to publish two articles.

Based on my own experience, I offer this advice to people hoping to move into a management position: think of yourself as a learner and as a leader: as a learner by gaining knowledge from writing center colleagues and scholarship; as leader by envisioning initiatives that could help your writing center enhance its perception and increase its outreach among students, staff and faculty who you don't encounter regularly. As a leader, the path toward management can come to those who contribute "locally" as a resource for colleagues at their school, and more broadly to the writing center community by contributing to a professional journal or presenting at a conference, the latter of which is a personal goal for me.

Like the writing process, my path to management has involved brainstorming, writing, revising, and taking suggestions from others. The process has been both enjoyable and, at times, difficult, and I have learned much about people, leadership, and myself along the way.

Note

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Work Cited

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Jane Hirschhorn has worked at **Mount Ida College** as a tutor since 2002. She became supervisor of the Writing Center in April 2007. Her article "**ESL and LD Students: Different Populations, Common Concerns**" was published in *Praxis* in 2007.

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