

Communication and the community: Using outreach to enrich consultants and the public

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As a Graduate Assistant with my Speaking Center, I was privileged to be provided opportunities to assist others with their communication skills not only in an on-campus tutorial setting, but also in the Greensboro community at large. More specifically, our director, myself, and a number of undergraduate volunteers worked with the Homeless Union of Greensboro on their communication skills to aid in the delivery of speeches they were preparing in order to advocate for themselves later that night with the Greensboro City Council. There has been previous research on advocacy outside the Speaking Center which discusses the positive effects of such volunteering efforts on the community (Cuny, Thompson, Naidu, 2014). This essay will assert that this experience was valuable not only to the Greensboro Community but also to the Speaking Center consultants who volunteered, and that similar opportunities should therefore be afforded to employees at other Speaking Centers as well.

Before we arrived at the venue where our volunteer work occurred, our director laid out the circumstances for which we should be prepared. Firstly, she told us this was not a classroom setting, which meant that our usual avoidance of value statements (implemented to ensure that feedback from consultants could not be seen as a guarantee of a certain grade on an assignment) was of less importance in this non-academic setting. Similarly, jargon we would utilize in an academic setting might not necessarily translate to the broad spectrum of individual educational backgrounds and learning styles with which we would be working. Also

different from our usual operations was the timeframe in which we were working. At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Speaking Center, we have a rule that we refer to as the Two-Day Violation Policy where we do not provide feedback to students whose speech due date is less than two days from the day they come to the center seeking our help. The reasoning for such a policy is that while a speech changed at the last minute could theoretically be more technically competent, the confidence of the speaker would be hampered, making the overall consultation not particularly useful to the speaker. In this case, however, a grade was not at stake, and the individuals involved did not have the luxury of scheduling an appointment two days in advance and devoting a great deal of time to practice. Finally, she reminded us that we could not necessarily expect every individual we worked with to be able to read or write. These were all conditions which were far removed from the usual consultation space, which is often defined by well-formatted and structured paperwork, a specific set of instructions to follow based on the type of consultation requested, and an undergraduate academic speaker with whom to work. This situation was certainly different from any of our experiences in the traditional consultation space.

When we actually sat down with the homeless individuals to consult with them on their upcoming speeches, I was incredibly impressed with the undergraduate volunteers. While it is undoubtedly true that “[t]he concrete benefits that communication centers can provide for students are

numerous” (Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2012, p. 39), the benefits of exposing consultants to opportunities to utilize their skillsets away from campus became apparent in this situation. They showed a remarkable level of adaptability to an unfamiliar situation. For a woman who could not read or write, one consultant immediately volunteered as a note taker, and would read back her notes to her so that she could more easily keep track of her ideas. Another consultant devoted herself to harnessing the anger one individual was feeling into a format which could be more readily digested by the intended audience, managing to put her own feelings about the situation aside to aid an individual in need. The director and I worked with a member of the homeless community who felt that others often considered him ‘crazy’ and discussed ways to present himself as more credible to an audience unfamiliar with him.

Overall, our consultants proved ready and willing to approach new situations with an open mind. Each of us benefited from the experience; not only were we forced to adapt our often-formulaic techniques to a completely new audience, we were also exposed to a situation in which the skills we practiced and taught to others were of importance outside the classroom. It has been noted in previous research from the UNCG Speaking Center that “[b]y helping citizens to effectively communicate their points of view, communication centers can equip citizens to participate in the democratic process” (Cuny et al., 2014, p. 407), and this was the case with the work we did here. For example, the speaker the director and I worked with utilized an introduction that included the sort of attention-getting language we had recommended, which hopefully had an effect on their audience as well as their own confidence. But in addition to these benefits for the community, the positive effect of

such advocacy on the consultants who volunteer to participate should not be overlooked. Previous research suggests that the level of investment students have in an organization like the Speaking Center has been found to increase levels of student retention (Yook, 2012). This investment in an on-campus organization could be further utilized in concert with a greater level of investment in the community around the campus. With this experience in mind, I recommend that other Speaking Centers find opportunities for their consultants to volunteer their public speaking training and experience to the community at large. This is beneficial to the community at large, and also provides valuable experiences for the consultants themselves.

What this outreach looks like will differ from center to center, of course, but there are some more general ways in which a center could begin to open itself to community service. One simple way to implement the methodology my center has utilized is to include a section on its website directly offering community support. Such a section does not need to be overly specific in who can make use of the center’s services; it need only outline what the center can offer to those in the community who might need public speaking assistance. The inclusion of such a section can ensure that those looking to the Speaking Center as a potential source of assistance are less hesitant about reaching out. Such a section could also include what specific help your center can offer the community, considering your Speaking Center’s particular strengths; for example, a center with many multilingual employees would be uniquely positioned to aid non-native English speakers in the community, a strength which would be vital to elucidate to those looking for assistance. Outside of updates on the site, other methods could be considered to help those in the community be aware of the center’s availability as a

resource. An active and official social media presence is one easy way to communicate with the community. If possible, things like posters, flyers, and the like could also prove useful, as could tabling or participating in any sort of festival or larger community event which sees a lot of attendance and foot traffic, although these could require the utilization of more resources than those necessitated by an online presence. With that being said, community outreach does not require a surplus of resources; much as the Speaking Center strives to meet speakers where they are, a center's community outreach efforts should be built around the strengths of the center and what it has at its disposal.

References

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