

Communication Center Consultation Proficiency: Benefits of Building Better Consultants

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Communication centers operate with the collaborative effort of peer student tutors, graduate assistants, and professional faculty and staff. In my experience, student consultants play a major role in a communication center's overall success. Many sessions are taken on by undergraduate consultants, so the consultations undertake a peer tutoring format. Therefore, surveys and evaluations of the center's efficiency are often done based on the performance of trained consultants. Because consultant proficiency is directly linked to center productivity, well-trained consultants are vital to a center's campus relevancy, campus traffic, and financial stability. Centers should allocate resources for the ongoing professional development of their student educators.

The UNC Greensboro Communication Center is an established nonprofit organization, which means that the center does not profit directly from the services given. The largest amount of funding for the center that comes from UNCG are state funds, which are allocated by the administration from a tuition increase made in the early 2000's, and federal work study. Starting in 2019, around 20 of the student employees were funded through the federal work study program. These funding sources cover payroll, so professional development that happens in the workplace draws upon these funding sources. Aside from these sources, the center also receives

gifts as a result of four university campaigns, two of which are done by the university. Additional funds are raised through the selling of t-shirts at the start of the December month through a social media campaign where the main purchases are from the communication center alumni, professional staff, and the parents of staff. The other fundraising campaign is a student driven pop-up bake sale model. The center's student employees work the bake sale while they are on the clock and all proceeds are used to cover expenses for students to attend the Excellence at the Center [NACC] conference when it is on the east coast.

An allocation of these funds is directed toward student and employee pay in the center and making sure the center can run its general operations. That being said, the money made by nonprofits, including the center, can be related to how efficiently the nonprofit performs. Research by Ecer, Margo, and Sarpca (2017) supports that "For a nonprofit organization, efficiency can be defined as fulfilling its mission at the lowest cost... thus, it is important to measure efficiency and profitability to verify entrepreneurship as a basic component of assessing overall effectiveness." Communication centers have a place on college campuses where they are seen as effective, needed, have positive student perception, and are linked to a measurement of student success. Because of this, centers that succeed in getting more funding are those that are recognized as impactful by

professors and students alike and fulfill its mission. The best way to achieve this is to prioritize consultant proficiency within centers through continuous professional and communicative development.

Training tailored towards developing and refining communication center consultant competencies produce student consultants that are more adept at adjusting to speaker needs and prioritizing speaker growth and development. The semester long training course at the UNC Greensboro Communication Center for those seeking to be student consultants is instructed by the director of the communication center, who employs an andragogical teaching approach. Andragogical teaching emphasizes self-directedness, real-life application, problem-solving, and experiential learning. Andragogical methods and material are geared to the learning style of adults, expecting learners to be self-guided, independent, and to largely dictate the pace of their own development. This teaching style prioritizes that consultants-in-training gain hands-on experience with consultations and cultivate their understanding of communication concepts through self-reflection, case studies, and/or discussions.

The course provides students the opportunity to shadow active consultants in the workplace, which prompts familiarity with the job early on. The course in its completion, though arduous, leaves students competent and confident enough to handle standard consultations by themselves. Only after successful completion of the course, achieving the grade requirements and receiving generally positive evaluations from most working student consultants at the time, does the student receive a job offer from the center.

It is imperative that consultants are knowledgeable and well-rounded enough to independently lead most consultations

offered by the center. The peer-to-peer learning method utilized by the UNC Greensboro Communication Center sets up daily interactions between speakers and student consultants, so the effectiveness of each of these consultations mold student perception of the center. According to Strawser (2019), "...reliance on student-to-student feedback and informal participatory learning is essential to the success of the center" (p. 3). The success is linked to students who feel more comfortable with receiving help from competent consultants. Employing strategies that ensure the needs of the speaker is understood and prioritizing those needs during consultations is what creates a positive experience for the speaker. Speakers with positive consultation experiences are more likely to recommend the centers services and re-visit in the future. Therefore, student consultant proficiency is linked to positive center reputation among students.

With student speaker satisfaction high, there is a greater possibility that the center will succeed in receiving financial support to continue operations as a nonprofit. According to Ecer et al. (2017), "Receiving government grants, large amounts of indirect public support, and size of the organization (as measured by revenues) are associated with overall efficiency gains." Student speaker traffic is affected by consultant effectiveness, and data reflects how relevant and impactful the center is on campus. Universities and donors may be more inclined to allocate funds to an organization that maintains a consistent level of efficiency, producing noticeable results over time. Funds coming in allow for steady student employment within centers.

It is important to be aware of how the factors of finance, efficiency, and proficient student employment connect, particularly in nonprofit organizations.

Research by L. LeFabvre, L. LeFabvre, and Anderson (2017) state that “The most salient issues related to the decline in center numbers resulted from shortage of financial resources, lack of leadership, and not firmly grounding centers in a disciplinary department to aid institutional integration” (p. 440). Consistent consultant proficiency within centers, as well as adequate funding are key to keeping centers open and thriving.

The training and overall development of student consultants should be the main focus for communication centers that wish to thrive. Shifting focus can lead to a center that is more efficient at garnering financial support, producing positive results in regard to speaker development, and one that remains more relevant among students on campus. The high standards set for consultants and their development at the UNC Greensboro Communication Center is the primary reason it remains one of the largest and most successful communication centers that currently exist.

References

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