

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY RESPONSE

**Program Review
Learning Center**

EXTERNAL REVIEWERS

M.E. McWilliams, Stephen F. Austin University
La'Tonya Rease Miles, Loyola Marymount University

CAMPUS VISIT:

November 11 – 13, 2015

The review team was provided with a self study report and other documents including: assessment tools and rubrics, recent assessment data, position descriptions, training outlines for various programs and a copy of the tutor manual. The review team also reviewed the completed CAS Standards or those developed by the appropriate professional association in the field and reviewed benchmarking data and/or a comparison of best practices. During their visit, the reviewers were able to meet with and interview a variety of students, faculty and staff, in addition to community partners whose programs the Learning Center serves. They were also able to tour the Learning Center space and other spaces on campus. Prior to their visit, the reviewers were provided with USF's Vision, Mission, Values Statement, and University Life's Commitment Statement along with other university materials.

1. How did the external review committee rate the overall quality of the department—excellent, very good, good, adequate, or poor? How does the department compare with well established/recognized programs nationally? Please provide a brief rationale for the external review committee's rating.

The reviewers determined that the Learning Center and its programs were adequate and services provided to students were strong. They felt that there were a number of critical issues that needed to be addressed while acknowledging that there is a great potential to expand and improve services. The department compares poorly with benchmark programs and needs to innovate and become more data driven to improve.

Reviewers felt that there was not a clear focus on student academic support and that the department itself is situated institutionally in a way that does not allow it to fully perform. Much of the staff time and resources is devoted to external community partners that do not directly serve the needs of the USF student body.

2. What are the most important general issues that emerged from the external review process?

Reviewers suggested focusing on a few key areas:

- Departmental staffing structure and revision of job duties
- Facility and resource planning

- Utilization of institutional data to drive programmatic components
- Relationship building and collaboration opportunities across campus

3. What specific recommendations for improving the department's quality has the external review committee made to the supervisor?

Specific recommendations included a focus on an assessment and potential redistribution of job responsibilities amongst the staff. The reviewers noted that the Program Assistant served both the Learning Center and Writing Center although only reported to the Learning Center. Reviewers suggested uniting both centers under one director and use of tutors and peers in both areas. Additionally, the Director of the Learning Center spends more time coordinating than strategically planning for the department or building relationships to grow and expand services. Support should be given so that she is able to focus more in these areas.

Student staff and tutor positions should be professionalized. There should be more consistent mandated trainings and incentives for continued employment with the department. More senior staff should be leveraged to train their peers. Tutors need to be able to commit to a set schedule for an entire semester to better serve the student body and allow for recurring tutoring appointments.

A centralized, larger, and more visible space for the learning center would help to normalize tutoring on campus and encourage greater use of the service. Appropriate resources (whiteboards, copying services, etc.) and availability of resources on the weekend would also aid in the delivery of services.

The work of the Learning Center should be more connected to institutional data related to retention and graduation rates, as well as success rates of individual courses and programs. Services need to be adapted to meet the changing needs of the student body and expanded to reach more programs. The University should consider relocating community service programs to another unit more in line with community or service learning work.

In order for any changes to be successful, the department must focus on raising its profile on campus and connect with faculty and other colleagues to build both knowledge of and trust in the services provided by the Learning Center. It is suggested that an advisory board composed of faculty allies be created to help guide and advance the work of the Learning Center. The University should also consider the placement of the Learning Center (potentially unified with the Writing Center) under the purview of a member of the leadership team who can adequately advocate for the needs of the department at the VP level.

4. In the opinion of the external review committee is the department advancing the University's strategic initiatives and the divisional goals and commitments in the programs and services it offers?

There is no doubt that the services of the Learning Center are clearly tied to the University's mission. The service programs, particularly, highlight the connection to Jesuit values and social justice. Additionally, student staff of the Learning Center also have great opportunities to serve their fellow students while developing holistically themselves as student leaders. All student staff members and tutors interviewed loved their positions and the experience it has given them.

However, the Learning Center should consider if they should relocate the service programs to another unit of the University (the McCarthy Center, University Ministry, etc.) which would allow a greater focus by the Learning Center on direct delivery of service to the USF student body. This would better tie to institutional goals related to retention, persistence and four year graduation rate. Additionally, within the division, the Learning Center should find better ways to integrate with CASA so that information is shared between the two departments and referrals are tracked and assessed for relative success.

5. Is the department in compliance with professionally accepted standards? What best practices have been adopted and implemented?

The Learning Center has strong tutoring best practices. The Supplemental Instruction program particularly was highly praised by reviewers. Students who accessed services also had positive reviews of their experiences. Professional staff were deemed highly competent and are active in their professional organizations. They are well regarded on campus and by student employees.

The only compliance issue of concern was that the physical space of the Learning Center is potentially not accessible for those in wheelchairs or with other mobility issues.

6. Does the department have adequate space, personnel and budget to carry out its programs and services?

The reviewers felt as though staff was adequate and did not recommend the consideration of hiring additional staff until job duties and responsibilities were reassessed and/or reassigned. Graduate interns, for example, could focus more on tutoring programs and data collection and analysis if they were not in charge of community service programs.

Reviewers also felt that budget was likely adequate although there did not appear to be significant clarity on the source of the budget (from CASA, from grants, work study, etc.) and there should be more time devoted to budget analysis and tracking as reports of underfunding were affecting morale of the team, perhaps unnecessarily so.

Space is likely the most critical resource deficiency that needs to be addressed. The current space in the Nursing school is not visible to students and is cramped. Reviewers

recommended relocating the Center to the library or potentially utilizing other spaces outside of CASA or in other common areas of the University Center for tutoring activities. Large spaces with room for group collaboration around large whiteboards are needed. Student tutors should have access to necessary supplies and copy services at all times, and reviewers felt that the addition of access to services on the weekends could also be beneficial.

Response: At the time of the review, the observation about unnecessary budget concerns may have been accurate, since prior to that year our budget had usually covered our expenses. During the same academic year of the review, however, we spent significantly more than in our budget due to student staff wage increases and benefit mandates, the PLTL program expansion, and a huge increase in demand for tutoring. So, although misperceptions can be clarified, concerns about overall budget are justified at this time.

7. Has the department identified appropriate learning outcomes and implemented assessment strategies to measure progress in this area?

The department does assess its programs and the experiences of students that access services. Reviewers suggested utilizing more direct assessment such as observations of tutoring sessions by professional staff, and focusing on two key questions:

- What are student learning to do?
- What are tutors learning to do?

Learning outcomes should be developed under each of these questions and benchmarks or rubrics created to determine if the identified learning outcomes are being reached. This information should then be used in aggregate with institutional data and research to adapt training and services and to better advocate for additional resources within the University as needed.

What is the timetable for the response to the external review committee's recommendations for program improvement? What can the Vice President's Office do to appropriately respond to the review? As this report is written in July, 2016, it is feasible that many of the recommendations could be discussed and planned for implementation in Summer/Fall 2017. The VP for Student Life can aid in facilitating conversations with the University space committee regarding space planning and with Human Resources in regard to staffing structure and position description review. The VP may also support the department in raising its profile across campus and helping the Director build collaborations with academic and other student life units.

8. What general comments or issues, if any, are crucial to understanding the reviewer's report?

Please see full External Review report.