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Risk-Free Trial: Reviewing Writing Samples to Broaden Student Engagement



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Before making a commitment of any kind, you should try before you buy. This shopping ethos is not only prevalent but encouraged in law school, where upper-level students often attend several classes during the add/drop period to evaluate a particular professor or subject matter before settling on their course schedule. Because students tend to shy away from working with a writing specialist to engage in a regimen of issue spotting, organizational troubleshooting, and grammar exercises, I needed to entice students to “check out” my services. I had to make them an offer they could not refuse. So, to act as a gateway for other writing specialist consultations, I began reviewing writing samples for summer employment and clerkships.

I. ORIGINS

Beyond teaching a section of the first-year Legal Practice Skills course and an upper-level Civil Pretrial Litigation class, I wanted to expand the influence of the legal writing faculty while also serving the greater law school community. So in early 2014, a

few months after I arrived at Penn, I pioneered the job of writing specialist to ensure that struggling students receive extra attention and assistance with fundamental writing skills. Having identified a gap in Penn’s offerings, I surveyed other schools’ programs to shape the scope of my role. Based on my research, my plan was to meet with students individually to diagnose deficiencies in their writing and to assist with organization, style, clarity, structure, grammar, punctuation, and usage. As is typical of most writing specialists, my goal was to offer guidance and craft exercises to help students improve their writing and self-editing abilities.¹ But because Penn’s first-year course is graded on an Honors/Credit/Fail basis, I was concerned that it might be difficult to find enough students inclined to take advantage of this opportunity to refine their communication skills beyond what they learn in the classroom.

II. EXPANDING MY OFFERINGS:

To drum up more business and broaden my appeal, I decided to take some inspiration from modern-day writing centers by offering services to all, not just “remedial” students. Writing centers no longer are grammar “fix-it-shops” but instead are places where students can seek individualized assistance as they work through the writing process, from topic selection to final product.² With this model in mind, I found my hook: reviewing students’ writing samples for summer employment and clerkship applications.

Because Penn’s Career Planning and Placement (“CP&P”) office was focused primarily on students’ cover letters and resumes, I realized that there was



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a great opportunity to offer a service that would be universally attractive given students’ incentive to submit high-caliber writing samples. So I teamed with CP&P to promote my availability and willingness to help students by giving input into which paper to use as a sample, offering guidance on how to create an excerpt from a larger document, and providing a knowledgeable reader’s perspective on how to improve their papers through tailored comments. To get the word out, CP&P advertised my services through a blog post and an email. The clerkship advisor also agreed to tout my availability when she met with prospective candidates.

Little did I realize how much demand there would be. For 2014 On-Campus Interviewing, I provided individualized comments on fifty-seven writing samples, which amounted to approximately 22% of Penn’s Class of 2016. I also reviewed and critiqued twenty-one writing samples for clerkships. Word of mouth, however, generated even more participation the ensuing year. For On-Campus Interviewing in 2015, I received eighty-four writing samples, each ten pages on average. This twenty-seven paper increase shows a growth rate of 47% from 2014 to 2015. In total, I assisted more than one-third of the Class of 2017.

III. TAKEAWAYS

My writing sample review service has been very well received. Students have been most appreciative of and grateful for the feedback on their papers; one even thanked her “lucky stars” for the great support system at Penn. The students readily understand and are equipped to implement the comments because of the foundation they have from Legal Practice Skills. They also see firsthand the power of revising and polishing to improve their work product and work prospects. And Penn faculty and CP&P staff have been thrilled that students are receiving more assistance in obtaining prestigious job offers and coveted clerkships.

Because reviewing writing samples enhances the writing specialist’s appeal, schools might consider similar collaborations with career services both to remove any potential stigma associated with visiting the writing specialist and to promote the writing specialist’s visibility. Offering to look at students’ writing samples provides another arrow in the writing specialist’s quiver to reinforce the message that writing is a critical lawyering skill that will affect students’ ability not only to land plum positions but to thrive at them as well.

NOTES

1. Aida M. Alaka, *The Grammar Wars Come to Law School*, 59 J. LEGAL EDUC. 343, 355 (Feb. 2010) (observing that although the specific duties and job descriptions vary by program, the essential task of a writing specialist is to work individually with students on low-level writing problems such as basic grammar, punctuation, and usage).
2. Kristen E. Murray, *Peer Tutoring and the Law School Writing Center: Theory and Practice*, 17 LEGAL WRITING: J. LEGAL WRITING INST. 161, 162 (2011) (citations omitted) (describing the evolution of peer-staffed writing centers).