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08. Coordinating with Institutional Administration

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Coordinating With Institutional Administration

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1 The "Politics" of Coordination

Little has been written about how the director of a Quantitative and Mathematics Support Center (QMaSC) should interact and coordinate with other institutional groups. In fact, little has been written about this topic for directors of other centers (such as Writing Centers) on campus. For a fortunate few, this information is passed down from a mentor, perhaps a previous director. However, in smaller organizations, the previous director might have left before a replacement is hired and the knowledge is lost. Then, the new director has to learn the hard way – by learning from his or her own mistakes.

It takes time to develop relationships and allies on campus. Most center directors have not been trained in how to negotiate campus politics, and fewer still enjoy the process. Directors who neglect these relationships do so at their programs' peril. A center's health may depend on its director's ability to implement or resist change. Thus, these relationships and this coordination not only require that the director let others know about his or her program, they also mean that a director has to know what is important to others.

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2   Coordinating with Upper Administration

Most directors of a QMaSC do not report directly to the uppermost levels of administration. Although some may report to a provost, most will report to a dean, department chair, or some other individual. But regardless of reporting lines, many requests will end up on an upper administrator's desk. It is important that upper administration knows about the good work that the QMaSC does, and to be most effective, the director also needs to know what is important to the upper administration.

Upper administrators base their decisions on institutional priorities. These priorities may be established by boards, legislatures, or accrediting bodies [1]. They may result from the current strategic plan. They may also result from the vision of a president or chancellor [2]. The director should know that the highest level of administration may report to a board or system administration. Since decisions that these administrators make set precedents, those decisions may come slowly and with limits.

A director should also realize that upper administration will have limited knowledge about the QMaSC. Even if they are former faculty members of the institution, upper administrators do not really know everything that the center does. They do not need to be experts about the center; they just need to know the basics. Although the director might feel protective of his or her center, to upper administration it is just another unit of the institution. It has assigned space, a defined reporting structure and leadership, and an established budget. And, it is in competition with other units for scarce resources.

Having regular communication with administrators or the director's liaison in administration will be important. This may be accomplished through face-to-face meetings, regular reports, or other means. To be valued by administrators, a director must use the administrators' time efficiently, be prompt in supplying information, and work toward the institution's goals. The director must follow proper procedures, without demanding special consideration. He or she must also be flexible and able to handle QMaSC-related problems. In short, upper administrators value directors who are skilled, informed, and professional.

Directors who have problems or requests should prepare carefully before bringing those issues before an administration. They should gather convincing data and prepare possible options. Fortunately for a director of a QMaSC, many administrators value quantifiable data more highly than anecdotal information. Directors should also align their needs with institutional priorities. As an example, a new initiative could be offered as an answer to a strategic plan initiative. Perhaps an online tutoring program could support the expanded online and distance learning offerings mentioned in the strategic plan. Or, a student success objective might relate to increased retention and persistence initiatives. In this case, collecting data to show that center attendees have reduced drop/fail/withdrawal (DFW) grades might be an appropriate response. Additional information can

be found in the chapter on "Internal Evaluation and Reporting."

Regardless of the strength of the data, a director should prepare for a "no" answer. Whining is not an option. For many administrators, the answer to a whine is "no." The smart director will realize that the groundwork has been laid to support a "yes" answer at a later time.

Going around the chain of command to get more favorable treatment at a higher level is also not an option. The director who attempts that will make enemies and lose the trust of administrators.

However, following the chain of command can sometimes be difficult in an academic setting. The QMaSC may be seen as a campus-wide resource, and its director may be approached by other departments for help with their initiatives. For example, a department might have gotten a grant to provide tutoring help for a special population of students, even though the QMaSC is set up to help all students. The director might have to help by following the department's (or the grant's) reporting structure. This does not mean that this request should be turned down. After all, it can be an opportunity to build relationships and, perhaps, get something in return. In such a case, it is imperative that the director keeps his or her own supervisor informed of these situations.

To prepare for coordinating with upper administration, data gathering is an important task. To assist the director, the university's institutional assessment or institutional research group can be a powerful ally. It can help a director access and analyze the center's data along with other institutional data needed to show how the center is supporting the university's objectives. The research group can also point out useful information from national and regional databases, as well as data from peer institutions.

A member of the institutional research group is usually part of higher administrative committees and may even be present at some Board of Trustees meetings. It can be of immense benefit to a center if the Board of Trustees knows it has a growing program that is helping the student population to succeed.

3   A QMaSC's Support Structure

Like Writing Centers, Quantitative and Mathematics Support Centers are institution-specific in both structure and function. Some centers are responsible just for math courses; others add support for science courses, while others add help for other areas (business, nursing, computer and social sciences). Some just offer tutorial help, others add online resources, and others offer additional services. As a result, all Quantitative and Mathematics Support Centers do not have the same reporting structure.

Many Math Support Centers start out in a traditional mathematics department. The director is likely to report to the department chair. Quantitative Support Centers may be aligned with a larger tutorial unit, a faculty development center, or student services center. The director's supervisor may be a middle- or upper-level administrator of various ranks. Still other QMaSCs are

in non-departmental academic units headed by deans or provosts. Regardless of the configuration, the director should have a well-defined structure for both <u>reporting</u> and <u>budgetary</u> support.

The director will interact with his or her immediate supervisor for many of the same reasons that they might interact with upper administration. These include making long-range and day-to-day policy decisions, handling personnel decisions, budgeting, and short-range (annual) and long-range (3-5 years) planning. Ultimately, the director will have to work with his or her supervisor to get the data and write the reports needed by upper administration to make their decisions. To maintain communication and also go beyond dealing only with urgent issues or requests, regular meeting times should be established.

In some cases, the director may have both faculty and non-faculty status. This can create problems for the director if the faculty status is within one department while the center is under the supervision of someone from another area (such as a faculty development center or dean of another college). However, directors having faculty status in the departments they serve may create natural ties to the department through this status, which may help to minimize politics and communication problems.

What happens if a director's supervisor is not a "collaborator?" People can refuse to collaborate, and this can include one's supervisor. "Refusing to collaborate" can be through overtly avoiding collaboration, such as acting hostile to new ideas. It can also be through inactivity or neglect, such as a supervisor who sits on ideas or never responds to requests for action. This leaves the director with few options. It may mean that the director has to make collaborative alliances elsewhere. This has the potential of "going over the head" of the supervisor if the alliances are within the unit, which is risky and frowned upon by upper administration. To avoid this situation, the director should document requests, discuss strategies with other directors, and seek to communicate clearly and openly with all involved.

In addition to direct supervisors, some institutions also set up an advisory board or advisory committee for the center (or all of the support centers of the institution). Most of these committees are for advisory purposes only. Committee members may include faculty, staff, and students. Members usually come from the areas the center serves (e.g., the chemistry department, biology department, mathematics department). If advisory, the board's goal is to bring additional viewpoints to issues of importance to the director and the center, which can be a valuable communication vehicle. To enhance these relationships, the director should coordinate regular meetings with this board, bring agendas to meetings to help direct conversations, and share positive aspects, statistics, and ideas related to the center.

4   Coordinating with Other Academic Support Centers

For many universities, a Quantitative and Mathematics Support Center is not the institution's only academic support center. Some institutional administrators prefer to define various academic services as the responsibility of "home" departments. Thus, a math lab might report to a mathematics department, a writing center might report to the English department, and a speech lab might report to a journalism department. Although all provide services to help students, it is generally easier for administrators to structure and assess centers if they are within existing academic departments. However, it is becoming more common for several of these centers to be located within one entity, such as a faculty development center, student academic support services, or a University College. So, how should a director of a QMaSC coordinate with the directors of these other centers?

The answer depends on the situation. All directors have to remember that their mission is to benefit the students, which engenders collaboration between the centers. Having this common goal and recognizing similarities in center structures can be helpful in developing assessment strategies, long-term planning, working with administration, and dealing with shared or common issues and practices. Although this collegiality can go a long way, budgetary issues and contesting for resources may create competition. If the centers are within different departments with different budget structures, this competition might not be as acute as if the centers are within one group competing for one pot of money. In either case, additional initiatives might be in competition if they have to be funded by the same upper administrator.

Usually with this shared vision for helping student learning, relationships between directors are positive and alliances can be created. In areas where all center directors do similar things, they can work together and help each other on projects. For example, they can create a master schedule of services each semester. Instead of each group competing to get its information out to a smaller group of students, they all work together to get a complete master schedule out to all students. They can also jointly develop public relations materials. Writing center faculty and staff have many clever ideas that could be used to promote a QMaSC program. Conversely, often the QMaSC director has the math background to help all centers analyze data each semester to assess their programs on a consistent basis. Since this group of directors is a very valuable resource for one another, regular meeting times should be established with this group.

5   Coordinating with Academic Departments

Department chairs and faculty can be powerful allies of the director of a QMaSC. But they usually do not initiate contact with the QMaSC, not unless there is a problem. The smart director needs to reach out and connect with departments.

A Quantitative Support Center usually provides academic support for students taking courses in multiple departments. This offers the director a unique advantage. Having the ability to work with many departments, the director is frequently seen as "neutral." This can make it easier to establish collaboration and coordinate service.

The director of a QMaSC can usually establish relationships with individual faculty. Some will be more interested in "going the extra mile" for their students than others. They will put in more effort to get their students help. The director must make sure, though, that his or her program is seen as working collaboratively with faculty, not doing their work for them. Tutors do not do the faculty member's teaching.

To be more effective, the director will need to develop good relationships with department chairs. Although it is important to work with individual faculty, failure to work with the "important people" (department chairs) will cause problems. Chairs are protective of "their turf," so they will want to be included (or at least notified) if the QMaSC director works with their faculty.

As an administrator, a department chair will respond to data. A director must be willing to share center successes with department chairs. For example, if a director creates a report to show upper management how helped students have lower DFW rates than unhelped students, that information would also be of interest to a department chair. It gets a chair's attention knowing that students are passing a course in his or her department at higher rates if the students are coming to QMaSC tutoring or supplemental instruction (SI) sessions. Some chairs might even pass this information along in a faculty meeting to encourage their faculty to send students for additional support.

Department chairs and faculty can help a director in several ways. They can recommend good students as peer tutors. If they are working on an educational grant, they can ask for tutorial support funding. If they are already paying for tutors out of departmental or grant money, they might be willing to let the director advertise their tutoring services along with the center's services. This guarantees that word about the QMaSC program gets out to students. Some faculty might even give incentives to their students who attend tutoring sessions, an effective method for increasing center attendance. Encourage these efforts, and acknowledge any support that the departments give the QMaSC program.

When working with departments, the director must be careful to communicate clearly with each party served, keep department chairs informed about services and issues, and keep his or her supervisor abreast of any issues that may arise. Sometimes navigating these relationships can be tricky. For example, a department chair may recognize that a faculty member in their department could use the center's help for their course. However, the faculty member may see this as a challenge to their abilities and might resist help. To handle this situation, a director might begin by thanking the department chair for their confidence in the service that the QMaSC supplies. Next, the director might ask the chair to schedule a joint meeting with the faculty member where all three can discuss

implementation of the chair's suggestion. It can also be beneficial if the director makes his or her own supervisor aware of this meeting. Whenever possible, keep communication open and seek to maintain a neutral position on any department politics.

6   Coordinating with Other Campus Groups

The director of a QMaSC needs to interact and coordinate with other campus groups. A few of these include:

1. The Honors Program/Graduate School Departments – These programs can provide additional sources of well-qualified student workers for the center. Many of these students look for extra sources of income. An added benefit is that they are often active leaders in many programs, so their fellow students know them. They provide added visibility to the center. Graduate students, if available, can add an even higher quality of peer tutoring because of their experience. Assistantship programs with a Graduate School program can provide ongoing graduate student positions that can ensure a consistently high caliber of student assistance for the center.

2. Athletics – Many athletic programs are under increasing pressure to graduate their students. A director might be able to coordinate with the athletic program to set up a satellite center in the gym. Although its proximity would benefit the athletes, it could be open as an additional site that is conveniently available to all students.

3. Library – Some centers are physically set up in the library. If not, a small satellite location within the library should be considered. Library administrators are usually agreeable to coordinate joint programs that help students and bring more "customers" to their location.

4. Residence halls – Directors of residence halls are also increasingly being asked to do more with the residential students. This offers the QMaSC director additional opportunities to set up satellite service areas. As always, it helps to know who the QMaSC "customers" are. For example, a freshman residence hall might need a tutor with different capabilities than a residence hall housing nursing students, athletes, or honors students.

When coordinating to supply service to different locations, the director should recognize that not all efforts will be immediately successful. However, "failures" can represent opportunities. It might not be that the location was wrong; the problem could be that the timing of the services was not optimal. The director should continue to work with directors of these other programs to find ways to further benefit their students.

Finally, tutors can be a uniquely qualified group, as they may be candidates for serving as either paid or volunteer tutors in off-campus situations. Tutors appreciate added income (if any), and the institution can benefit from the positive relationships developed through this arrangement. To avoid

potential problems, the director should work with the appropriate organization (such as Student Affairs) that coordinates the volunteer services group within the institution. This group will be more familiar with issues related to transportation, safety, and appropriate contact information between student tutor and outside agency. With a few constraints in mind, positive relationships can be developed and the center's tutors can continue to grow in their tutoring capabilities through these situations.

7   Conclusions

The director of a Quantitative and Mathematics Support Center will find it necessary to coordinate and collaborate with many different groups on campus. This will require the forming of new relationships. The director should expect not only to tell others about the QMaSC program, but also to give them the information that they need to know in ways that they need to know it. It also requires the balancing of these multiple relationships. But this should not be anything new to the director of a QMaSC. Service, coordination, and relationships lie at the heart of what QMaSCs do, whether internally or externally.

8   Bibliography

[1] J. Simpson, "Managing encounters with central administration," in *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*, pp. 199–214, 2006.

[2] W. B. McLeod and J. M. Young, "A Chancellor's Vision: Establishing an Institutional Culture of Student Success," *New Directions for Institutional Research*, no. 125, pp. 73–85, 2005.