Book Review

Sanford, D. R. & Steiner, M. (2021). *The Rowman & Littlefield Guide to Learning Center Administration: Leading Peer Tutoring Programs in Higher Education.* **The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. (183 pp., Paperback $42).**

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As a novice Speaking Center Director, *The Rowman & Littlefield Guide to Learning Center Administration: Leading Peer Tutoring Programs in Higher Education* captured my attention as a valuable guidebook that informs readers how to develop learning centers that facilitate peer-to-peer support across many subjects and skillsets. Alongside scholarship, the authors write from their experiences as learning center administrators, resulting in an enriching toolkit of adaptable strategies. This book can provide a great starting point for those who are just beginning as a new director (and may be feeling a little overwhelmed), or for those who are looking "to compare their own center to an established set of best practices" (Sanford & Steiner, 2021, p. viii).

One big picture aspect of the book that I found most appealing is how thinking about centers has shifted over time. For example, the first chapter addresses how centers used to be framed around a deficit mindset that targeted underperforming or underprepared students. A stigma then attached itself to students seeking a center's help. A more recent focus, however, seeks to dismantle this stigma by emphasizing that peer tutors are not just educators but collaborators. Knowledge production is not just the responsibility of the peer tutor but also the peer client as the learning process creates opportunities for teamwork, feedback, and empathy. Thus, collaborative sessions at learning centers demonstrate that "*all* learning is active learning" (p. 4).

Beyond the structural learning center focus, the book articulates why and how to think about each component of a learning center's *presence*. Presence includes anything from physical location, proximity to other subject-specific learning centers, and the center's routines, such as whether to offer drop-in or scheduled appointments. Each chapter helpfully ends with a checklist of questions "that can be used as a rubric of self-evaluation, goal-setting, and planning" (p. viii). The book also explores the role of aesthetics in creating student-centric spaces by describing multiple layout and location considerations.

Once a learning center reaches an established status on campus with designated space and trained peer tutors to staff it, maximizing student reach unfolds as a logical next step. Marketing, outreach, reporting, and assessment routines conclude the book with future-oriented ideas. As administrators in any capacity in academia well know, sometimes we face shifting circumstances and needs, and so learning center administrators are equipped and encouraged, for example, to think about how to reimagine resource usage or how to revise and update a center's mission and

purpose. Precisely because situational circumstances vary, I grappled with some of the authors' arguments, however.

One such argument is that learning centers should be more collaborative across campus. This sounds great in theory but is hard to practice as each fight for resources, staff, and space. Furthermore, this would require more collaboration among departments, curriculum, and assignments which can be very difficult in a siloed environment like academia. However, the biggest issue I see is changing attitudes. The authors signal that framing peer tutors as experts "is the least helpful stance for tutors to assume in working with learners, because it casts learners in the complementary role of novice" (p. 28). However, peer tutor expertise does not have to pertain only to one subject. A peer tutor can help display the overlap between subjects and help the peer client see the potential benefit of visiting another learning center for additional support.

For example, when peer tutors relate by making suggestions about public speaking strategies that they have used personally or witnessed in speech contexts, their expertise and experience shine, and they provide options for students to consider. Furthermore, a peer tutor may describe the benefits to visiting the writing center about creative language usage to integrate into a speech, thereby enacting cross-promotion of another learning center. Where stigma associated with visiting learning centers remains, peer tutor expertise can bolster its legitimacy. Collaborative peer-to-peer learning need not take a top-down approach.

Perhaps this theme of overlap is most feasible for writing and speaking centers as opposed to subject specific centers, which is a strength that resonated specifically as I considered the important ways that my institution's speaking center is different from subject-specific centers. The cross-curricular reach of a speaking center holds tremendous value in providing support for student learning in practically any type of college class with a presentational assignment. This point is clear in the book despite its overall broad focus on learning centers. Speaking centers are mentioned with comparably less specificity as writing centers in this book, perhaps because the latter are a generally more established type across academia. For readers interested in specifics related to developing speaking centers, this book gives plenty of good overarching, broad structural considerations for multiple types of centers to co-exist together. Two prime examples of depth pertaining to speaking centers that I would recommend readers dive into alongside Sanford and Steiner's book include Yook and Atkins-Sayre's (2012) *Communication Centers and Oral Communication Programs in Higher Education: Advantages, Challenges, and New Directions*, and Turner and Sheckels' (2015) *Communication Centers: A Theory-Based Guide to Training and Management*.

Nevertheless, Sanford and Steiner provide readers with a valuable resource that thoughtfully engages multiple angles to learning center development, student-centered service, and mechanisms to facilitate and measure effectiveness. The margins of my book are full of "aha" moments I experienced while reading and because each chapter builds upon the content of the one prior, it is best read sequentially. The "questions for assessment" that conclude each chapter prove tangibly useful in their current form, an obvious strength because it takes the guesswork out of how to start putting the recommendations into practice. This book balances a

big picture overview of learning centers with plenty of precise guidance to those who oversee the workflows of speaking centers and hold power to make changes.

References

Sanford, D. R. (2020). *The Rowman & Littlefield guide for peer tutors*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Turner, K. J., & Sheckels, T. F. (2015). *Communication centers: A theory-based guide to training and management*. Lexington Books.

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