Learning from Writing Center Assessment: Regular Use Can Mitigate Students' Challenges

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Abstract

To demonstrate effectiveness, writing centers collect quantitative and/or qualitative information about and from the students who use their services. A broader understanding of effectiveness requires us to consider both direct measures of writing quality and why some students do not use the writing center. This mixed-methods research followed one entry cohort for two years and found that regular use of our Writing Center was correlated with higher grades in writing-rich courses, regardless of student background. Findings regarding one-time visitors indicate that adopting more flexible pedagogies is key in encouraging them to return.

Keywords: writing centers, assessment, administrators, learning centers, tutor training, learning assistance, consultant preparation

Introduction

Like most writing centers, Carleton College's collects a host of data from our visitors before or at the start of every conference: class year, major (if they have one), the kind of writing project they're working on, the class for which they're writing, the writer's hoped-for focus of the session, the date when the final draft is due, etc. We also ask writers to complete a short post-conference questionnaire that poses two questions: "What did you learn today?" and "Would you return to work with the same consultant (and why or why not)?" Writers deposit their forms in a locked box, our office assistant records the comments on an Excel spreadsheet, and we return the feedback, without the writer's name, to the consultant.

In responding to these open-ended survey questions, students tell us about the wide variety of writerly lessons learned, from how to bring their own voice to an essay in which they primarily "share knowledge," to "how to fix wordiness," to "how to write a clear thesis statement," and "how to do a literary analysis (text → ideas, not the other way around)." Students almost uniformly praise their writing consultants with comments like these: "She was responsive to my questions and had good ones of her own. Her responses seemed considered and [she] tried to think about the content and context of my essay"; "She was a good listener and patient. Asked good probing questions"; "He was really helpful and welcoming. And, I think if I'd come with more to work with, he could've helped me significantly with the editing process." In fact, out of 1,306 recorded post-conference evaluations students completed during the 2017-18 academic year, only 11 students answered "No" and 10 replied "Maybe" when asked if they would return to work with the same consultant.

When the three of us—an associate director of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Writing Center director, and the assistant Writing Center director—began working together in fall 2015, we agreed that replicating these user satisfaction surveys was unlikely to produce much new information. Instead, we decided to focus on determining if Writing Center use led to success in meeting Carleton's writing requirements, and on learning how the Writing Center could reach more students.

Purpose

As the project unfolded, the data that we uncovered prompted us to refine these research questions:

- Who uses the center and who does not?
- Do those who use the center write better than those who do not?
- Does using the center enable all students to achieve comparable writing skill levels?
- Why are non-users staying away from our center?
- Which students visit our Writing Center only once, and why do they not return?

We hypothesized that students who took more writing-rich courses and made more frequent use of the Writing Center would demonstrate more effective writing skills by the end of the sophomore year than those who did not.

Literature Review

The Challenge of Demonstrating Effectiveness

In his foundational essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center," Stephen North (1984) set out to describe what writing centers do:

> In a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing. (p. 438)

Writing center scholars have not been in complete agreement about what should take place in writing center spaces to achieve North's vision, which has made it difficult to conduct and share assessment practices. Furthermore, as Boquet and Lerner (2008) pointed out, "Research into the effects of writing centers on students' writing is rare for many methodological and practical reasons, given the wide variety of variables that contribute to students' texts" (p. 184). Put simply, writing centers have struggled to convince their stakeholders, and sometimes even themselves, that what they do with writers is effective. Believing or knowing that

senior administrators, as budget decision-makers, demand evidence of effectiveness, writing center professionals feel they must assess something—e.g., student satisfaction, students' self-reported learning outcomes, writers' confidence levels—that points toward success (Lape, 2012).

Against a backdrop of literature on attitude and writing performance, Davis (1988) noted that "students with lower apprehension have been shown to write more fluently" (p. 3). Davis' (1988) study showed that students who used the writing center had significantly better attitudes towards writing compared to those who did not. Carino and Enders (2001) investigated attitudes as well. Specifically, they explored one assumption of writing center lore, "the idea that the more times students visit the writing center, the more they like it" (p. 85). Examining survey data about students' satisfaction with their tutor, their confidence with writing, their perception of improvement, and whether or not the writer would recommend the writing center to other students, the researchers found some correlations between satisfaction and perceptions of improvement, confidence, and likelihood of recommending the center to others (Carino & Enders, 2001).

Thonus (2002) turned to interactional sociolinguistics in an attempt to research effectiveness. She triangulated "conversation-analytic and ethnographic techniques" (p. 110) with interviews, observing that "symmetry of tutor and tutee perceptions correlates with judgment of the tutorial as 'successful'" (Thonus, 2002, p. 124). Again, the study was mainly focused on attitudes or perceptions, but this is not the only kind of assessment attempted by writing center researchers. In "Counting Beans and Making Beans Count," Lerner (1997) bluntly asked, "Are we helping to improve student writing?" In an attempt to answer that question, he "wanted to know if students in first-semester composition who came to the writing center during this past fall semester had higher grades than students who did not visit: the outcome—first-semester composition grades; the intervention—the writing center" (p. 2). He found that "students with the weakest starting skills (according to their SAT verbal scores) came to the writing center most often and benefited the most" (Lerner, 1997, p. 3).

Researchers have continued attempting to assess the effectiveness of writing centers by looking at the grades their users achieve on writing tasks. Spurred by the proliferation of writing centers outside the U.S. at institutions where English is the language of instruction, Tiruchittampalam, Ross, Whitehouse, and Nicholson (2018) compared essay-writing scores of L1 Arabic students who did and did not use the writing center at United Arab Emirates University. The researchers found that "students in the experimental group who attended eight writing center consultations made significantly higher gains in their overall writing scores" (p. 10), perhaps most notably in writing skills related to higher-order concerns.

Yet, writing center scholars have recognized that this type of assessment does not necessarily establish the role of writing centers in student success. Lerner (2003), for example, returned to the issue in his essay, "Searching for the 'Proof' of Our Effectiveness." He questioned the value of considering SAT scores and students' grades in their first-year composition courses to gauge writing center effectiveness. Henson and Stephenson (2009) conducted a study in which half the students in a composition class used the writing center and the other half did not. The former showed statistically significant improvement; however, as the authors acknowledge, students chose which group they wanted to join, suggesting that motivation could have been a factor in their improvement and that those who used the writing center did so at varying rates.

Schendel (2012) advised writing center directors to refocus their assessment efforts:

> By explicitly describing your values, devising outcomes and goals from them, and communicating your results in persuasive ways to your audience, you've done the most important work associated with assessment: you have based your assessment on foundational principles within the field of writing center scholarship and you have framed the discourse about assessment of writing centers with the values of your center and the field. Rather than shaping your writing center's work around the discourse

> of assessment on your campus, you've made your assessment goals and outcomes a statement of what your center values, believes, and does. (pp. 115-116)

Jones (2001) took up the challenge of reviewing the literature on assessing whether and how writers may be changed by using a writing center, concluding that an exhaustive search of the literature revealed that only a handful of researchers had attempted to evaluate the performance of writing centers in enhancing student writing skills through the use of empirical study designs. Moreover, assessment efforts have been complicated by the variety of writing centers and the populations they serve, the frequency of a writer's visits, and other factors. Jones (2001) pointed out that indirect evidence, such as that produced by satisfaction surveys, cannot be read as indications of writing improvement. Thompson (2006) encouraged centers to continue using satisfaction surveys but also to develop ways to measure student learning. Gofine's (2012) review of the literature on writing center assessment noted administrators' reliance on surveys and usage data, which have limited validity. She recommended that centers "work together to create strong, standardized assessments with high reliability and validity" (p. 47).

Composition scholars and writing program administrators have also faced the challenge of documenting effectiveness. White's (1994) observation in "Issues and Problems in Writing Assessment" remains true: "The diverse and often conflicting stakeholders not only come from different perspectives on assessment but also have developed different definitions of the purposes of writing" (p. 12). Those who teach writing may prioritize "individual student growth" (p. 12), while senior administrators may demand accountability in the form of quantitative data. Furthermore, while students' literacy practices presumably develop and mature during their time in college, writing center administrators have acknowledged various explanations for that change: a particular writing-rich course, a professor who provided detailed feedback and met with the writer on numerous occasions, writing-savvy roommates, visits to the writing center—or some or all of the above. However, typical writing center assessment strategies rarely link these factors to the quality student writing.

Writing Center Non-Users

Salem's (2016) examination of writing center non-users at Temple University has sparked intense interest among writing center consultants and administrators. The International Writing Centers Association October 2018 meeting in Atlanta included no fewer than 10 presentations that reacted in some way to Salem's findings and conclusions. In her essay, she offered an incisive observation of the broader writing center community and, indeed, our own Writing Center:

> It is a peculiar feature of writing center research that there has been no meaningful investigation of the decision not to come to the writing center. Nevertheless, our professional discourse reflects a lot of anxiety about non-visits. Specifically, we worry that non-visits happen when students have gotten the idea that the writing center is "remedial." If they think that going to the writing center is stigmatized, then they will choose not to visit, even if they genuinely want help with their writing. Therefore, most writing centers work hard to control how the writing center is represented to students. (p. 151)

Salem focused on Temple University's 2009 entering class of 4,204 students. For the next four years, she looked at who used the center and who did not. At the end of the study, she documented that 22% of the 2009 cohort had visited the writing center at least once. A particularly intriguing data point came from a survey that students took before arriving at Temple University. One question asked students how likely they were to seek out tutoring services while enrolled. Salem found a high correlation between students' answers and their actual use of the writing center. As she notes, "It shows that students' decisions about seeking tutoring were in place before they come to the university. This means that their decisions cannot simply have been the result of what we say to them about the writing center" (p. 155). In fact, she maintains, "The choice to use the writing center is raced, classed, gendered and shaped by linguistic

hierarchies" (Salem, 2016, p. 161).

Space constraints preclude a comprehensive review of the literature on writing center assessment. What we want to emphasize, though, is that writing center administrators seem to have moved away from a defensive, sometimes resentful stance toward "proving their worth" and toward an embrace of what assessment can tell them about the work they do with and for writers and their institutions (Schendel & Macaulay, 2012).

Methods

The Study Cohort

This study tracked Carleton's fall 2015 entry cohort of 491 first-time first-year students for two years. Carleton is a small, highly selective[1] liberal arts college in Minnesota.

Data Analysis

Following the standard assessment model of inputs, experiences, and outcomes (Astin, 1993), we assembled the following data on this cohort of students.

Input data. Inputs are the backgrounds and characteristics that students bring with them to college, and which might reasonably be thought to influence the course of their education.

- Standardized test scores (SAT Critical Reading and Writing, or ACT English) were available for every student. Most Carleton students have high test scores from a national perspective, but their academic experiences are also affected by how they compare to their classmates. Therefore, instead of using the raw scores, we created a variable placing students into quintiles within their entry cohort.
- Students for whom English was a second language were identified by Carleton's admissions office.
- Students from a low-income family and/or who were the first generation in their family to attend college were also identified as

1 The middle 50% of SAT scores for this cohort ranged between 660-750 for Critical Reading, 660-770 for Math, and 650-750 for Writing. Twenty-six percent of the entering class were U.S. students of color, and 12% were international students. Fifty-four percent of the cohort received need-based financial aid.

such by the admissions office.
- Students' perceptions of their own writing ability and preparation were measured using their responses to two questions on the CIRP Freshman Survey, which provides data "on incoming college students' background characteristics, high school experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and expectations for college" (HERI, 2019). These questions were "Rate your writing ability as compared with the average person your age. We want the most accurate estimate of how you see yourself." and "Do you feel you will need any special tutoring or remedial work in writing?" Of the students in our cohort, 379 students had completed the survey.

Each of these data points was used as a separate variable in the regression analyses presented below (which consider colinearity when calculating their separate effects). In addition, we calculated a "challenge" score for each student. With no way of knowing the relative effects of the different challenges prior to the analysis, we simply counted how many each student faced, assigning one point for each of the following characteristics:

- The student's SAT or ACT score was in the bottom two quintiles of the entering cohort.
- The student did not speak English as their first language.
- The student was a first-generation and/or low-income student.
- The student reported on the CIRP that they had been an average or below-average writer in high school.
- The student reported on the CIRP that they expected to need help with writing.

The cumulative scores helped us understand the cohort as a group. Twenty-four percent of these students had a challenge score of 0; that is, they entered college facing none of these circumstances. Thirty-seven percent had one challenge point, 20% had two points, 12% had three points, 6% had four points, and 1% had five points. This score was used in our analyses in addition to the separate variables, as a way of flagging students who arrived facing multiple challenges. Our goal was to test the idea that students facing one or

more of them might, without additional effort and support, have a harder time achieving college-level writing skills.

Experiences. Two experiences were investigated: enrollment in writing-rich courses and use of our Writing Center. Many courses at Carleton involve writing, but some are deemed "writing-rich" due to a special focus on developing this skill through the number of writing assignments (typically, three or more), opportunities for feedback, and opportunities for revision. All first-term students at Carleton enroll in a writing-rich "Argument & Inquiry" (A&I) seminar. One additional writing-rich course is required for graduation, and many are offered across the curriculum. Enrollment records revealed how many writing-rich courses each student took during their first two years (through spring term 2017). More than 60% had taken two to four of these courses, while 1% had taken ten. By the time they graduate, the average student has completed six writing-rich courses. Carleton's academic year consists of three ten-week terms.

Since our Writing Center's online appointment scheduler and post-conference reports track all visits, we could measure how often each student had visited the Writing Center during each term. This resulted in three measures of use:

- whether the student had ever visited the Writing Center
- a student's total number of Writing Center visits
- the number of different terms in which the student visited the Writing Center

Fifty-three percent of the cohort never visited the Writing Center. Thirteen percent visited only once, 20% came between two and seven times, and the remaining 14% visited eight to more than 30 times in their first two years. When we look at how these visits were distributed, we find that regardless of the number of total visits, 20% of students visited the Writing Center during only one out of six terms. Eleven percent visited during two different terms and 8% during three terms, with only 8% of students having visited the center during four or more of their first six terms.

As Table 1 shows, between one third and two thirds of each

demographic subgroup[2] in the entry cohort used the Writing Center during their first two years. Though more students visited as first-year students than as sophomores, some did visit for the first time in their second year.

Table 1
Use of Writing Center by Demographic Groups in Cohort

Demographic Groups	% of these who used the Writing Center in 2015-16	% of these who used the Writing Center in 2016-17	% who used th Writing Cente ever
All students	42%	22%	47%
Females	49%	27%	57%
Males	31%	17%	36%
White U.S. students	38%	18%	42%
U.S. students of color	42%	20%	49%
International students	66%	53%	69%

Table 2 looks at Writing Center use for students facing each type of challenge identified. The highest usage rates (81%) were found among students who had said on the Freshman Survey that they thought they would need help with writing. English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), students with SAT scores below Carleton's average, and students who entered college thinking they were average or weak writers compared to their high school peers were all more likely to visit the Writing Center than their counterparts of whom these things were not true. Low-income and/or first-generation students were slightly less likely to visit than their peers with higher incomes and college-educated parents, but this was the smallest difference we observed. At Carleton in general, then, simply using the Writing Center is not an indication of prior academic or socioeconomic privilege.

2 Demographic information was obtained by Institutional Research from the college database and matched with Writing Center records. The category "U.S. students of color" includes all U.S. citizens or permanent residents who identified themselves as having any race or ethnicity other than "white," or who identified as mixed race.

Table 2
Challenges and Writing Center Use

Initial challenge	% of these students who used the Writing Center	% of students *not* facing this challenge who used the Writing Center
Low-income and/or first generation	43%	47%
ESOL	69%	41%
SAT Verbal scores below the Carleton average	56%	44%
Self-rated own high school writing as average or below on CIRP	54%	48%
Expected on CIRP to need help with writing	81%	46%

On the one hand, it was disappointing to learn that more students did not make use of the Writing Center. On the other hand, these patterns provided us with a natural experiment that allowed us to test the effect of the Writing Center for those students (of all descriptions) who did use its services by comparing them to similar students who did not.

Outcome data. Two outcome measures were available that reflected the quality of the students' writing during their first two years at Carleton: their average grade in writing-rich courses, and their score on the required sophomore writing portfolio. While course grades probably combine measures of writing quality with other variables, such as participation and improvement, it is presumably true that students who receive high grades in writing-rich courses are deemed by their professors to write well.

We used portfolio scores because they are a direct assessment by faculty members of student writing. All Carleton students are required to submit a writing portfolio at the end of the sophomore year, including three to five papers written for different academic departments and demonstrating five types of academic writing. Each portfolio is read and scored by one to three Carleton faculty members who are not already familiar with the student's work. Passing the

portfolio is considered to mean that a student is ready to do upper-level writing in their major field.

What predicts writing-rich course GPA? Looking just at the input variables, we found that students with relatively lower Verbal SAT scores had received lower average grades in writing-rich courses. The same was true of students with higher challenge scores at entry (Table 3).

Table 3
GPA in Writing-Rich Courses for Different SAT Quintiles and Challenge Scores

SAT verbal score by quintile	Average writing-rich GPA	Challenge score	Average writing-rich GPA
770-800	3.62	0	3.62
740-765	3.49	1	3.48
700-735	3.42	2	3.44
650-695	3.44	3-5	3.28
450-645	3.29		

To examine the effects of college writing experiences, linear regression[3] was used to see how the various inputs and experiences worked together. Table 4 shows that only two variables had a statistically significant effect[4] on grades in writing-rich courses: the number of terms a student used the Writing Center, and their Verbal SAT score quintile.[5] The strongest predictor of performance

3 This statistical procedure identifies the independent effect of each variable on the outcome (in this case, GPA in writing-rich courses). Standardized beta shows the relative strength of each variable. Significance reflects the likelihood of a pattern occurring by chance; values smaller than 0.05 are considered "significant" or meaningful.

4 The regression equation using inputs and experiences to predict this outcome was significant at $p<.000$, meaning that there is a genuine relationship between the significant predictors and the outcome variable..

5 There is a large literature analyzing and critiquing the use of SAT scores as predictors of academic success. Our analysis did not use actual scores; instead, we used a measure of how students' scores compared to the rest of their Carleton cohort. The low-income first-generation students in this cohort did have, on average, lower SAT scores than other students; however, simply low-income and/

in writing-rich courses was the number of different terms that the student used the Writing Center during their first two years at Carleton. Note that just having visited the center did not have an effect, nor did the total number of visits in the two years. Taking more writing-rich courses also had no effect on writing-rich GPA. (Perhaps this is not surprising since students do a lot of writing in many courses that do not carry the writing-rich designation.) Though Verbal SAT score (relative to other Carleton students) remained an independent predictor, students who faced the other challenges when they entered college all performed equally once their use of the Writing Center was taken into account.

Table 4
Linear Regression Analysis of the Effect of Inputs and Experiences on GPA in Writing-Rich Courses

Inputs and Experiences	Standardized Beta	Significance
# terms used the Writing Center	0.239	0.013
SAT verbal score quintile	0.187	0.023
Expected to need help with writing	not significant	0.120
# challenges faced at entry	not significant	0.145
Low-income and/or first-generation	not significant	0.148
Used the Writing Center at least once	not significant	0.219
# total visits to the Writing Center	not significant	0.229
# writing-rich courses taken	not significant	0.413
English is not their first language	not significant	0.596
Self-rated writing ability (CIRP)	not significant	0.657

Our Writing Center, then, can be said to be effective in helping students perform better in writing-rich courses, but students must use it consistently over multiple terms. A single visit does not have an

or first-generation status itself was not a predictor of writing outcomes. We are not attempting to generalize our findings regarding SAT scores.

inoculation effect, nor does visiting many times in a single term. It appears, though, that using the Writing Center consistently over time can mitigate the potential negative effects of a variety of challenges that some students bring when they enter Carleton.

The Sophomore Portfolio. Portfolios written by the fall 2015 entry cohort were evaluated in June 2017, and 91% received either a "Pass" or an "Exemplary" score. The remaining 9% received a "Needs Work" score. Among these students, those facing one or more of the challenges we examined had the same pass rate (90%) as did the entire cohort. Table 5 shows that for four of these challenges, students who used the Writing Center passed at a higher rate than those who did not. Students with Verbal SAT scores below the Carleton average were the only group for which Writing Center use and passing the portfolio were unrelated. Students facing three or more challenges (regardless of which ones) who had never used the Writing Center had the lowest pass rate (65%).

Table 5

Pass Rates on Sophomore Writing Portfolio by Challenge and Writing Center Use

Low-income and/or first generation	90% passed	76% passed
ESOL	84% passed	79% passed
SAT Verbal scores below the Carleton average	83% passed	82% passed
Self-rated own high school writing as average or below on CIRP	88% passed	80% passed
Expected on CIRP to need help with writing	91% passed	80% passed
Students with three to five challenges	88% passed	65% passed

Another linear regression, using the same variables in the table above plus writing-rich GPA, showed that GPA in writing-rich courses was the strongest predictor of a student's score on the portfolio (standardized beta = 0.241, p=.000). The two other

predictors were SAT verbal quintile (SB=0.178, p=.034) and the number of writing-rich courses a student took (SB=.096, p=.066). Remember, however, that the writing-rich GPA itself is primarily predicted by how consistently a student used the Writing Center.

Interviews: Why students do or do not visit the Writing Center. The results of our analysis show that students who use the Writing Center repeatedly tend to become successful Carleton writers. Given this observation, we wanted to know why half of the students never visit. To explore this question, we worked with the research methods class in Carleton's Sociology/Anthropology Department. During winter term 2016, each student in this class interviewed a member of the cohort we were studying, that is, students in their second term. Interview questions focused on how interviewees worked on challenging writing assignments, whether they sought help either from the Writing Center or someone else, and why or why not. Unknown to the student interviewers, some interviewees had visited the Writing Center and others had not, but all had received a grade of B+/B/B- in their required first-term Argument & Inquiry seminar. Trosset's analysis of the interview transcripts revealed six themes that help to explain student behavior.

The Writing Center's perceived scope and usefulness. Whether or not they had ever used the Writing Center, some students thought that staff helped with grammar and clarity, but not with content, structure, or organization. Some who had been to the Writing Center once may have believed they knew exactly what would happen at their next visit - "You read it aloud to see if it makes sense" - and decided they could do this on their own. Others were frustrated by the consultants' not being more explicit and asking questions like, "What do you think the problem is?" One interviewee said, "If I knew what the problem was, I wouldn't be there." If these students had received more specific guidance, they would have been more likely to return another time.

One international student reported that seeing a writing consultant had been helpful because they met with the same consultant every time. Some interviewees who had course-specific writing assistants (WAs)—i.e., undergraduate Writing Center consultants embedded in writing-rich courses—said they found their

WA helpful for drafting ideas or discussing what they were trying to say. However, they sometimes viewed WAs as a separate resource, so that working with a WA may not have led a student to feel comfortable with the Writing Center. Other students said they went to the Writing Center to brainstorm and construct arguments.

Perceptions of faculty as a source of assistance. Some students reported that they went to the Writing Center for help with grammar or structure, but they asked the professor for help with the topic. If the assignment prompt was unclear, students were more likely to ask the professor than the Writing Center because they wanted feedback from the person who would grade the paper. Students worried about what professors wanted. Even if they continued to find the assignment instructions confusing after meeting with the professor, they still viewed the professor as the best source of helpful information.

The formality of students' relationships with professors made the students feel they needed to have well-thought-out ideas before seeking help. They would not ask their professor to read a draft. Students were likely to be frustrated if they had gone over a paper with the professor and then received a grade lower than A-.

Belief that subject knowledge is necessary to give useful writing advice. Some students saw peers who lacked subject-area knowledge as unable to provide beneficial advice. Even if students thought another pair of eyes could be helpful, they believed that a particular individual needed specific content knowledge to provide useful writing advice. Some students said they would meet with a Writing Center consultant whose major gave them credibility in the subject matter of the paper. Others reached out to advanced students majoring in the field for which the student was writing.

Time management. Procrastination caused some students to avoid the Writing Center because they believed that, without having done some writing in advance, their visit would not be productive. Some students thought they needed to have written a draft before seeking assistance. If they wrote the first draft fewer than about three days before it was due, they believed there would not be time to ask for help. Some students incorrectly thought the Writing Center did not accept drop-in visits (it does when consultants

on duty do not have prior appointments). Appointments were seen as inflexible and hard to fit into students' schedules.

Students who procrastinated said there was not enough time to visit the Writing Center before the paper was due, or that they did most of their writing at night when the Writing Center was closed (the Writing Center is typically open until 11:00 p.m. or midnight from Sunday through Thursday). Some students claimed to work better under the pressure of last-minute work. Some procrastinators received good grades, so they did not have an incentive to plan ahead. Other students, however, said Writing Center appointments were helpful as scaffolding. Scheduling an appointment encouraged them to start working sooner to produce some writing beforehand.

Perceived stigma. There was an interesting difference of opinion about what it meant to be a "good student." Some interviewees thought that good students were more likely to be organized and make Writing Center appointments in advance, while others believed that going to the Writing Center, despite our concerted efforts to normalize help-seeking behavior, was "not what you do here [at Carleton]." These students worried about seeming unintelligent or being stigmatized if they sought feedback even from an embedded writing assistant. The feeling of stigmatization decreased when a professor encouraged all of their students to use the Writing Center.

Out of fear of being judged, some students avoided the Writing Center when struggling with something that seemed so basic as to go unexplained in the prompt, such as "Construct an argument about x." Even if the students understood all the readings about x, they may not have known how to construct an argument. Even high school AP classes may not have prepared students for the kinds of writing they were being asked to do at Carleton.

Though all the students interviewed had received Bs in their A&I seminar, some said they were still unsure of their writing ability, while others thought they were very good writers. If a student knew they had a certain type of writing challenge (e.g., incorrect grammar), they may not have visited the Writing Center because they did not want to be reminded of the problem. Students said they would not ask for help from someone if they felt uncomfortable "messing up"

in front of that person.

Perceptions of writing as an individual vs. a social act. Some students said that, unlike math, writing is personal; therefore, there is no such thing as a right way or a right answer. This attitude seemed based on the conviction that writing is expressive and subjective, and that others' views of one's writing are irrelevant. It sees writing as not dependent on eliciting a response from one's audience. Others found criticism threatening because they strongly identified with the views they expressed in a paper.

Since only 20 first-year students were interviewed, we cannot infer anything about the frequency of these views in the student population as a whole. However, each of these themes was expressed by more than one first-year student, and all were familiar to the juniors and seniors who conducted the interviews.

Responding to the Findings

We were encouraged by the strong relationship between consistent Writing Center use and positive outcomes. Despite the likelihood that some degree of the variation in both student behavior and outcomes could be explained by characteristics that we were not in a position to measure (such as motivation, or time devoted to writing assignments), we were convinced that the findings were meaningful and that both the Writing Center staff and others at the college should act on them.

Faculty and Administrators

The directors of Writing Across the Curriculum, TRIO,[6] the Learning and Teaching Center, and Advising were alerted to the findings about the effects of consistent use of the Writing Center over several terms. They were encouraged to recommend the use of the Writing Center to their students and stress the importance of repeated visits.

Writing Consultant Preparation and Ongoing Professional Development

New consultants return to campus a week before the start of fall term classes for an intensive, four-day workshop that prepares

6 Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html)

them to work with fellow undergraduate writers. In response to our research findings, we revised our consultant education program. Previous workshops emphasized the importance of non-directive tutoring because writing center pedagogy has traditionally positioned writers as owners of their work and, we hoped, helped them develop metacognitive habits. This research project demonstrated, however, that some students perceived non-directive tutoring as simply unhelpful. Rather than leave the Writing Center with a new sense of direction, some writers left scratching their heads and vowing never to return.

Salem (2016) has argued that insisting on a non-directive approach privileges some students and disempowers others, and that social justice is at stake:

> …[non-directive tutoring] is a pedagogy that is most appropriate for students who have solid academic preparation—who already have a pretty good idea of what kind of text they are expected to produce—and who already feel a sense of self-efficacy and ownership over their texts. In other words, it is best suited to students with privilege and high academic standing. When students do not understand the expectations—when they "don't know what they don't know" about writing—then non-directive tutoring doesn't transform them into privileged students, it simply frustrates them. (p. 163)

Our goal in revising the workshop was to encourage new consultants to view non-directive and directive approaches not as poles on a good-bad binary but rather as options they could use depending on the situation. Particularly useful was the "spectrum of coaching skills" (Newby, 2018), which we adapted to prompt consultants to think about the spectrum of directiveness in their own conversations with writers. In essence, this visual representation shows novice consultants that responses ranging from listening and reflecting to making suggestions, offering guidance, and instructing exist on a continuum of legitimate choices. The key is deploying

these strategies intentionally. As Newby (2018) cautions, "Coaches need to be aware of when they're in directive or non-directive mode, as well as which skills they tend to use by default without due consideration" (para. 9).

We also discussed Downey's spectrum of directiveness (cited in Newby, 2018)—adapted to reflect writing center conversational moves—in a professional development workshop for all consultants, no matter how experienced. There we asked them to reflect on and respond to two questions: (1) why are you likely to use some moves more than others? and (2) what specific factors affect how directive or non-directive you might be in any given consultation? Through reflection and discussion, we empowered our student staff to be directive when they deemed it appropriate, especially when working with students who are new to college-level writing.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that tracking the percentage of students who have visited a writing center may not be a good metric for determining or arguing effectiveness. This is because among cohort students who used the center, the largest group of users (27%) visited only once during their first two years, and we now know that a single visit makes no lasting contribution to writing skills, though it may, of course, help with an individual assignment. Two metrics that would indicate whether or not students were benefiting from Writing Center support could be tracked fairly easily:

- What percentage of students visit the center during at least three of their first six terms?
- Do students feel that their first visit to the Writing Center was helpful? (This is an important metric because students who feel this way are more likely to return.)

Our early findings show that our Writing Center is effective at improving student performance. Consistent use of the Writing Center mitigates the potential negative effect of the challenges many students face when they arrive at Carleton. However, everyone has work to do. Students need to visit consistently over time and be

realistic about what they can accomplish during a single visit. Staff and faculty need to encourage students to visit, and our pedagogy must be flexible and intentional in responding to students' needs so that writers, especially those facing multiple challenges, will return.

This project also demonstrates that, while a project like ours takes us into the (scary) unknown, it can also lead to revitalization and greater inclusiveness.

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