

WRITING CENTER DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS:
CREATING A SURVEY SYSTEM FOR COLLECTING
DATA AND COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVENESS

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Dedication

For Zoey
DON'T PANIC!

PREVIEW

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DATA AND COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVENESS

by

LOUIS AARON HERMAN, M.A.

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1

Understanding the Situational Need for Data Collection and Analysis in Writing Centers

WHAT MAKES A WRITING CENTER

As budget cuts, increased tuition, and student debt become more prevalent issues among institutions of higher education, there is increased pressure for departments to find ways of proving their worth within the institution; none more so than with Writing Centers. As an interdisciplinary service, Writing Centers across the country continually find themselves fighting for dwindling resources, arguing that the service they provide to a student body is just as valuable as discipline-specific student services such as disciplinary tutoring centers and career service centers. Writing Center directors, administrators, and managers need to prove that their work contributes to the overall goal of their institution, through GPAs, retention, or students' professionalization after graduation. Collecting, analyzing, and reporting on relevant data becomes an overwhelming task, taking up as much space as one is willing to give it. Yet, assessment of Writing Center success is necessary to continue to fight for the relevance of the work writing center administrators put into their center to make it a success. The problem lies in being able to quantify what is typically a qualitative issue. Writing improvement is not normally measured with concrete numbers and hard data, but rather in long-term studies, holistic in nature, and wholly dependent on peer collaboration (student, faculty, and administration) and participation over long periods of time, typically across multiple disciplines and in many differently taught classes on the same subject (Salem, 2014). With such disparate incoming data, both qualitative and quantitative, it becomes daunting to sift and sort through the myriad of students a writing center sees, and put their progress into meaningful categories to show a wide

range of audiences that the work done at a writing center matters. Writing center pedagogy does not focus only on the writing intensive disciplines normally found in the College of Liberal Arts, but has begun to reach far into many of the STEM fields to show that these students engage in writing as frequently as their peers in the humanities. The writing center is a broad student resource, it therefore becomes even more important for writing centers to face the challenge of collecting data and show its impact on the university. So, how does a writing center define success?

Since this is a project that focuses on writing centers, I would be remiss if I didn't invoke Stephen North (1984) and his statement: "[Writing Centers] make better writers, not better writing." This statement was first concocted to respond to those outside of a general university setting who ask the question about what writing centers do. North's quip is more like a back-pocket elevator speech that writing center directors/staff can pull out whenever faced with that question. In my experience, it is a question that is asked frequently, and it is a loaded question. It could be asked as simple curiosity of what writing centers actually do as writing centers are not typically an institutional powerhouse that everyone is familiar with. On the other hand, it could be an exploratory question from someone trying to figure out where exactly the writing center fits in the larger institutional context. North (1984) states that this quip is meant for people outside of the university, yet I have used it in the past to tell people at the university what the writing center does. And, regardless of who asks the question, North's response is wholly inadequate to truly describe what writing centers do for students.

There are several aspects of North's statement that can be expanded, and that is largely what I do in this dissertation. The notion of "better writers," I argue, means different things for different audiences. Mostly, it is not the study of what makes better writing; scholars have been

digging at the question for decades and still haven't found the key to what makes better writing. Instead, I argue, that better writing doesn't need to be examined as closely as we might suspect. Better writing means different things for different people inasmuch that it is a difficult aspect of learning to measure accurately. However, the results of better writing are easily measureable and from that measure, writing centers can create arguments showing the benefit and impact the writing center has on the institution. And this is where we might find a better answer than North's when asked about what writing centers do. Instead of talking about better writers, we need to be specific in the impact that a writing center has on students, not in their writing, but what they are able to accomplish because of better writing.

Being able to differentiate the needs of audiences at the institution and communicate student success, or the results of "better writing" to those audiences, is crucial for a writing center's viability, regardless of how students achieve better writing. Instead, it is the results of better writing that are measureable and similar across institutions. The other aspect of this is a simple exercise in audience awareness. Writing centers need to understand the needs that different audiences have for seeing how units impact the institution as a whole. Understanding how the writing center can provide that impact, based on the audience asking the question, is crucial for a writing center to convey its viability. Most institutional needs are fairly similar when it comes to student success; however, different audiences at the institution are interested in different aspects of student success. I will talk about the needs of different audiences at the institution later in this chapter.

The other aspect of North's statement that I want to examine is the notion of "We make" as writing centers' primary focus of the work they do with students. Often, the goal of the writing center is misinterpreted as a place that holds the key to better writing rather than a center

for teaching and learning. Instructors see the writing center as a place that holds some specialized knowledge for writing where students can enter as bad writers, and leave as better writers (Barnett, 1997; Carino, 1996; Kail, 2000; Hayward, 1983). The idea of how writing centers accomplish that feat is talked about at length within the writing center community, but rarely leaves that circle of conversation into the larger discourse of the institution. While writing centers approach their work with students differently depending on the student population and need, the ultimate goal is to improve student writing. While North's assertion is that writing centers make better writers, this is achieved in a myriad of ways. It would be difficult to walk into two different writing centers and find them using the same pedagogy or approaches. Instead, writing centers adapt to the institution for which they work, serving the students in the ways that those students need most. And so arguing that we make better writers, while uniform in intent, is not so in procedure. This poses a difficult argument to measure. Since writing centers are malleable to the needs of the population they serve, what works for one center, may not work for another. However, it is not necessarily the procedure that matters most here. I have been to numerous conferences and presentations on writing center approaches and pedagogy, and have been able to implement maybe 20% of what I've learned at my own center. This is not to say that what these other centers are doing is wrong or bad, it just doesn't fit with the institutional context that we operate in. Instead, it is the results of those procedures that matter most. Are the procedures that writing centers engage in, and assist students with, producing better writers? Again, I stress that better writing is not what needs to be measured, rather what students can achieve with better writing skills.

Both of these aspects of writing centers (how a center makes better writers and what better writers look like) present enormous challenges for analysis. So, instead of burdening

myself with trying to delineate what better writing looks like and how we can achieve that through the writing center, I looked to the results of better writing contextualized through the needs of several different stakeholders at the university. What I discovered is that studying the institutional context of the writing center to determine what stakeholders within that institution value in terms of student success, and then begin to analyze those aspects of the writing center, creates a more effective argument to communicate to said stakeholders. By understanding the audience's needs for information in regards to student success, writing centers can develop analytical methods that speak to those needs while still completing their mission of making better writers. What also came from examining these needs and creating a survey system was something cyclical. In discovering what the institution needed in terms of student success, I was able to find ways of adapting our pedagogy to create even more success under those terms. The writing center became an additional audience, or stakeholder, once all the other audiences' (students, faculty, and administration) needs were met.

LITERACY SPONSORS

It is also important to talk about how writing centers position themselves as “literacy sponsors,” a term defined by Deborah Brandt (2002) and then reformed by Lori Salem (2013) as a person or institution that provides access to a specific literacy. The literacy sponsor is a commodity that is formed by the institution as a way to improved knowledge for students, but also as a form to improve the institution as well (Brandt, 2002). Literacy sponsors are, in part, created by the major stakeholders within the institution for the benefit of the students and for the benefit of the institution. Salem (2013) goes on to say: “a university targets its resources so that certain people (usually tuition-paying students) can learn certain kinds of literacy in ways that

cohere with and support the university's overall mission and goals" (p. 23). Thus, the creation of a writing center is not a benevolent act for the benefits of the students. Instead, writing centers are created with the overall mission of the university in mind. This creates a strong connection between what the mission of the writing center is and what the mission of the university is. It is therefore important for the writing center to be able to speak to the university (all its stakeholders: students, faculty, and administration) in a way that meets the goals and missions.

To be able to show that a writing center is successful within an institution, there are several aspects that writing center administrators must take into consideration. Data collection and data reporting are the most important aspects to be able to speak to a specific audience about the worth of a writing center. As writing center directors face speaking to multiple audiences, we need to understand which data is relevant to different audiences, who are often concerned with different aspects of student writing. Upper administration¹, for example, is commonly concerned with retention numbers as well as overall GPAs across the multidisciplinary landscape of students, faculty is concerned with their specific pass/fail rate in their courses and class GPA, and students want to know how good the writing center is and how it can improve their writing. In addition, data collection is an effective method for understanding the internal workings of the writing center, which will help the center to effectively adapt to changes in the institutional community and student body to provide assistance to the students who visit the center. In all, there are three external audiences that writing centers most often have to speak with: students, faculty, and administration, and all three audiences have different questions regarding the operation and effectiveness of the center. However, all the audiences' questions, or need for

¹ Throughout this entire dissertation I will use "upper administration" to refer to anyone in the position of Deans and Provost, as these are the positions I have had most of my contact with in upper administration.

information, relates to the larger mission of writing centers assisting students to become better writers.

While the upper administration is frequently concerned with the overall function of the university in providing students with education, their purpose is commonly focused on ensuring that students are navigating the institution and completing their education in a successful manner. One of the upper administration's major concerns is graduation rates: monitoring how quickly and effectively students complete their credit requirements to graduation. Most often, this is qualified by a 4-6 year graduation rate, and in Texas directly linked to the state's 60x30TX plan in which Texas institutions are working to have 60% of Texans ages 25-34 obtaining certificate or degree by 2030 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015). Additionally, in Texas, state appropriations per student have remained more or less constant since 2008 (See Figure 1). And in 2013, states were spending 28% less per student on higher education than they did in 2008 (Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman; 2013) As Oliff et al. show in their 2013 report, "Students with less academic preparation and fewer financial resources are more likely to need intensive turning to ensure that they are keeping up with their coursework... to ensure that they get the credits they need to graduate" (p. 15). This means that even as expectations for graduation rates increase, the funding to support these outcomes remains stagnant. Graduation rates are directly linked to the students' ability to pass course and achieve some of these statewide goals in an efficient manner. In addition, many public institutions' funding is directly related to graduation rates, so this aspect of student success is of utmost importance. There are many recent examples of performance based funding in higher education. Previously, the majority of state funding was based on the number of students the institution enrolled. However, states like New Mexico, Tennessee, Mississippi, Ohio, Louisiana, and Missouri have adopted

performance based funding models which tie performance metrics, such as graduation rates, to the state appropriations for the institution (Milligan, 2013). Yet, with diminished funding it has become more difficult to improve graduation rates.

What this project takes into consideration is that all of these degrees and certificates will include some aspect of writing regardless of the discipline, and therefore need to be analyzed in terms of writing ability and outcomes to meet many of the above mentioned programs. From the perspective of the writing center, it is crucial to show that a student's ability to pass a course and proceed towards graduation is directly linked to successful writing a student does in class. This is an area that the writing center can directly impact.

While having a student's ability to graduate in mind, faculty, on the other hand, are more concerned with the student's ability to pass the course. How well students are answering the assignment guidelines, whether students are doing enough work prior to due dates, and intellectual growth are the larger concerns for the faculty member. Again, because most classes have a writing aspect of one form or another, be it a specific writing assignment, discussion postings, and even emails to the instructor, the writing center can have a direct impact on the students in the classroom and their ability to pass the course. This also speaks to a faculty member being able to adapt their own classroom pedagogy to fit the needs of the student. If they are able to see the success and failure points of writing assignments in their classroom, where students stumble the most, where they succeed, faculty can improve their syllabus and provide even more pathways to success for the students. Again, this system becomes cyclical in that the more we are able to measure success of the students, the more we are able to adapt our pedagogy and approaches to improve student success.

Finally, the writing center needs to be able to communicate to students. In my experience there are several different types of students who visit the writing center: those who are active in their own learning and visit the writing center on their own recognizance, students who are recommended to attend a session at the writing center by their instructor, students who will receive extra credit for attending a session at the writing center, and students who are required to attend sessions at the writing center. Students need to know that their peers have a good relation with the resource, and that is something that writing centers should speak to. Being able to communicate to all students, no matter their motivation, how the writing center can assist them in achieving better grades in courses, becoming better writers, and moving closer to graduation, is again something that the writing center can have direct impact on. Being able to communicate to students how the writing center improves success rates, in terms that are relevant to students, is an important aspect of the writing center. Being able to cut through some of the old stigmas of writing center expectations² is in part one of the primary contact points for students throughout the institution. Collecting data on student success, and showing the students that their success rate can be improved if they visit the writing center, is an asset in achieving the overall goals of the institution at the local level. Speaking with students about the skills and knowledge they acquire from the writing center goes beyond the classroom and can impact their success once they graduate. This aspect of writing center impact would be an additional, and very interesting, aspect to study with the students. However, the focus here is only on students' success within the institution.

The survey system that I will describe in later chapters assists writing centers in determining the best approach for sharing knowledge with their students. Once all the arguments

² As I mentioned previously, instructors often think of writing centers as places of editing and proofreading, not teaching and learning. This misrepresentation of writing centers is often carried by students as well.

are made to upper administration, faculty, and the student body, writing centers can see where they might be lacking in providing tools for student success. Looking at the audiences' need and determining how much of that need is being fulfilled by the mission of the writing center will provide an important clearing house of information that writing centers need to take into consideration. By continually monitoring and reporting on the success of students in these ways, writing centers can adapt approaches to improve their ability to make better writers. The need for this information also serves as a defense mechanism for writing centers. When that question of "what do you do?" is asked with the implications of questioning the importance of a writing center within an institution, writing centers can respond with a more in-depth analysis of what they actually do for students.

THE UNIVERSITY

This survey system was originally created to collect data and create arguments for The University Writing Center located at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) in El Paso, Texas. UTEP is a public university, and part of the University of Texas system, and while not yet a Research 1 institution, UTEP holds a strong commitment to research as part of its main faculty focus (utep.edu). UTEP's mission is to provide access and excellence to a 21st century student demographic. UTEP is one of the nation's largest Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and is located on the border of El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico. The bi-national region provides a unique student demographic of 80% of the 23,922 student body identifying as "Hispanic." Ninety percent of the student population is from the region, and UTEP is considered a commuter campus (very few students live on campus, rather they stay off campus, typically with a family member, and commute to campus each day). Nearly 20% of college students are first-generation

students, and among those nearly 63% are Latin@/Hispanic. Traditionally, first generation students graduate within 4 to 6 years at a rate of 27% compared to a 47% 4 to 6 year graduation rate for students of parents who graduated from college (National Center for Education Statistics). This statistic becomes even more significant at my institution where 85% of the undergraduate student population is LatinX/Hispanic³, some of which commute from Juarez, Mexico every day for class (utep.edu). The unique position UTEP holds both in the region and as an institution of higher education, provides a distinctive site for study in many aspects. The students, faculty, and administration of UTEP has had a singular vision of accomplishment for the last 30 years, and is considered one of the top universities in the country because of it. It is also because of this distinctive position that writing literacy sponsorship also becomes necessary to examine through the lens of the mission and expectations of the institution. It is relevant to take both the physical and educational position of the university, the stakeholders that keep the mission moving forward, and the students the university serves in mind while creating the survey system that is described in this project.

THE ASSESSMENT MODEL

Most writing centers have an assessment model of one sort or another. However, these assessment models do not always provide relevant data to all of the above mentioned audiences. Many writing centers are able to produce on-demand raw data relating to number of visits, hours spent working with students, and a small qualitative assessment of perceived student improvement based solely on the perspective of the tutor providing the assistance. Next level

³ The term “Hispanic” is typically used to refer to anyone who is from a Spanish speaking country and is often the term institutions use to categorize people who fit into the demographic. LatinX, also written Latin@, is a more specific term that refers to people who were born in Latin American countries and live in the U.S. The “X” and “@” replace the last letter to signify the inclusion of both the male and female gender in the word.

assessment can show customer satisfaction of student success (students' perspectives of their own improvement in writing). Even further, most writing centers can show that their numbers have direct correlation to issues such as retention and overall GPA (Brandt, 2009; Mullen, 2010; Salem, 2014). However, at this time, there are no writing center assessment models that are designed to speak to all three audiences with a single mode of assessment.

Without the capacity to speak to multiple audiences, writing centers are missing opportunities to have their success heard within the institution. This issue was addressed in Gofine's (2012) study on the assessment of writing centers across the country. In "How are we doing? A review of assessments within Writing Centers," she focused on both quantitative and qualitative methods of assessments. Her findings were twofold. One, writing center assessment needs more cohesion amongst scholars, that while "investigators currently develop isolated lines of research, a more effective approach might be for researchers to collectively focus on a small number of issues that are of common concern to the majority of writing centers" (Gofine, 2012, p. 46-47). In her view, because writing centers are currently focused on how they are positioned within their own institution and how they serve their own student population, investigators are limited in what they can do in assessing the success of improved writing. This is a common problem considering demographics, culture, and institutional goals that writing centers face when trying to collect qualitative data to show their success within the institution they serve. What may be integral qualitative data for one institution may not be relevant to another. Gofine also points out that while writing centers attempt to employ quantitative data collection and analysis methods, it is of limited validity when attempting to assess subjective material such as improved writing. Gofine suggests that a national standardization of assessment be implemented that can "generate data for writing center's annual reports, examining how tutorials affect