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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Georgiy Uzkih, WCC peer consultant and research assistant for his work on the statistical analysis as well as Marta Troya Martinez and Edmond Squires for their feedback on the quantitative aspects of this paper. Finally, I thank all my colleagues and students at the New Economic School for the supportive environment that made this work possible.



Decisions Squared: A Deeper Look at Student Characteristics, Performance, and Writing Center Usage in a Multilingual Liberal Arts Program in Russia

L. Ashley Squires
(New Economic School)

Abstract This article contributes to the ongoing discussion of student characteristics and usage/nonusage patterns in the writing center. Using a sample of 107 economics students from a selective, bilingual liberal arts program in Russia, the author finds statistically significant relationships among GPA, gender, English-language proficiency, and writing center usage. Namely, writing center usage predicts higher GPA and closes two achievement gaps related to gender and English proficiency. These findings complicate the picture presented by Lori Salem (2016), whose research showed gender, low SAT score, and being an English language learner to be strong predictors of writing center usage and produced a lively discussion about whether traditional writing center methods could be failing the students most likely to use the service. The present study suggests that while users may have less systemic social privilege, they also tend to be stronger students. As such, interventions should take care not only to address the needs of the students who actually visit but explore barriers to writing center access for nonvisiting students who are at the highest risk of dropping out.

Keywords writing center, peer tutor, student success, RAD research

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Lori Salem's award-winning article, "Decisions . . . Decisions" (2016), opened an important discussion about usage and, perhaps most originally, nonusage patterns in writing centers. In her analysis of over 4,000 students at Temple University, she found that the characteristics most likely to predict writing center visitation were low SAT score, being female, and being a multilingual writer. On this basis, she suggests that the modern constituency for writing centers at American universities is quite different from the white, middle-class, monolingual clientele for which they were created many decades ago. She thus

calls for a rethinking of writing center pedagogy "to ensure that it meets the needs of students who visit" (p. 162).

Writing center professionals have, of course, long been aware of the shifting demographics of their institutions and the need to adjust our pedagogical practices. However, in an interview in early 2018, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* represented Salem's recommendation as far more controversial than it actually was (Jacobs, 2018). The *Chronicle* article generated some nods of agreement in response to the underlying recommendations but also considerable pushback against its

representation of the field as a whole. Indeed, Salem herself objected to her characterization as a “maverick” in a letter to the editor that was quoted on the *Chronicle* website and posted in full on the WLN blog (Salem, 2018).

Where Salem’s work has been cited by writing center specialists, it is primarily to acknowledge and extend her recommendations about nondirective tutoring methods (Haen, 2018; Pittcock, 2018) and to note that her findings challenge the notion that writing centers are not (or not just) remedial spaces (Lunsford, 2018; Wilson, 2018), a concept that has been at the core of writing center identity for decades (Lerner, 2003). The profile of writing center users that emerges from Salem’s statistical analysis is sometimes seen as confirmation that regardless of the professional identity work that writing centers conduct and the signals we seek to put forth, students invariably and inevitably view us that way. If they didn’t, the logic seems to be, then our clients would be more “elite.” However, Andrea Lunsford, in a blog post for Macmillan’s “The English Community,” questions “the efficacy of seeing students who use writing centers as somehow ‘remedial’ or in need of remediation” (Lunsford, 2018). And there is indeed something disquieting about the way in which this remedial stigma is being internalized by writing center professionals and reciprocally applied to our students, especially on the basis of demographic characteristics and metrics that act as a proxy for forms of relative socioeconomic privilege, like SAT scores.

Indeed, there is a troubling inference near the end of Salem’s original article that, I think, needs to be more deeply interrogated:

Earlier I noted that the research literature on education choice has repeatedly shown that students who have greater privilege typically make educational choices that increase their privilege, while students with less privilege do the opposite. And here in this research, we have just seen that students with less privilege are more likely to choose to visit the writing center. So, could it be that visiting the writing center is somehow a downwardly mobile choice? (Salem, 2016, p. 162)

This question emerges out of a long-simmering worry among many writing center professionals, epitomized in Nancy Grimm’s 1996 essay, “The Regulatory Role of the Writing Center,” which she begins by suggesting “that we don’t always accomplish as much as we think we do” and “in the long run we sometimes do more harm than good” (p. 5). This concern is picked up in Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* (2013), itself cited by Salem, in which the author lays out the very real if somewhat sobering fact that “most students do not want writing tutoring (and/or they do not want tutoring the way we have conceived it)” (p. 73). These are important provocations, but discovering that not all students want us or that the type of student who wants us is not who we traditionally thought is not the same as claiming that we don’t help the students who come. Measures of tutorial effectiveness are not offered in Grimm or Grutsch McKinney (though, to be fair, this isn’t their purpose), and they aren’t offered in Salem’s essay either.

My problem with Salem’s intimation that using the writing center may be a “downwardly mobile choice” is that it simply isn’t a conclusion one can draw based on the data Salem presents. Her study looks at the characteristics of students as they arrive at the university. It does not explore data points related to student performance during their university studies (such as student persistence, time to degree, or GPA). The paragraph cited above ends with a question mark, indicating, again, that Salem intends to provoke here rather than to conclude, but this inference informs her subsequent reflections about the ways in which writing centers may be failing these students. And while those critiques are themselves important to consider, at best, Salem presents a hypothesis about the relationship of writing center usage to student performance and social mobility that needs to be tested.

In a survey of writing center activities at 76 institutions, Jackson and Grutsch McKinney (2012) found that only 23% conduct research on writing center usage and long-term indicators of academic success like GPA and retention. Of what research is conducted, very little, if any, is published. A literature search

on writing centers and GPA yielded just one 2001 *WCJ* essay by Molly Wingate, which found a very small difference in the average GPA of writing center users at Colorado College and the averages of their respective classes. Users were also more likely to graduate, though Wingate does not report the statistical significance of these results. More evidence of writing center effectiveness related to retention exists, though much of it is published outside of the major writing center or composition studies journals.¹ A 2003 review article by Griswold in *Academic Exchange Quarterly* cites multiple studies showing a positive relationship between peer tutoring services and student persistence but notes the need for more specific attention to writing centers. Since then, there has been at least one study showing a positive relationship between writing center use and retention (Ball, 2014). However, another study on the impact of library services (including an in-house writing center) on retention conducted at James Madison University found exactly the opposite, but the authors caution that it “should not be interpreted that use of the writing center leads one to withdrawal from an institution of higher education. Instead, it could be interpreted that students’ need to use the writing center is more related to their at-risk levels,” given that the majority of their users are multilingual and students with low standardized test scores (Murray et al., 2016). The researchers suggest that the results be used to identify and intervene with those at-risk students.

The present article aims to investigate this basic but nevertheless important question of the relationship between writing center usage and long-term student performance, to see, essentially, if the writing center does appear to be a “downwardly mobile” choice. This question was of particular concern to me since my writing center exclusively serves one of the groups identified as high propensity writing center users: English language learners. Housed in a liberal arts program in Moscow that seeks to prepare Russian students for participation in the international business and academic communities, in which English is the lingua franca, it behooves me to be concerned about whether and how we are helping

students succeed in their goals. What I found in our data complicates the picture substantially and offers some qualified reassurance for writing center administrators. Looking at the relationships among student characteristics, writing center usage, and GPA, I arrived at findings that were consistent with Salem’s: students with less social privilege appear to be more likely to use the writing center than more privileged students. However, when GPA was taken into consideration, the findings call this downward mobility hypothesis into question: students who visit the writing center at this institution have higher GPAs and maintain their GPAs better over the course of four years than students who do not visit the writing center. Indeed, I found evidence that writing center usage is associated with the narrowing of achievement gaps in our program specifically related to English language proficiency and gender.

As I will explain, it is not at all clear that the writing center is the *cause* of these higher GPAs. It is likely, in fact, that self-selection is a significant factor here: the writing center tends to attract students who are already more motivated and high-achieving relative to their cohort. For reasons that shall become clear in the next section, the population of students I am analyzing is unique in ways that make it both useful for this sort of research but problematic when it comes to generalizing for undergraduate students as a category. My hope is that my analysis serves as a model that can be replicated in other contexts and that will contribute to a robust conversation on this issue.

The Writing and Communication Center and the NES-HSE Joint Bachelor’s Program in Economics: An Overview

The writing center data I will analyze here is unusual because it comes from Russia. More specifically, it comes from what is now the most selective undergraduate program in the Russian Federation: the Joint Bachelor’s Program of the New Economic School and the Higher School of Economics, where I have been teaching and directing an American-style

writing center since 2013. Each of the sponsoring institutions for this program was founded after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The New Economic School (NES)—a private graduate school founded by international economists and philanthropists (including the Soros Foundation) to begin training former Soviet citizens in modern, liberal economics—began offering master's degrees in 1992.² In 2018, it was named the best institution of higher education in the country by *Forbes Russia* (Mokroysova et al., 2018). The Higher School of Economics (HSE) was founded by young faculty who left the Faculty of Economic Sciences at Moscow State University, which remained mired in Soviet political economy (Ofer, 2012). HSE has since become the largest publicly funded university in the Russian Federation.

In 2011, NES and HSE collaborated to form the Joint Bachelor's Program for which NES (as the more fully internationalized school) would provide the teaching faculty and HSE the facilities and administrative resources. This program offers an American-style liberal arts education with a major in economics and functions somewhat like an honors program at a large comprehensive university. It is completely unique in Russia in that, like at an American university, students may choose classes to fill a given set of requirements and, in addition to their econ classes, take courses in literature, the natural sciences, art history, and a range of other elective subjects. Admission to the program is highly competitive. Most students are winners of national Olympiad competitions in mathematics and related fields, which means that they are allowed to attend any university program in Russia without taking an entrance exam and with full financial support from the Russian government. The program is very small, admitting fewer than 90 students each year.

The Joint Program is unique for Russia in one other regard (though it is becoming less unique as other universities seek to internationalize): it uses both Russian and English as languages of instruction. While all students thus far are Russian, the faculty hail from all over the world—the United States, Spain, Greece, and Turkey, to name a few countries—and even Russian faculty, who hold

PhDs from top U.S. universities, teach some of their courses in English. The students are generally looking to either earn a PhD from a Western university or to work for international companies. This means that English is a required subject of immense importance, not only for success in the program but for students' futures.

The Writing and Communication Center (WCC) was founded in 2011 specifically to serve the Joint Program and has always been directed by a specialist with a literature or composition PhD from the United States and U.S. writing program experience. As such, it was built with many "orthodox" writing center principles at its core. However, the center employs both native Russian speakers and native English speakers as professional consultants and peer tutors. Consultations are offered in both Russian and English, but the overwhelming majority are conducted in English (88% in AY 2017–2018).

The Joint Program is therefore the closest thing you will find in Russia to an American-style higher education program, and the WCC is very much an American-style writing center. Nevertheless, its location outside of the United States makes this study highly relevant to the study of non-Anglo-American (especially non-Anglophone and multilingual) writing centers, a context in which the standard, "orthodox" practices of American writing centers have also been challenged (Chang, 2013; Tan, 2011; Zhang, 2019). Nondirective pedagogy and peer tutoring, for instance, have proven difficult to implement in some Asian contexts where cultural norms governing authority conflict with the leveling impulses that inform these pedagogies in the United States (Okuda, 2018; Turner, 2006). Likewise, the resistance of Anglophone writing centers to proofreading texts and teaching grammar seems counterproductive if not nonsensical within institutional contexts in which effective and accurate communication in a second language is an urgent concern (Kyle, 2018; Tan, 2006). International writing centers are also often called upon to serve very different constituencies. Writing centers in Russia, for instance, predominantly serve faculty and graduate student researchers working toward publication in international,

English-language journals (Glushko, 2021; Squires, 2018). At the same time, it is clear from discussions at regional writing center conferences that the concerns shared by international writing centers and American writing centers, especially with regard to the question of how we know if we are helping, remain quite similar (Johnston et al., 2010).

While the student population examined in this essay clearly differs from those found at American universities, those differences are, in many ways, quite useful for the purposes of this study. For one thing, the sample is relatively homogeneous, as all students share a nationality, native language, and major. This similarity is helpful when looking at data on student performance in the university, as we have reduced the number of student characteristics that might have an impact on performance and writing center usage. We can assume, for example, that differences in GPA are not substantially influenced by variations in difficulty and expectations across majors, a common criticism of GPA as a measure of student achievement for English-language learners (Graham, 1987; Ho & Spinks, 1985).

Also useful is the fact that, while all of our students are native Russian speakers learning English as a foreign language, the Joint Program has a consistent and well-validated placement exam for sorting students into the appropriate English courses at the start of their studies. The examination is done in-house and consists of a multiple-choice grammar test, an essay exam, and a 15-minute face-to-face interview with an English instructor. On this basis, students are placed into one of three levels: L100, L200, and L300. L100 students, the beginners, take a two-semester English-language course with a Russian-speaking instructor who can provide explanations in the students' native language. L200 students skip the 100-level courses and enroll in one semester of Intermediate English followed by one semester of Introduction to College Writing. Both 200-level courses are currently taught by the same faculty member, who is an American TESOL specialist. L300 students skip both of these levels and enroll directly in Advanced College Writing, an English-medium course that is similar to a freshman comp course at

an American university. This course has been staffed by different people, some TESOL specialists and some Rhet/Comp specialists. Once students complete the English courses they are required to take, they may enroll in the English-language electives of their choosing. This placement procedure allows us to break down the overly simplified and problematic category of "non-native speakers" a bit more granularly and to consider the relationship of relative English proficiency to other variables of interest.

Data and Methodology

Since 2013, the WCC has systematically collected data on every consultation in the form of a session report filed by the consultant at the end of each appointment. Session reports are audited alongside payroll reports to ensure that each consultation is accounted for, and the data are checked for errors at the end of each semester.

This study looked at complete data sets on two graduating classes (Class of 2017 and Class of 2018) and incomplete data on the other classes enrolled at the time. I examine the two complete classes, which contain a total of 107 students, 66 of whom (62%) visited the writing center at some point in four years. My findings about what characteristics predict users and nonusers are consistent with earlier studies, and I would posit that one big reason for our high usage rate is the extremely high concentration of precisely the kind of student one would expect to need a writing center.

While our center collects a robust array of information on each session, for the purposes of this study we are only interested in whether a student paid a visit at least once in four years. I also requested data from the program itself on GPA at the end of the students' first and final years, English placement level at the time of matriculation, gender, hometown, and grade point average across the required English language courses.³ In the HSE-NES Joint Program, grades are given on a 10-point scale, with scores 1–3 considered failing, 4–5 considered satisfactory, 6–7 good, and 8–10

excellent. Students' GPAs are a simple average of their grades across all classes and are also reported on a 10-point scale, with 4 being the minimum for passing. Only students who graduated from the program on time are included in this study. The Joint Program students certainly do drop out or take extra time to graduate, but the numbers are too small to enable us to draw meaningful conclusions. As such, retention and persistence are beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, GPA has important implications for retention with this group, since failure of even a single course in the Joint Program can cost a student their government-sponsored tuition waiver. Since many students cannot afford to pay for their education, this often means dropping out.

Regression analysis uncovered two significant achievement gaps in our program: one related to English proficiency and another related to gender. Both of these variables were also significantly related to writing center usage, and I found that writing center usage is associated with the narrowing or even closure of these achievement gaps. Language and gender will be considered separately in each of the following sections.

Findings: English Language Proficiency, GPA, and Writing Center Usage

Students are admitted to the Joint Bachelor's Program on the basis of their math prowess. Even though English is a requirement, there is no minimum proficiency score required. Nevertheless, most of our students arrive in our program with some exposure to English in school, though the extent of that exposure and their level of proficiency varies widely. Some students will already be fluent enough to take all of their courses in English (a select few may have already studied in an Anglophone country), while others may have only begun studying during their summer holiday in preparation for starting class.

A very large body of research has examined the question of whether English-language proficiency (typically measured using IELTS or TOEFL scores) predicts overall academic

performance in English-medium university programs. The results have been mixed, with various studies of different sample sizes and institutional contexts showing correlations between international English test scores and GPA that range from very weak (Dooley & Oliver, 2002) to moderate (Feast, 2002; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000; Oliver et al., 2012) to equivocal (Cho & Bridgeman, 2012; Lee & Greene, 2007).⁴ One recent study by Geide-Stevenson (2018) looks at 148 Chinese nationals who graduated as economics majors from a regional comprehensive university in Utah between 2011 and 2016. Crucially, this study examined differences between students who were or were not required to take English as a Second Language courses as a condition of their admission to the program, a breakdown of the non-native speaker category that proved quite instructive (p. 7). This study found a positive but nonlinear relationship between TOEFL scores and GPA, meaning that higher proficiency boosted GPA but that the effect grew smaller as proficiency increased. This was true, however, only for the group that placed out of ESL courses upon matriculation. For the group that took ESL courses, there was no significant relationship between proficiency and academic performance, indicating that "the impact of ESL programs, offered by many universities, has to be considered to get a full picture of the impact of initial admissions criteria with respect to language proficiency and performance" (p. 18).

In the HSE-NES Joint Bachelor's Program, students are required to take an English course at the appropriate level upon entrance into the program, though for the L300 group, writing is heavily emphasized at the expense of other dimensions of language-learning, such as speaking. Nevertheless, when GPA is modeled as a function of English placement level (whether a student is sorted into L100, L200, or L300), we see a fairly large and statistically significant effect of language proficiency on GPA.⁵

As Figure 1 shows, at the time they graduate, students who enter the program at L100, on average, have GPAs .76 points lower (+/- .28 points) than students who enter the program at L300 ($p = 0.009$). There is a smaller difference between L100 and L200 students (.21 points), though this difference was not

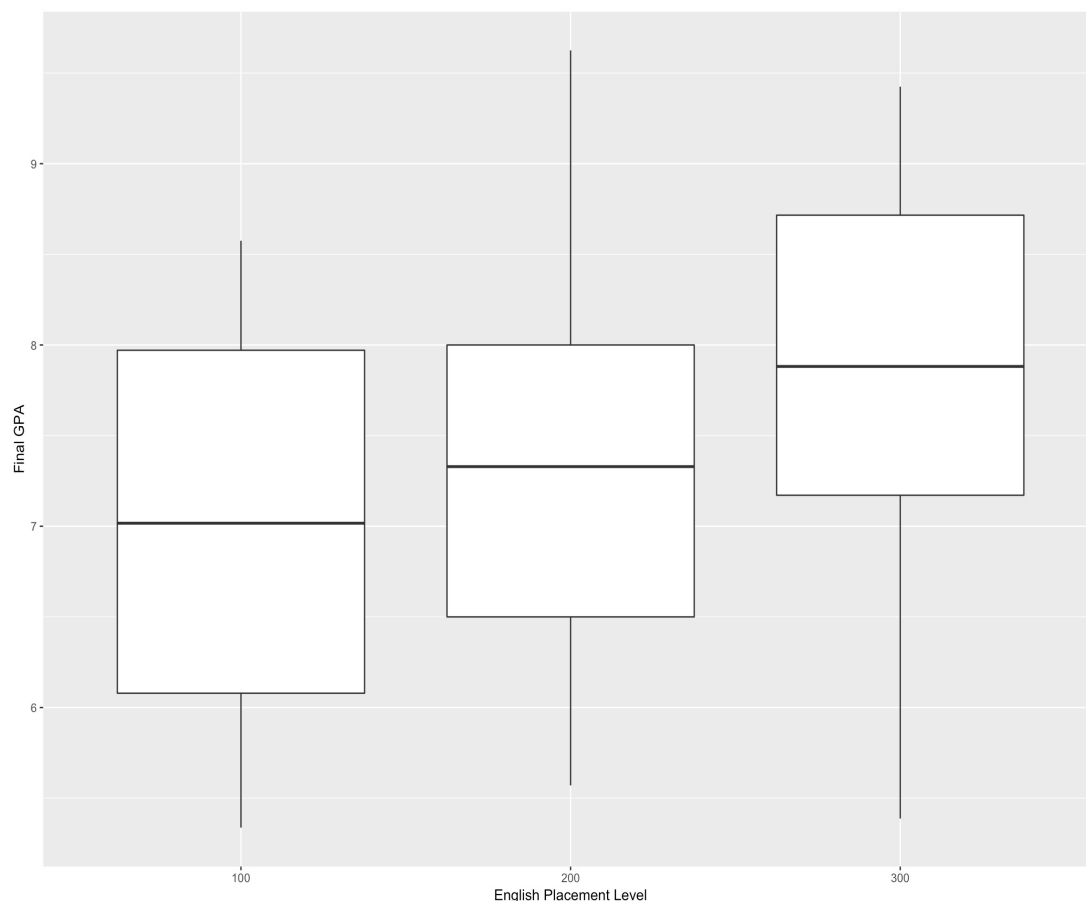


Figure 1. Final GPA by English placement level at the time of matriculation.⁶ L100 = 17 students, L200 = 37, L300 = 53.

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statistically significant in this sample. This means that students who enter at L100 tend to do a bit worse than more proficient students, and this appears to be systematic across the entire program. We would not necessarily expect these students to perform worse in their designated English-language courses (where English is explicitly taught) since the placement procedure is supposed to assign them to level-appropriate courses. And, indeed, as Figure 2 shows, a student's grades in their English courses are moderately correlated ($r = 0.55$) with GPA, but the relationship was not statistically significant.

There are two plausible explanations for this achievement gap. It should be noted once again that students are admitted to the Joint Program without regard to their English ability, meaning that many students who enter would not pass the minimum TOEFL score requirement for admission to many universities in Anglophone countries. As such, it could simply be that many students entering

at the 100 and perhaps even 200 levels are so far behind that they continue to have difficulty in English-medium courses (including economics courses taught in English) relative to their more proficient peers even after they have completed their required language classes (and/or that these courses are insufficient to the task of preparing them for later English-medium coursework). Another strong possibility is that, at least in Russia, language proficiency is a rough proxy for socioeconomic privilege and access to cultural capital: in the L300 group, students who have attended the better-resourced schools or lycea in Moscow and St. Petersburg may be overrepresented, likewise for students who have had access to private language tutoring and opportunities to travel and take courses abroad.⁷ In other words, English proficiency upon matriculation may also be a proxy for social class in the same way that the SAT functions in Salem's study.

What mediating role might be played by writing center usage? A hypothesis informed

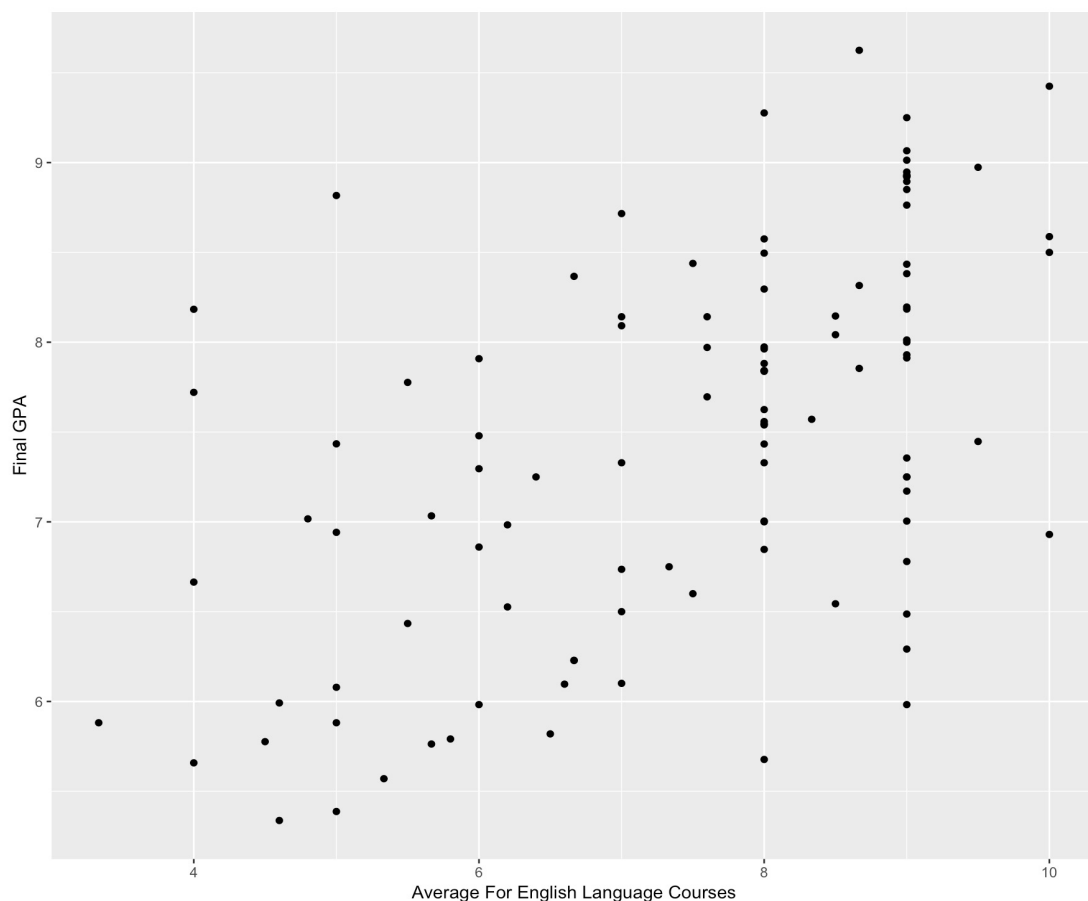


Figure 2. Final GPA plotted against the student's average grade in all required English courses.

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by Salem's findings would predict that L100 students would be the most likely to visit the writing center, and this indeed proved to be the case, as Figure 3 shows.

It should be noted here that in chi-squared analysis,⁸ this relationship proved statistically significant only for L100 students as compared to the L300 students ($p = 0.035$). In our sample, the difference between L200 and L300 (the plot suggests that L300 students are more likely to visit) was not significant.

Given the fact that L100 students have lower GPAs and are also more likely to visit the writing center, we might therefore expect writing center visitors to have lower GPAs. In fact, the opposite proved to be true. As Figure 4 shows, writing center visitors get a half-point (0.533) bonus on their GPAs relative to nonvisitors ($p = 0.01$).

However, if we model all three variables together—GPA, placement level, and writing center usage—a fuller picture emerges (Figure 5). We see here that while L100 students

do have lower GPAs than their more proficient peers, L100 students who visit the writing center make up a significant amount of ground. In each group, visitors have higher GPAs than nonvisitors one level up, and L200 visitors also nearly catch up to L300 visitors (Table 1). Additionally, there is greater distance between L300 nonvisitors and L100 nonvisitors (1.42 points) than exists between visitors in those same groups (0.66 points).

This data would suggest that for L100 students, visiting the writing center is not a downwardly mobile choice. Rather, visiting the writing center is associated with narrowing this particular achievement gap. This would seem to be good news for writing center professionals working with a multilingual clientele, as it at least points to the *possibility* that writing centers can help lower-proficiency students make up some ground. We should exercise caution with such an interpretation, however, as we cannot say with any certainty the writing center is *explicitly causing* these students to

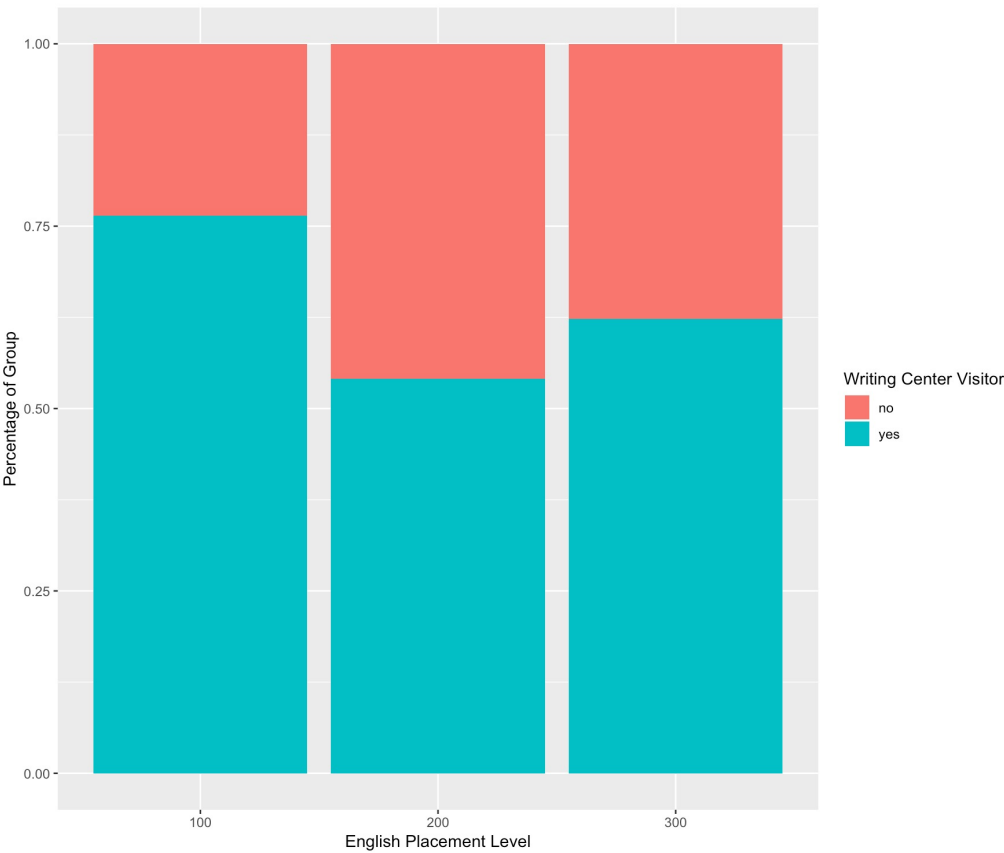


Figure 3. The proportion of students in each placement group who visited the writing center.

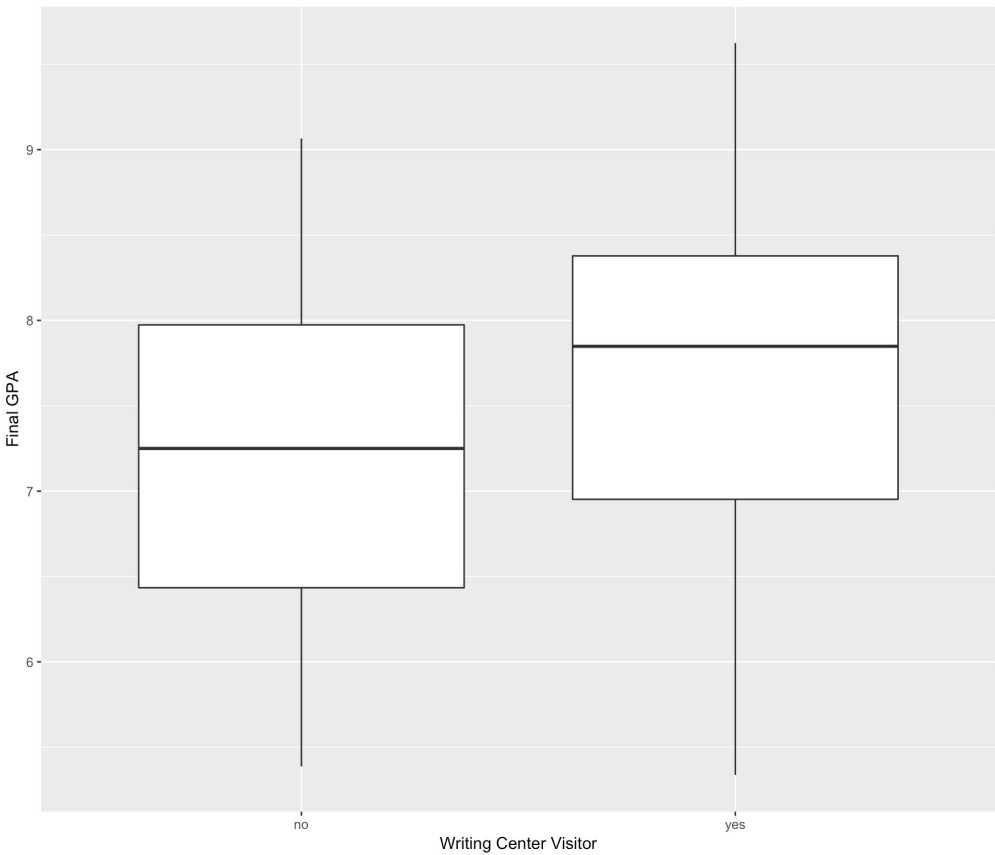


Figure 4. Final GPAs of writing center visitors and non-visitors.

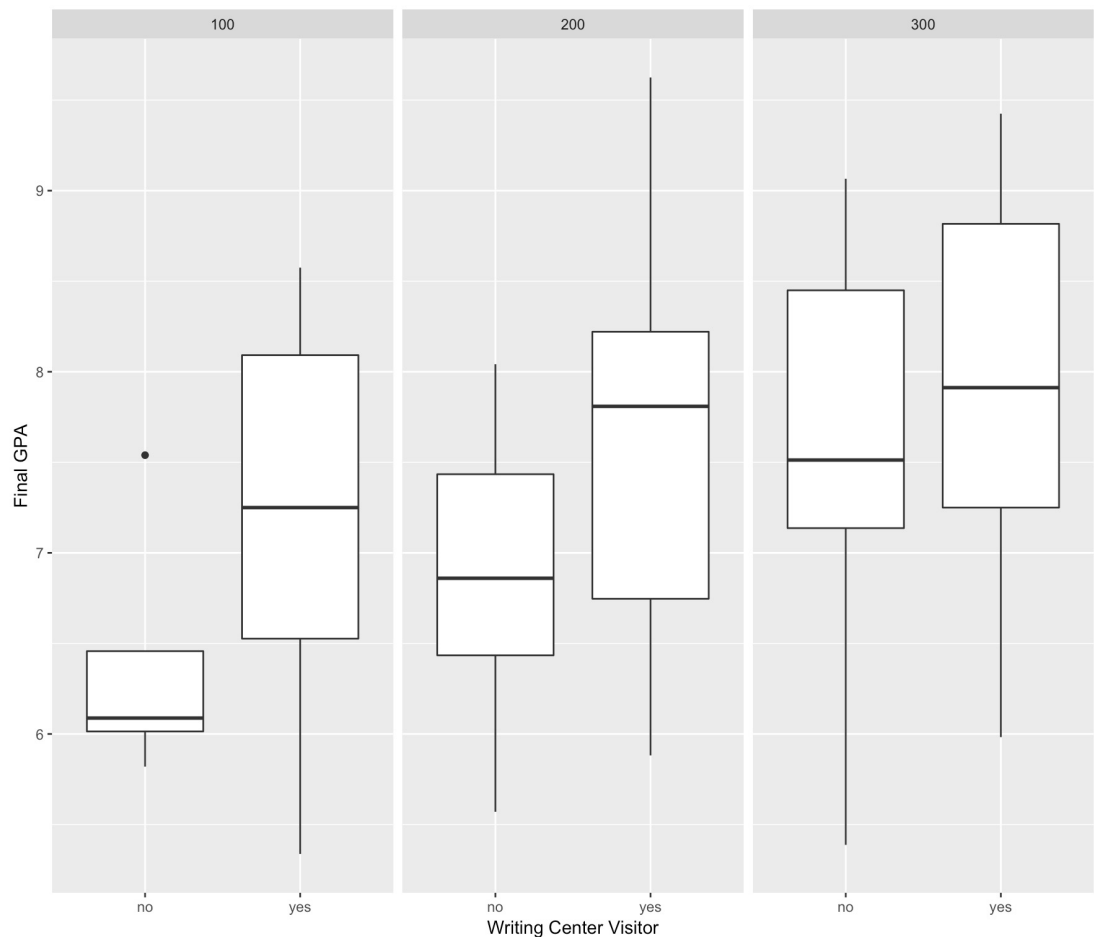


Figure 5. Final GPA and writing center visitation broken down by placement level.

Table 1. Final GPA and writing center visitation broken down by placement level

	Median Final GPA
L100 Nonvisitors	6.09
L100 Visitors	7.25
L200 Nonvisitors	6.86
L200 Visitors	7.81
L300 Nonvisitors	7.51
L300 Visitors	7.91

have higher GPAs. Because visiting the writing center is entirely voluntary, self-selection is most likely playing a role here. The only way to avoid selection bias would be to randomly assign groups of students to visit the writing center or to stay away. One other highly compelling explanation here is that writing center visitation is indicative of strong academic motivation and good study habits more generally, or, in the words of one WCC peer consultant,

that “studious students like to study.” Writing center visitation is also indicative of a willingness to seek help, and most L100 students in this sample do seem to be aware of a need for additional help as well as having the motivation to access it, a possibility that will be explored further in the next section.

Findings: Gender, GPA, and Writing Center Usage

Throughout the industrialized world, the emergence of a so-called “reverse” gender gap in educational achievement has been very well documented. While men continue to outnumber women in high-ranking positions in government, academia, and the private sector, since 1980, women have made up the majority of undergraduate students and receive the majority of bachelor’s degrees each year (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). They are also more

likely to obtain advanced degrees than their male peers. One important driver of this trend is a similarly well-documented gender gap in course grades. Thomas DiPrete and Claudia Buchmann (2013) observe “a performance gap that begins at the start of elementary school” attributable to girls’ advantage in reading and verbal skills as well as social and behavioral skills that are “correlated with higher rates of cognitive learning (as documented by standardized test scores) and higher levels of academic investment (as measured by homework). Girls’ greater attention to homework and stronger academic orientation translate into their higher grades in middle school” (p. 10).⁹ This higher performance in turn translates to higher rates of college enrollment and graduation. “Understanding the female advantage in college completion,” they argue, “is largely a matter of understanding the female advantage in academic performance at all stages of education” (p. 11).

Certain academic fields, however, remain highly gender segregated. In 2014, only 157 of the 500 doctoral degrees in economics awarded in the United States were granted to women (Bayer & Rouse, 2016). These two trends—male overrepresentation in the economics field and female dominance in course grades—are readily observable in the Joint Bachelor’s Program, where men outnumber women two to one. Shockingly, this is a better ratio than the one that exists at the professional level: in the United States, women make up only 23.5% of tenured and tenure-track faculty in economics. At the full professor level, the share of women shrinks to 15%, making gender diversity in economics “as poor as both the male-dominated tech industry and the Academy Awards nominating committee” (Bayer & Rouse, 2016, p. 222). Indeed, the gender balance in the Joint Bachelor’s Program is better than it is in bachelor’s programs in economics in the United States, where 28.4 percent of degrees were granted to women in 2014 (Bayer & Rouse, 2016, p. 225). Explanations offered by Bayer and Rouse (2016) include disparate levels of interest, women’s greater responsiveness to low grades, lack of role models, and systemic bias in the advising of students and the hiring and promotion of faculty.

The women who do enroll in Russia’s most elite economics program, however, receive higher grades on average than the men (Figure 6). Indeed, the effect of gender on GPA is nearly as large as the effect of entering the program at the L300 level vs. the L200 level: the GPAs of women are .433 points higher, on average, than those of male students ($p = 0.04$). I should note that there is also greater variance in the male GPAs: the highs are a little bit higher and the lows are lower.

One well-observed dimension of the reverse gender gap in education is that women tend to outperform men in language subjects, and we have evidence for this in our sample as well. Figure 7 shows that women in the Joint Program overwhelmingly place into L300 when they enroll and that men make up the vast majority of the L200 and L100 cohorts ($p = 0.01$). Women also have averages in their English courses 0.678 points higher than men ($p = 0.04$).

The literature on gender and college completion also points to a disparity in “noncognitive” skills that makes university study, on average, easier for women than it is for men (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Indeed, Becker, Hubbard, and Murphy (2010) suggest that not only are noncognitive skills generally higher among women but that they, as in the GPA distribution in Figure 7, show lower variability among women than men. (Measures of cognitive skill, like IQ, show no significant difference between men and women.)

Noncognitive skills include things like conscientiousness, persistence, and the ability to collaborate. Use of a voluntary service like a writing center is likely a good indicator of noncognitive skill as it requires not only the ability to recognize one’s need for help but to make plans well in advance to get that help. It is, therefore, fairly unsurprising that in Salem’s study, gender was a strong predictor of writing center usage. I also find that a greater proportion of Joint Program women visited the writing center; however, the difference in this sample was significant only at the 17% level (not very significant), meaning that there is roughly a 1 in 6 chance that the difference in this sample is random. What we do see, however, is that while gender is a predictor of GPA, it is not as

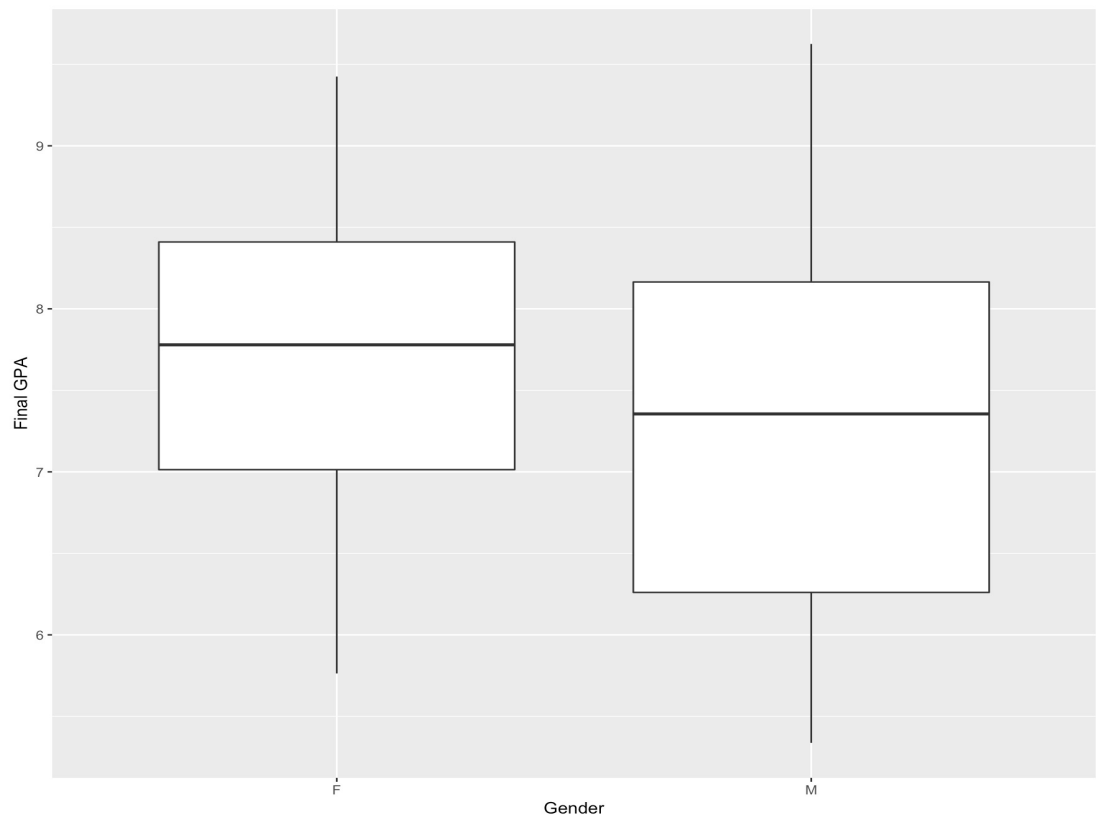


Figure 6. Final GPA by gender.

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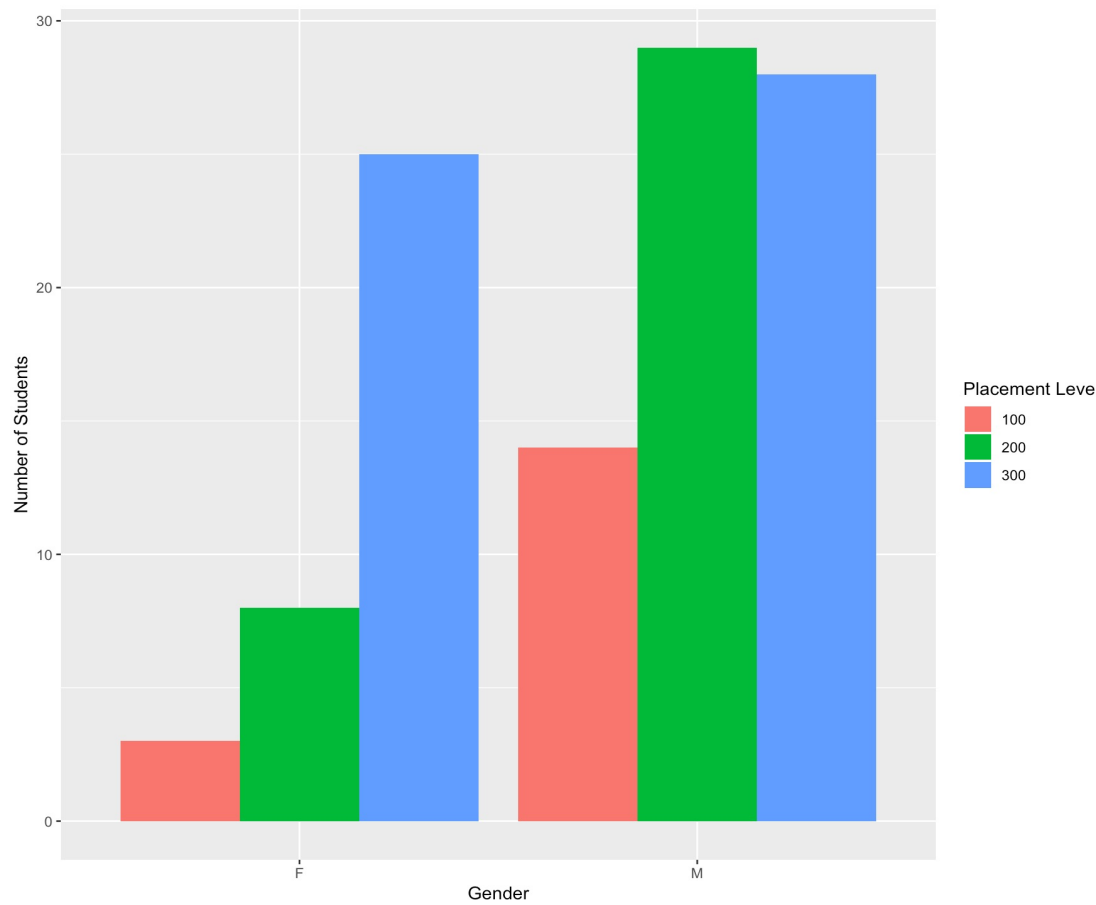


Figure 7. Placement level by gender.

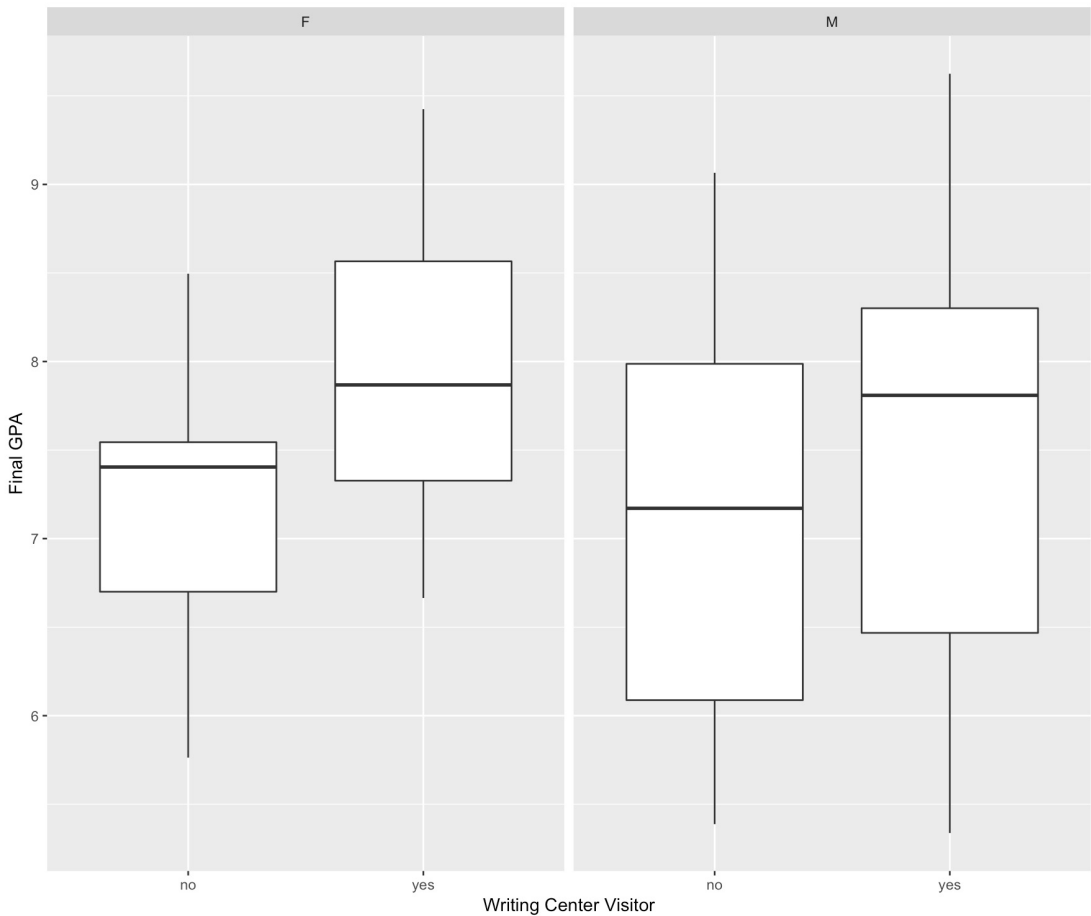


Figure 8. Writing center usage and GPA broken down by gender.

Table 2. Results of three regression models: (1) GPA as a function of gender, (2) GPA as a function of gender while controlling for writing center usage, and (3) GPA as a function of gender while controlling for writing center usage and English placement level

Independent Variable	(1) Difference in GPA	(2) Difference in GPA	(3) Difference in GPA
Gender—Male	−0.433**	−0.357*	−0.173
Visitor		+0.480**	0.534***
Placement—200			+0.322
Placement—300			+0.783***
R-squared	0.04	0.09	0.16

n = 107, * stands for significance at the 10% level, ** at the 5% level, and *** at the 1% level.

significant as writing center usage. And if we plot the two variables together, as in Figure 8, we can see that among writing center visitors, the gender achievement gap nearly vanishes.

It appears that there is no significant difference in academic achievement between female and male writing center visitors, who appear to have more in common with each other than with nonvisitors of the same gender. Table 2 demonstrates how controlling for

writing center usage and for English placement level changes the regression results for GPA and gender.

Here, writing center visitation and placement (for L100 and L300 students) emerge as the more significant variables predicting GPA, while gender ceases to be significant. Therefore, the gender achievement gap is partially explained in this sample by the difference in English language ability between male and

female students (which, again, may be a proxy for overall academic preparation and social class) and by writing center usage, which may imply higher noncognitive skills overall. In short, the women in this sample are accessing the writing center in greater proportion not because they are in greater need of remediation but because they tend to study harder and are more likely to engage in help-seeking behavior.

Conclusion

While these dynamics will need to be studied in other contexts with larger sample sizes, this study provides evidence that writing center usage is a good predictor of high GPA, though the directionality of that effect cannot be derived from this analysis alone. This means that while it is absolutely true that writing center practices should accommodate the students who are actually visiting, we need to be careful about the assumptions we make about those students based purely on their demographic characteristics. Yes, it is likely true that a great many of our visitors are students who experience some form of systemic disadvantage in society at large. It is also true, however, that these visitors are likely very good students. After all, overcoming systemic disadvantage in order to enroll in a university requires considerable motivation, self-discipline, and the wherewithal to access the resources that are available to you.

After conducting this study, the major concern I have is less with the students who do visit than with the subset of students who don't. Salem does not draw this conclusion herself, but one implication that could be taken from her data is that that because her nonvisitors tend to be a more socially privileged group than visitors, they presumably do not need as much help. This would be a dangerous assumption to make, especially given what we know about how the gender gap in educational achievement and college completion interacts with race and class. Namely, the male disadvantage in academic performance is much steeper for African American and Latino men and men from working-class and impoverished families (Autor et al., 2016; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013).

While it is likely that one group of non-visitors consists of students with high socioeconomic status and a considerable endowment of cultural capital, students who indeed are confident in their ability to succeed without accessing a tutoring service (and who may even see the use of such services as beneath them), there surely also exists a subset of students with lower capital who do not access resources that might help them and who are at the greatest risk for dropping out of college. Indeed, the cohort of greatest concern for me, upon analyzing this data, was that group of L100 non-visitors with the very lowest GPAs. While this group of students is small (only six individuals in this sample), it seemed imperative to begin addressing the barriers that might limit their access to the writing center. In our program, this effort took the form of reaching out to first-year students more extensively in their native language, as interviews revealed that despite the bilingual nature of our program, most students identified the writing center with English (understandable given that most staff are English teachers), and few were aware that we offered Russian-language consultations. We addressed this issue by increasing the visibility of our native-Russian-speaking peer tutors and targeting Russian-medium classes and the 100-level English course with Russian-language presentations.¹⁰ These efforts proved largely successful. In fall 2018, 54% of the first-year class visited the writing center, and 80% of those consultations were conducted by Russian peer tutors. Obviously, this is a solution that is somewhat unique to our bilingual writing center. But, even as we rethink certain writing center orthodoxies developed in the age of a more homogeneous student body and ensure that our practices are truly effective for the students we serve, we will need to address the barriers that prevent certain students who need writing centers from accessing them, and this will likely include factors related to stigma and disparities in noncognitive skills.

Acknowledgments

By sheer happenstance, this article presenting findings from a writing center in Russia is

being published shortly after the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the days since, I left Russia, as have many of my colleagues and former students, and the status of progressive education in Russia is very much under threat as the government cracks down. As such, this article may document a moment in the history of Russian higher education that may no longer exist or may not exist for much longer. I would therefore like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the community of the New Economic School in its steadfast commitment to academic freedom and fostering an atmosphere in which we could all do our work with integrity. I would also like to thank Georgiy Uzkikh, WCC peer consultant and research assistant, for his work on the statistical analysis, as well as Marta Troya Martinez and Edmond Squires for their feedback on the quantitative aspects of this paper.

Notes

1. Surveying the literature on retention in this regard is challenging, partly because, at least in some contexts, student support services and retention are practically synonymous. This would seem to be because math tutoring centers, writing centers, language support centers, library services, etc. are often part of an institution's frontline retention efforts. As such, their effectiveness for this purpose often tends to be an assumption rather than an object of genuine study. For instance, in Harris (1995), it is simply asserted in the first few sentences that writing centers are "integral to retention efforts" (p. 27).

2. At the time, the MA was viewed as the ideal starting point for preparing students to receive PhDs in Europe and the United States and then return to Russia to pass on their knowledge, reversing what was already a serious brain drain problem. NES now offers five master's degree programs in economics and finance and is one of the most competitive and prestigious academic institutions in the country.

3. Race is an important category in Salem's study that is not easily captured with this group of students. The Russian Federation has inherited the legacy of the diverse multinational empires of the Soviet Union and czarist Russia, and the Joint Program includes members of the various ethnic and cultural groups that hail from this region. These categories, however, do not easily map onto Anglo-American racial categories, rendering any com-

parison problematic. But the even more basic issue is that this data isn't gathered by the Joint Program and thus isn't available for analysis.

4. As is noted in a meta-analysis by Graham (1987), statistical thresholds for weak vs. moderate vs. strong correlations are determined quite differently in each study. Therefore, results across the literature need to be interpreted with caution.

5. Salem uses CHAID analysis to find significant variables within her very large dataset, a sophisticated and functional statistical approach when the variables of interest are unknown. However, CHAID operates by splitting target variables into categories. Thus, with a continuous variable like GPA (in which the number of possible values between any two values is infinite), statistical programming software creates categories by "binning" the values, separating them into ranges. In Salem's study, this is done with SAT scores (which has a finite but very large number of values), which we see presented in groups (≤ 430 , 430–470, 470–560, and > 560). Because of this, CHAID also does not tell us the size of the effect of the independent variable on a continuous dependent variable. Because the variables of interest in the present study are known and because I wish to know both effect size as well as significance, I used linear regression analysis, which is a standard statistical modeling procedure used to estimate the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable with or without controls. Whereas CHAID goes looking for the variables that predict writing center usage, linear regression tries to figure out how much of a bonus or a penalty (on average) a student gets by using the writing center. Regression also offers us an estimate of how much variability there is in that effect size (standard error) and how likely it is that the effect is purely random and therefore not generalizable (p -value). P -values below 0.05 (meaning that if we randomly assigned GPAs to users and if we did that over and over and over again, this exact result would appear in less than 5% of cases) are considered "statistically significant."

6. Boxplots are a useful data visualization tool once you know how to read them, but they are less familiar to general readers than other kinds of graphs, so a brief explanation may be warranted. The vertical line in each column of this plot represents the full range of GPAs for each group. The box itself represents the middle two quartiles, and the bold horizontal line represents the median GPA for each group. Extreme outliers are represented in boxplots as a dot on either end of the vertical line.

7. Though the hometown of the student was considered in this analysis, it did not prove to be a

Squires

significant variable. This doesn't mean that it does not matter, just that we couldn't find evidence for it here. Though the "capitals" are known to be hoarders of Russia's wealth and access to opportunity, the Joint Program draws students from regional powerhouses in the fields of math and economics (such as Izhevsk).

8. A standard form of statistical analysis for two categorical variables.

9. The authors further note that this disparity has existed since the middle of the 20th century and is not, as some commentators on "the problem with boys" believe, a recent phenomenon.

10. Visitation in the first semester of study had also dropped from a high of 49% for the class of 2018 to a low of 8% for the class of 2021, a decline that we attribute to a number of structural changes in the writing center and the English faculty that meant that, even if students who started at L100 were still the most likely to visit the WCC at some point in four years, they were not developing the habit until their second or even third year. This is a shift that we need to study more carefully over time, however, and is thus outside the general scope of this article.

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