Assessing Attitudes Towards The Writing Center

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"The problem with the Writing Center," a colleague remarked, "is that students just go there to get their papers written for them. That's why I don't send mine." I had asked for it. As Director of Freshman English, I sensed that feeling among some of the teaching staff; in response I had designed a questionnaire to assess attitudes towards the Writing Center. At IUP our freshman writing courses are taught by regular English faculty (and all faculty do teach writing), while the Center is staffed by six non-teaching graduate students. Since the Writing Center seemed to do a good job with a highly competent staff, I wondered where the real problem was? A difference in goals? A breakdown in communication? Or were we seeing one more manifestation of the territorial imperative? Through the assessment I found a rather surprisingly high level of agreement between faculty and Writing Center staff in general goals for composition. On the other hand, I was also able to pinpoint some areas of disagreement in the proper place of the Writing Center in meeting those goals. Although simple, concrete solutions to this problem may be hard to find, I will suggest ways by which some of the difficulties may be alleviated.

The first object of the survey was to determine how faculty members rank different goals for their composition courses. As each instructor chooses his or her own course materials and approach, and as all English faculty teach freshman composition, the results are fairly representative not only of IUP but of professional attitudes in general. Fifty-one questionnaires were distributed to the faculty; twenty six were completed and used in this analysis. Instructors were asked to rate eleven possible goals for the English I course on Lickert scale, as follows:

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1. Extremely Important
2. Relatively Important
3. Only of Average Importance
4. Of Little Importance
5. Of No Importance At All

The goals were stated as: grammatical correctness, punctuational correctness, spelling, vocabulary development, syntactic development, stylistic development, organization, imaginative development, cognitive development, enjoyment of writing, and awareness of language. I had expected from this diverse, eclectic group that the ratings would be rather evenly distributed across the whole range. Such was not the case, however.

Table 1.   Faculty's Ratings of Goals

Goals	1 Extremely Important	2 Relatively Important	3 Only of Average Importance	4 Of Little Importance	5 Of No Importance At All	N.A.	Average
Grammatical Correctness	9	13	2	1		1	1.80
Punctuational Correctness	7	13	5			1	1.92
Spelling	7	10	5	3		1	2.16
Vocabulary Development	6	8	9	2		1	2.16
Syntactic Development	17	8	1				1.38
Stylistic Development	9	9	7	1			2.00
Organization	21	3	1			1	1.20
Imaginative Development	6	12	5	2		1	2.12
Cognitive Development	15	7	1			3	1.39
Enjoyment of Writing	6	7	8		1	4	2.30
Awareness of Language	17	6	2			1	1.40

The rating fell into two clearly defined groups. The development of general patterns of writing and thinking were, for the faculty, the most important goals, as indicated by the average ranking, in parentheses, on the scale. In this group were organization (1.20), awareness of language (1.40), cognitive development (1.39), and syntactic development (1.38). The faculty felt their work should be in developing general skills and

advocated goals that might be seen as only indirectly related to the finished composition (such as awareness of language). Moreover, the general category of syntactic development was significantly more important than a desire for correctness in grammar or punctuation.

The second group of goals primarily concerned specific writing techniques. These include grammatical correctness (1.80), stylistic development (2.00), punctuational correctness (1.92), and spelling (2.16). Also in this group are imaginative development (2.12) and, further down in importance, enjoyment of writing (2.30) and vocabulary development (2.28). The English I course is, then, seen first as a course in thinking and organizing. Instructors are most concerned with the broad development of students' minds and general writing skills and only secondarily with avoidance of error or the accomplishment of specific mechanical ends.

Nine questionnaires were distributed to the Writing Center staff (six in the fall and three more for new staff in the spring); eight were returned and used in this analysis. I asked the staff to complete the questionnaire in terms of their tutorial work with composition students.

Table 2.   Writing Center Staff's Rating of Goals

Goals	1 Extremely Important	2 Relatively Important	3 Only of Average Importance	4 Of Little Importance	5 Of No Importance At All	N.A.	Average
Grammatical Correctness	1	4	1	2			2.50
Punctuational Correctness	1	3	2	2			2.63
Spelling	1	2	2	3			2.88
Vocabulary Development	1	4	2	1			2.38
Syntactic Development	5	3					1.38
Stylistic Development	4	3	1				1.63
Organization	6	2					1.25
Imaginative Development	5	2	1				1.50
Cognitive Development	6	2					1.25
Enjoyment of Writing	3	4	1				1.75
Awareness of Language	7	1					1.13

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As had the faculty's, the tutors' ratings fell into two major groups. Tutors, like the faculty, were most concerned with such general patterns of development as awareness of language (1.13), organization (1.25), cognitive development (1.25), and syntactic development (1.38). They were least concerned with spelling (2.88), correctness of punctuation (2.63), grammatical correctness (2.50), and vocabulary development (2.38). They did, however, see imaginative development (1.50), stylistic development (1.63), and the enjoyment of writing (1.75) as more important goals than faculty members found them to be and within the lower end of the range of high priority goals for the Writing Center. Moreover, even though both groups placed grammar, spelling, and punctuation in the second ranking of goals, significant differences exist on just how to rank them. Faculty members placed these goals as "relatively important"; tutors felt these to be "only of average importance."

Here is one area of possible conflict, for even though faculty members and tutors are generally on the same plane regarding major goals for composition instruction, areas of significant difference do occur. For example, the difference in evaluation of grammar, punctuation, and spelling as possible goals reflects the fact that nearly a third of the faculty members ranked these as "extremely important," while over a quarter of the graduate assistants saw these goals as "of little importance." Also, with the tutors we find a much greater emphasis on imagination, style, and the enjoyment of writing. For composition instruction, areas of significant difference do occur. Given the large numbers served by the Writing Center, at some point a student may well be working with a faculty member who values grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and a tutor who places high emphasis upon imagination and the enjoyment of writing. This, however, almost states the obvious; in fact it is the foundation of the cynical caricatures sometimes found among faculty members of tutors who neglect the fundamentals of "clear and acceptable" writing for an idealistic freedom of expression, and found among tutors toward faculty members who belabor trivial surface errors while ignoring what the student "really has to say."

Such differences become more important when considering reasons for referring students to the Writing Center. I asked the faculty to rate eight qualities as criteria for referring students to the Writing Center, based on the same scale as before. The criteria were organization, paragraphing, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, spelling, style, and dialect.

Table 3.   Faculty's Ratings of Reasons for Referral

Reasons	1 Extremely Important	2 Relatively Important	3 Only of Average Importance	4 Of Little Importance	5 Of No Importance At All	N.A.	Average
Grammar	14	9	1	1		1	1.56
Punctuation	12	10	2			2	1.58
Spelling	7	8	1	3	2	5	2.29
Vocabulary	3	9	3	4	3	4	2.77
Style	5	5	7	2	3	4	2.68
Organization	13	4	2	3	3	1	2.16
Paragraphing	8	6	3	2	3	4	2.36
Dialect	4	9	3	1	4	5	2.62

For a faculty member, the two primary criteria for determining whether a student should be referred are grammar (1.56) and punctuation (1.58). These were significantly more important than any other criteria and the only ones seen as more than "relatively important." In a second group were organization (2.16), spelling (2.29), and paragraphing (2.36). The case of organization is particularly interesting, for while a fair number of faculty see it as extremely important as a reason for referral, others feel quite the opposite, despite their almost unanimous agreement on the importance of organization as a goal. Finally, dialect (2.62), style (2.68), and vocabulary (2.77) formed a third group of characteristics which were "only of average importance" in determining whether a student should be referred to the Writing Center. The key feature of the whole distribution is the importance which grammar and punctuation assume. For many faculty members, grammar and punctuation are the proper province of the Writing Center.

This may be seen not only statistically, but also in comments offered under a request for "other" criteria and as voluntary explanations of some of the rankings. Faculty members seemed to want to explain why organization and paragraphing were rated as of little or no importance in referring the students. One noted, "I do it myself because it's not so time consuming." Another wrote, "I can handle these in conference." The general feeling seemed to be that since these items were

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of primary importance, they were best left in the instructor's complete
control. One person wrote, "I teach these"; another mentioned,
"These are what I do in class and are far more difficult — *but* often
elementary mistakes are not the problem here." Finally, one instructor
wrote, "I assign my students in the hope that they can get at the fun-
damentals, not for matters of style and rhetoric."

For the tutors, the case is different. They were also asked to rate the
eight factors as reasons for referral to the Writing Center.

Table 4.   Writing Center Staff's Ratings of Reasons for Referral

Reasons	1 Extremely Important	2 Relatively Important	3 Only of Average Importance	4 Of Little Importance	5 Of No Importance At All	N.A.	Average
Grammar	2	3	2	1			2.25
Punctuation	1	1	5	1			2.75
Spelling		3	2	2	1		3.13
Vocabulary	2	1	3	1		1	2.57
Style	2	2	3	1			2.38
Organization	7	1					1.13
Paragraphing	1	4	3				2.25
Dialect		2	3	1	2		3.38

Organization (1.13) is by far the single most important factor for
referral. Of secondary importance are paragraphing (2.25), grammar
(2.25), and style (2.38). In a third group ranking most closely to "only
of average importance," are vocabulary (2.57), punctuation (2.75),
spelling (3.13), and dialect (3.38). In other words, Writing Center tutors
feel that they are able to work with what might be termed larger
problems in student writings, problems that are central to the stated
goals of both faculty and tutors. Thus wide-spread disagreement exists
between faculty and tutors concerning reasons for assigning students
to the Writing Center. Only on vocabulary and style is there accord and
for both groups these are only of average importance. Faculty members
see grammar, punctuation, spelling, and dialect as more significant in-
dicators, by an average of .865, while organization as less significant by
1.03 on the scale.

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Tutors, in their comments, suggested that their work might best be with the "total student" rather than with the fundamentals of grammar or with the surface correctness of the writing. One tutor mentioned that "low self-image as a writer/person" was a relatively important quality for determining whether to refer a student to the center. Another cited the student's *"need* to learn" as *"extremely* important." A third said that "understanding of audience, voice, purpose, tone and their interrelationship" and the "development of ideas" are key features. Finally, one tutor wrote, "I feel that the image the student has of himself as a writer is extremely important. Many students I worked with had very low self esteem, and I had to help them overcome that problem before we were able to do anything constructive with the mechanical aspects of their writing." The general tenor of these remarks suggests that it is impossible to work on such mechanical problems as grammar, punctuation, and spelling in isolation from more general qualities such as the student's ability to think and create ideas, confidence with the total writing process, and, most importantly, self-confidence.

Turning to the assessment once more the differences can be highlighted by comparing the ranking each group made for a quality as a goal for composition in comparison with the way they ranked that quality as a reason for a referral. If the Writing Center is seen as an integral part of the composition program, there will be a close accord between the goals of composition and the reasons for referral; differences between the two will show that the Center is seen as being responsible only for some part of the composition process. For tutors there is virtually complete agreement in five of six comparable categories. The differences are grammar (.25), punctuation (.12), spelling (.25), vocabulary (.19), and organization (.12); none are significant. Only style shows much difference: it is seen as more important as a goal than as a reason for referral by .75. Apparently while style is not a prime criterion for referral, it is an important element to work with once a student is in the Writing Center. On the other hand, faculty members do show significant differences in several categories between their reasons for referral and their goals. The two that are more important as reasons for referral to the Writing Center are grammar (.24) and punctuation (.34). The other four comparable factors are less important for referral reasons than for goals: spelling (.13), vocabulary (.49), style (.68), and organization (.96). Faculty members refer to the Writing Center for help in areas other than those related to the main goals of their course. Most significant is organization; it is seen as much more

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important as a course goal than as a reason for referral of a student to the Writing Center, at least for a fair percentage of faculty members.

What is the overall picture that may be drawn from these individual comparisons? And what useful conclusions may be drawn from that picture? First, Writing Center tutors and faculty share the same basic goals for their work with composition students. While they may differ somewhat in the emphasis on the less important goals, they concur about which are the most important, and the most important are those which involve the total development of the student and his or her general ability to think and work with language. On the other hand, important differences exist in the attitudes of each group toward the Writing Center and its duties.

As such differences will hurt the working relationships between teacher and Writing Center tutor, they need to be dealt with. Simple, workable solutions are not easily found. One that may help is a strong program of information.

1. Both faculty and Writing Center staff should be assured that they share the same goals for composition. This information.will be important to form the basis of cooperative efforts between the two. Moreover, both should be informed as to which goals are ranked most highly. What counts most for both groups is the broad development of general intellectual abilities. At times different tactics and teaching strategies may mask this commonality of goals. Yet, as we have seen, differences are minor and are usually related to the amount of emphasis given to secondary and tertiary goals. While methods might still prove a point of contention, the general agreement should provide a focal point for considering the needs of any individual student.

2. Faculty should be made aware of the ability of the Writing Center to work with primary goals of composition. Tutors feel capable of addressing problems central to the writing process, such as the ability to organize. In fact, the Center is ideally suited to such work due to its close interactions with students. And many theorists would suggest that writing instruction succeeds best when the needs and abilities of the whole student are taken into account. The remediation of isolated skills is not the strongest approach to a development program. But the tenor of the comments and implications of the survey suggest that many faculty do not see the Writing Center's work this way. While some of the problem might be professional jealousy, I think the greater part of it is due to an undervaluation of the real capacity of the Center, perhaps through a lack of familiarity with the way a Writing Center operates. A number of our faculty had not been inside the Writing Center, let alone

observed a scheduled tutorial. Under such conditions misunderstandings will certainly occur. Faculty need to be brought into the Center and familiarized with its operations.

3. Acquainting faculty with the shared goals and abilities of the tutors and bringing faculty into the Center for orientation are one-time events. Building strong relationships between faculty and Writing Center staff will also depend upon the ongoing sharing of information. As Patricia Teal Bates suggests in her article "The Public Relations Circle", in Muriel Harris' source book, *Tutoring Writing* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1982), it is the task of the lab director to inform faculty members about student progress via reports, folders, and recommendations on individual students, and newsletters and workshops more generally (pp. 207-212). Equally important will be providing the faculty members channels through which to communicate to the tutors. Misunderstandings often arise when a student is uncertain about an assignment or a particular emphasis the instructor has in his or her course. One goal of a director should be to acquire from all faculty a statement of course objectives and, ideally, of individual assignments as well. The director should also make sure that there are means by which faculty can make their expectations known. In addition to the initial referral forms, faculty need a way to continue to update tutors on their perceptions of the students' needs. In general, the more two-way communication there is between faculty and tutor, the less chance there will be of a misunderstanding which will affect the writing progress of the student.

4. Having spoken briefly of the roles of faculty and of the Writing Center directors, I come at last to the place of the tutor when conflicts arise. In written comments, tutors spoke mainly of their roles as motivators, developing a student's confidence, helping students find their own voices. They seemed to avoid placing their work within the context of the student's class work. Yet obviously class work, and grades on papers, are important for students. Perhaps tutors downplay in their analysis of their own work the effects of conflicting demands upon a student. Beyond the orientation meetings and shared information, the tutors' reports, notices to instructors, memos, newsletters, faculty referral forms, statements of goals, and all the other pieces and piles of paper which keep the lines of communication open, a real potential for conflict exists when goals and methods differ. When this occurs, the tutor has a responsibility to the student: to make sure that the overall instruction, in Center and class, is integrated, unified, and consistent. For this to happen, though, the tutor must at times be ready

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to adjust his or her methods, goals, and expectations to those of the instructor. Tutors must be flexible enough to match both students' needs and the instructor's wishes. At times, indeed, it is only through the intervening work of the tutor that the two can be brought together. Flexibility of approach, responsiveness to the needs of students and the expectations of faculty members, and the ability to help students adapt to the varying demands placed upon them become primary qualities needed by tutors.

In this study I have attempted to define the parameters of a potential conflict between faculty and Writing Center tutors. The conflict has been noted before, but its exact causes had not been determined. I have found that the problem does not lie in a difference in goals. By and large, tutors and faculty evaluate goals in the same way. Rather, the differences are found in assessing the competency of the Writing Center to reach those goals. Tutors feel they are able to work with primary objectives, while many faculty feel that the Writing Center should work with secondary goals. One possible solution is to increase the flow of communication between the two groups. I have the sense — but not the statistics to prove — that developing channels of communication will be an important element in creating the proper working relationship between the two groups. But when communication does not work, then the tutor must be prepared to act in a flexible way, adapting his or her methods and expectations to the demands made upon the student by the instructor.