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## Bringing Writers to the Center: Some Survey Results, Surmises, and Suggestions

Wendy Bishop

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Any writing center coordinator soon finds that a good portion of her job involves efforts to build, maintain, and increase the number of writers using the center's services. Nevertheless, articles on writing centers rarely focus on promoting services and referral issues. Jim Bell's analysis of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* for a four year period, for instance, shows a dominant interest in tutoring methods (65 articles) with far fewer articles concerned with administrative issues (37 articles), and only 11 of those 37 articles focus on promoting the lab (2-3). To find a sound discussion of this issue, I turned to a 1984 survey by Gary Olson, which illustrates just how important an instructor's referral can be in developing a student's attitude toward writing center visits. Olson reminds us that the instructor who threatens students with a referral can devastate a writer who already has a poor self-image ["Johnny, if you don't show *some* improvement, I'm just going to *have* to send you to the writing center" (156)]. Further, such demeaning oral referrals in front of a classroom of reluctant students enforces the myth that ". . . the writing center is merely for remediation" (Olson 160).

Additionally, in his article "Collaborative Learning in Context: The Problem with Peer Tutoring," Harvey Kail explains why normally well intentioned colleagues might work against their own best classroom interests. Kail reminds us that writing centers threaten the traditional roles of English department members since, through their discussions with students, tutors and coordinators gain clear insights into the workings of an instructor's classroom. Instructors who are threatened by such a possibility may be those who believe the center should perform by what Kail calls the

“service model of peer tutoring” (596). In this model, the tutor is expected to fix broken writers.

Instead, real tutoring—supportive, non-directive, writer-enhancing tutoring—changes the tutor-instructor-tutee dynamic, and, as Kail points out: “. . . peer tutoring involves instructors officially in each other’s teaching and involves us officially with each other’s students at a variety of different levels. This institutional involvement changes the world that the student writers and their audiences inhabit” (596). The exact interactions, then, that draw some of us to writing center work also serve to propel some instructors away from our services.

Kail does not find it surprising that instructors might not refer writers to the center, given the threat they perceive we offer to classroom integrity and instructor sovereignty. And I am not surprised, overall, when Olson in his survey found that instructors who did refer students took back with the second hand what they gave with the first through embarrassing public referrals. These instructors know they *should* encourage students to visit the writing center, but they are worried about peer tutors and the coordinator’s potentially subversive interactions with *their* students.

Problems do not reside solely with recalcitrant instructors though. Center coordinators who hope to increase student use of their facilities discover that students avoid visiting writing centers for a number of complicated reasons. A survey by Irene Lurkis Clark, reported in 1985, finds that students came to the University of Southern California writing center most often due to required visits. Says Clark, “unless teachers require their students to visit the Writing Center, the students are unlikely to go or perhaps go only once” (33). Students in her survey often felt they were too busy to go to the center. Clark’s survey results were so convincing, she ends her essay with a recommendation that required visits be part of an English department’s policy. The findings of Olson’s study and Kail’s observations though make such a recommendation problematic.

Stephen North’s view of teacher referral differs sharply from Clark’s. In “The Idea of a Writing Center,” North claims:

Nor should you require that all of your students drop by with an early draft of a research paper to get a reading from a fresh audience. . . . Occasionally we manage to convert such writers from people who have to see us to people who want to, but most often they either come as if for a kind of detention, or they drift away. (440)

However, I believe North is not against referral *per se* but, like Olson and Kail, concerned with what he views as poor referral methods—methods that help to maintain English faculty and student preconceptions of writing centers as remedial, sub-skills, fix-it centers, funded by soft money and intended for students with “special problems.” Since North feels that “Our

job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (438), he advocates center-instigated recruitment methods, “We simply send our staff, upon invitation, into classes to talk with students, or, better yet, to do live tutorials” (441). For Olson, Kail, Clark, and North, student recruitment remains an issue worth considering.

Concerned with recruitment and referral issues, I decided to conduct a survey to gather information not available in my general record-keeping forms for the writing center (the Writing Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks conducts approximately 900, one-to-one conferences per semester). I had particular goals for my survey:

1. I wanted to learn more about the students who *didn't* come to the center. Why didn't they? For these students, I had no records at all.

2. I wanted to find out which methods of advertising and promotion were most worth my time. For instance, our center staff visits classes to introduce instructor and students to the center. And each fall and spring semester, I produce a media-blitz of public service radio announcements, memos to faculty, and posters. I wanted to learn how well those techniques worked. Additionally, our particular tutoring staff consists of four to eight peer tutors, primarily English majors, and thirteen TA tutors, working six hours per week in the Center; TA tutors also teach one class of freshman composition per semester. Since these TA tutors know the value of writing center services, I expected they would have strong positive influences on students coming to the center. Could I find out?

3. I wanted, loosely, to compare our students to those in Olson's survey. Although I realized students, like any of us, are probably very apprehensive about coming to the center, I felt his survey form was worded to pick up primarily negative comments and thus might present a slightly overdetermined picture of student fears.

For instance, questions 6-12 of Olson's survey elicit information on (1) threatening referral behavior on the part of teachers, (2) student resentment, student anxiety or fear, and, (3) generally, student affect/attitudes (164). It seemed to me that these six questions, grouped in a sequence and focusing on negative aspects and feelings, formed an argument. Knowing what good test-takers our students are, I expected that the up-front focus of the survey on anxiety, fear, and resentment channeled at least some student responses in those directions.

I also wanted to compare my findings with Clark's survey. Clark's students went to the Writing Center most often from teacher or self-referral. Additionally, those who attended only because of a teacher's requirement felt they were too busy to attend. This was less true of those who visited the

center from self-motivation. Clark points out that “Being too busy is apparently a prime reason students claim they do not attend the Writing Center rather than because they do not recognize the worth of going” (33).

## Surveys

Now I’m not a master survey maker, so I don’t claim to have solved more problems than I created in designing the questions (See questionnaire in Appendix A). However, reviewing selected survey questions listed by Clark, I tried to offer alternatives when asking students why they hadn’t attended. At the same time, for comparison and because it was the most complete questionnaire model I had, I did use three of Olson’s questions. Finally, I included an open ended question asking for suggestions: “From your experience, what is the best, most supportive, and least threatening method for the writing center and writing instructors to get students to the writing center?” I wanted to be up front too: I wanted students to tell me what they thought would work.

After designing the questionnaire, I distributed it to fourteen English classes at five levels (pre-freshman, freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), in eight writing intensive courses, including basic writing and freshman English, writing with literature, and literature courses. From those sections, 193 students responded, sometimes filling out forms in their own way—crossing out questions, adding to categories, or leaving blanks. Because of this, the number of responses varies for each question.

Reviewing the survey tabulations (see Figure 1), I noted several points of particular interest. First, the majority of those students who visited the center felt it was helpful (74%) and even more felt they would recommend the center to other students (84%). Of the students who had visited the center, the majority did so as a result of the direct intervention of instructors (89%), whether or not the instructor simply suggested attendance (60%), required attendance (11%), or required attendance with a connected writing activity [presumably one for which students received some type of class credit] (18%). The influence of friends, advertising, and staff visits to classes was surprisingly low (11%).

### Students Who Had Visited the Writing Center

	No. of students	% of students
Number who visited the Writing Center N=193	Yes 114	59%
Did it help? N=104	Yes 77	74%
Would you recommend services N=93	Yes 78	84%
Before coming did you experience anxiety or fear? N=107	Yes 37	35%
Method of referral: N=181		
Teacher's suggestion	109	60%
Teacher's requirement	20	11%
Teacher's requirement and connected writing assignment	32	18%
Subtotal: Teacher Referral	161	89%
Suggested by a friend	10	6%
Advertising	6	3%
Result of classroom visit by WC staff	4	2%

### Students Who Had Not Visited the Writing Center

Why they did not visit the Writing Center by self-report:  
N=73

Didn't need to go	28	38%
Afraid to go	2	3%
No time to go	39	53%
Didn't know to go	4	5%

Figure 1: Students' responses to Writing Center Questionnaire.

Only 35% of the students who visited the center felt anxiety or fear before they came. This was identical to the percentages Olson listed (35%) in his larger sample of students. My survey, however, did not further explore students' sense of being threatened or resentful over referral. In Olson's survey, the numbers of those who felt threatened (18%) and resentful (25%) were large. However, my survey showed that the seventy-three students who chose not to attend made that decision either because they felt they didn't need tutoring (38%) or because they felt they had no time to attend (53%); fear of the center or lack of information about it played an extraordinarily low part in student avoidance of center services (8% total for the two reasons). Additionally, these figures differ slightly from, but also support, findings in Clark's survey. Clark found that many students who *did* attend the center felt they had no time to do so. In my survey, over half the students who *did not* visit the center felt they had no time to do so. Clearly, students' justification for avoiding the writing center most often relies on a time factor.

## Surmises

From this data, and from the student responses to the open question (see Appendix B), I learned a great deal concerning student perceptions and habits. First, 49 percent of those surveyed had never visited the writing center. Reasons given for not coming, by those who didn't visit, surprised me, at first. Looking at a more detailed breakdown of data, though, I soon saw that the higher the class level, the less likely the student was to have attended the center. This finding matches the reasons students gave for *not* visiting the writing center.

It appeared that students in upper division, elective writing classes had not found real reasons for attending the center. For instance, on open responses, these students were more likely to suggest that when they visited they didn't receive help they valued, that students didn't need to be told to visit the center but should be smart enough to go, that offering supportive services was silly ("oh come on, its not counseling," wrote one), and so on. These elective class students also felt strongly that they had no time to attend (I should note that these reasons held true for students in *one* required sophomore level writing class, too. My contextual knowledge about the particular instructors involved leads me to guess that such student beliefs—that they don't need tutoring or don't have time to be tutored—are usually reinforced by an instructor who doesn't value or recommend the center and who doesn't offer any type of incentive for attendance).

Second, students who did visit the writing center came most often from the required pre-freshman, freshman, and sophomore writing courses and

at the instructors' suggestions. In open responses, these students indicated they *expected* to be required to visit the center. These students more often than elective students indicated that the instructor should require attendance (one even sarcastically suggested the instructor "force them by gun-point"). Equally, these students seemed to feel that some recompense was required for their obedience. They suggested the instructor "tell them how it will help their grade" and "add two points to papers" and offer "extra credit" or "extra pts." or, less positively, threaten to "give them bad grades" [if they don't go].

Third, many students in this survey offered suggestions that showed they wished to have the instructor more involved. Students suggested that the instructor should "take class over" and "have groups go to [the] center together" and "class should go as a group one time." They thought the instructor might do well to stress the benefits of writing center visits: "it will help [a student's] grade" and "convince students it will help them" and "say it is free" and "professors will look more 'kindly' on them and their grade if they know you went to the writing center" and "[provide] positive assurances." At the same time, these students weren't ready to take any and all orders. Some suggested that instructors should allow students some autonomy: "just recommend it highly" and "strongly suggest" and "[use] gentle pressure."

Fourth, I learned disconcerting as well as interesting things by reviewing the survey data. For example, I learned that instructor referral, no matter how effective, will generally be viewed as a bargain: "I'll go in return for . . ." I found that more advanced writers did *not* feel good about the help they were receiving from our advanced writer/tutors, generally TAs who should have been able to help junior and senior English majors.

Equally, I sensed, that instructors in these upper division courses were more like the instructor Kail mentions who feels threatened when tutors (perhaps especially TA tutors) can see into their classrooms and, therefore, may have referred their students less often. Finally, I was dumfounded that my peppy fall and spring advertising sessions seemed to have much less effect than I imagined (I assume now, much more realistically, that the advertising is going to be as much for faculty and administrators as for students).

## Suggestions

After reviewing survey data, I decided to spend even more time working with writing instructors since most of our referrals were coming from that source and since many students wished to obtain some form of instructor



acknowledgment and credit for their writing center attendance. Even if I wished to, I knew that I could not convince the English Department, as Clark at the end of her survey article suggested, to mandate a required visit from all classes.

Clearly, I need to develop a greater number of ways to encourage productive, credit-for-visit opportunities, and I did so with the help of some of the Center's own tutor/TAs. For instance, one TA showed me an assignment sequence he had designed. He required that all his students bring their first paper to the writing center for tutor response and that the students' second paper be a narrative of the visit. This way the required visit was fully integrated into the class writing and drafting cycle. The teacher showed me his students' narratives and I enjoyed reading them. I enjoyed them so much, I asked him to ask students for permission to post them outside the writing center to be read by waiting tutees. Soon the tutors were reading them and commenting on them, too. This bulletin board generated tutor training documents—I read the students' essays during tutor meetings, and we discussed them—and encouraged the instructor's students to come back and see if they had been "published."

Even more important, the activity encouraged other TAs to give students credit for some kind of written response to writing center first visits. Soon, another TA/tutor/instructor asked students to write in-class journal entries and, with student permission, shared them with me for the bulletin board (see Bishop).

Nowadays, when I train new teaching assistants in composition, I *encourage* them to require *one* visit to the writing center early in the semester from ALL students, preferably with a connected writing activity and clear class credit. New instructors of writing are rarely threatened by the idea of opening their classes to tutors; in fact, they're often grateful for any class support they receive. And, at our institution, since the teaching assistants are also tutors, they know the value and limits of tutor assistance.

In suggesting a required *first* visit, I'm hoping to be coercive in a positive way. Clearly pre-freshman and freshman writing students are asked to do many things they'd rather not do. Rather than singling out any one student for special penalties as in the Olson example that started this essay, a required first visit suggests the writing center is a resource for all writers and should be used by them to enhance their writing throughout their university careers (as they should use a textbook, an instructor conference, a journal, or a knowledgeable friend). Having students write about the first visit can give them needed recognition and credit and offers the instructor and the writing center coordinator (if the instructor chooses to share these responses) useful feedback.

I view such a visit as a useful part of university orientation for new students, not simply as support for freshman writing students. Like Stephen North, I realize that “not everyone’s interest in writing, their need or desire to write or learn to write, coincides with the fifteen or thirty weeks they spend in writing courses—especially when, as is currently the case at so many institutions, those weeks are required” (442). However, because our writing courses *are* required, introducing students to the writing center early in their university enrollment allows me, as writing center coordinator, to assure that students know where to find center services in later semesters.

That is why, unlike Clark, who suggests that “the more visits required, the more times the student will be likely to go” (34), I don’t advocate more than a single required visit. Open responses on my survey showed me that students resent such unilateral pressure. I feel our center has a unique opportunity to prove its worth with the required first visit and that thereafter, students will need to learn to make time to visit us. Certainly, instructors can help them do so by offering study skills suggestions and/or credit, if they wish, for further visits.

TAs’ ideas for improving advertising and referral methods were useful, and so were the ideas offered by students in this survey. Both sets of suggestions helped me draw up the following rule-of-thumb guidelines for our instructors, regarding ways they might make a required first visit to the writing center a supportive rather than a coercive activity:

1. Instructors should have a clear idea of the benefits of writing center services and should explain these benefits *several times during the semester*.
2. Instructors should accompany the students on a “field trip” to the center (“do as I do, not do as I say”) to decrease students’ anxiety about the first visit. Students all too quickly learn not to value the center if their instructors are never seen in the vicinity of the writing center and never seem to talk to center staff.
3. Instructors should consider offering some form of reasonable class credit or encouragement to overcome students’ natural impulse to claim they don’t have time (i.e., reason) to visit the center.
4. Instructors could experiment with first-visit alternatives: inviting tutors into their classes, offering to have groups of students visit the center together, and so on.
5. When possible, instructors should encourage publication of student responses to a center visit or allow for class sharing of visit experiences to alleviate fears and to encourage future visits.

Although these suggestions were designed with English department instructors in mind, they are valid for instructors in other disciplines as well.

Of course, such sensitivity by instructors will not arise spontaneously; it develops when instructors are trained to use the center (as in the case of the TAs I work with). When access is not this simple, writing center coordinators will want to work with and for department and cross-discipline instructors through the usual routes of memos, discussions, in-service presentations, and so on, to help them learn the value of the writing center.

Each semester I relearn the value of these guidelines, the hard way. For example, this spring, a new part-time (and admittedly) underpaid lecturer took me up on an offer to visit her freshman English class, introduce our services, and take her students on a walk to the Center. When I arrived at the classroom, she said loudly: "Great. This is, uh, Wendy Bishop of the Learning Center? and she's going to take you over there. I've got to go sign my contract." And she darted out. Too late I realized I had neglected to make clear to this instructor that the visit was for her, too. Next time, I will provide a friendly version of my guidelines before the visit and be sure to link arms, if necessary, with her and walk over to the center together since she has still never visited it.

My final suggestion is broad. I feel writing center coordinators and their staff will benefit from surveying their own constituencies. Asking themselves first, "What questions would I like to explore?" they can design and then administer a site-specific questionnaire. Coordinators don't have to be trained statisticians to read through survey responses, and in such responses, writing center coordinators and tutors will find confirmation for hunches, will spot trends, and will, ultimately, discover ideas that help them develop a stronger program.

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## Appendix A

### Writing Center Questionnaire

We are trying to improve our services. Please answer these questions as honestly as possible. Circle the appropriate letter or supply the requested information. Thank you.

Your class and meeting time:

1. Approximately how many times have you been to the writing center this semester?  
A. Never    B. 1-3 times    C. 3-6 times    D. More than 6 times
2. Has the Writing Center helped you become a better writer?  
A. Yes    B. No
3. If yes, how much:  
A. A great deal    B. A fair amount    C. A little    D. Not much
4. If you visited the center, how did you decide to come to the Writing Center (Choose the most important reason):  
A. Suggested by teacher  
B. Required by teacher (oral or written referral)  
C. Required by teacher with writing assignment  
D. Recommendation of friend  
E. Advertising  
F. Classroom visit by Writing Center staff member
5. Did you find this method for getting to the center effective?  
A. Yes    B. No    Please explain \_\_\_\_\_
6. If you *did not* visit the Writing Center, but you still knew about our services, how did you find out about us? (Please choose letter A through F from question 4 above): \_\_\_\_\_
7. If you *did not* go to the writing center, why didn't you go?  
A. Didn't need help  
B. Was afraid to go  
C. Wanted to go but never seemed to make time  
D. Felt I was forced to go and didn't want to  
E. Didn't know about it and wish  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Before coming to the Center did you experience anxiety or fear?  
A. Yes    B. No
9. After attending your first session, did your attitude change?  
How? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Would you recommend the center to other campus writers?  
A. Yes    B. No    Explain: \_\_\_\_\_
11. From your experience, what is the best, most supportive, and least threatening method for the Writing Center and writing teachers to use to get students to the Writing Center?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

Question: From your experience, what is the best, most supportive, and least threatening method for the Writing Center and writing teachers to use to get students to the Writing Center?

*Representative responses from students at the pre-freshman, freshman or sophomore required writing class level:*

- required by instructor
- say it is free
- add two points to papers
- let them go on their own/don't force
- tutor come to class for a mini-lecture
- listing hours more available
- tell them how it will help their grade to go there
- either require visit & assignment or just recommend it highly
- force them by gunpoint
- ask students to go on the grounds that writing center will give a teacher's perspective rather than that it will make you write better
- class should go as a group one time
- have groups go to center together
- teacher recommendation or extra credit
- don't require it
- make extra pts available for going
- teacher should strongly suggest or require it
- visit it
- give them bad grades
- make the students attend at least 1 time in a semester
- convince students it will help them
- making one trip mandatory, possibly just letting students know that professors will look more "kindly" on them and their grade if they know you went to the Writing Center
- gentle pressure and positive assurances
- teacher recommend to those who need it
- teacher take class over

*Representative responses from students at the junior or senior elective class level:*

- helpful with later drafts, not so much getting started didn't get enough help; needed actual ways to improve the rough draft; editing suggestions
- use teachers who are aware of what is happening in classes
- mandatory for one visit
- conduct classroom intro & writer's exchange forum

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- I found a condescending attitude
- teacher recommendation works well
- more mechanical help needs to be offered
- gentle persuasion, explaining the rewards—better papers, better grades
- smart enough to attend college, should be smart enough to go to WC on own initiative
- oh come on, its not counseling
- intro to tutors in class

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Former coordinator of the University of Alaska Writing Center, **Wendy Bishop** presently teaches writing at Florida State University. She has articles forthcoming in *Exercise-exchange Reader*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. Her research monograph, *Something Old-Something New: College Writing Teachers and Classroom Change*, will be published by Southern Illinois University Press in 1990.